

WHO'S IN?: A POLITICAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF THE
COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the CFP and its media presence through a political economic lens. For the political economic scholar, the CFP as an entry point into studying media and sport is a natural one. The foundations of the current culture of the broadcast of college football, including the CFP, is based on the Supreme Court's 1984 ruling in the case of *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, which enabled universities and conferences to negotiate their own contracts with broadcast networks. The data show the CFP is emblematic of the superstructure built on an economic base seeking greater surplus value by commodifying college football and exploiting the student-athlete laborers within the sport media complex. This study suggested a new sport media complex model for the CFP better theorizes the unpaid contributions of student-athletes as media content producers. This study suggests the CFP may be one of the most egregious examples of worker exploitation and economic inequality in all of sport.

Though the CFP has helped lead to a widening of the gap between the larger and more powerful universities and conferences and those that are not, even the smallest of Division I conferences have received money directly from the CFP. As a natural outgrowth of the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling, the CFP has provided a remedy to the universities, the broadcasters, and the fans for greater amounts of college football. The data suggest, however, that

the student-athletes and most Division I conferences, especially the Group of 5 conferences that have ownership in the CFP, have been left behind in the economics of college football and especially the CFP. This dissertation suggests compensating student-athletes who participate in the CFP as content producers, similar to how NFL players are compensated for participating in the NFL playoffs. It also suggests leveling the playing field between conferences through a more egalitarian payment of the hundreds of millions of dollars that the CFP pays to conferences every year. These changes are more likely to keep or increase competitiveness in college football, and therefore more likely to stay the No. 2 sport in the U.S. as fans are more invested in the outcomes of their teams.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

ESPN introduced its new promotional announcement in August 2017 for the upcoming season of college football, which was, for the third year, to culminate in the College Football Playoff (CFP; ESPN College Football Playoff, 2017). As the commercial opens, a Claymation representation of Clemson University's football coach, Dabo Swinney, drops onto a football field next to the CFP championship trophy replete with a Dr Pepper logo. Behind Claymation Swinney and the trophy is the motto of the ad campaign, "Who's In?" in all caps, displayed two times above the stands of the fictional football arena.

To begin the promotion with Swinney is logical, because it was Swinney's Clemson Tigers who won the trophy at the end of the 2016-17 season, defeating the University of Alabama and its famous coach, Nick Saban. "It ain't easy bein' on top," Swinney says to open the commercial's dialogue. "Everyone wants to—" but just as he's about to complete the phrase, a Claymation version of Saban leaps onto the field, steps in front of Swinney and says his lines: "Bring the trophy home" to complete the sentence. Soon a University of Georgia logoed bobsled carrying Georgia alum and former National Football League star Herschel Walker, also in Claymation form, skids to a halt knocking the two coaches off screen. "To Georgia!" Walker says. He then is knocked off by a red and gold chariot bearing the University of Southern California Trojan mascot who says, "U.S.C.! Fight on!" And so it goes, as mascots, coaches, and fan representations of multiple schools fight each other on the field to be the center of attention.

The promotion takes a bit of a turn as a Claymation figure of the then coach of Florida State University, Jimbo Fisher appears, who says, "Everyone's got a shot." He is soon blown off the field by a female fan representation who says, "All 130 teams!" The female fan is not only

notable for the singularity of the female gender representation, but also for the school she represents, the University of Louisiana Monroe Warhawks, the lone representative of the lower group of conferences, the Group of 5. The exception is notable because the rest of the schools, which all belong to the aptly named Power 5 conferences, outnumber the smaller school 13-1 in the commercial.

Finally a larger, clearer version of “Who’s In?” in large, white, all caps block lettering appears to signal the end of the promotion. Under the words are 14 different schools, including the aforementioned teams, along with powerhouses University of Notre Dame, University of Texas, University of Florida, Oklahoma State, Michigan, Ohio State, Washington, and Oklahoma. University of Louisiana Monroe is relegated to the back in the lineup, as the big boys take center stage.

University of Louisiana Monroe is an odd choice for this promotion to represent the Group of 5. Though the CFP is nominally open to all 130 Division I football universities, only one Group of 5 school has made it to the annual four-team playoff as of 2022. Though some Group of 5 schools have come close, University of Louisiana Monroe is generally nowhere near the CFP. Since the first CFP championship in 2015, University of Louisiana Monroe has a combined record of 10-27 (“Football,” n.d.). Yet, the commercial features a representation of a Warhawks fan blowing Fisher off the field, who, ironically, ended his tenure at Florida State University by defeating the Warhawks, 42-10, before moving on to Texas A&M University in 2017.

The placement of the small school within the context of a promotion for the CFP is meant to portray the notion that any team in Division I college football could conceivably make it to the CFP and play for the title. ESPN’s presentation of this idea of the potential fairness of including

the small school along with the big boys of college football could give some the notion that every school has a shot, but it must be earned on the field. “It’s going to be a fight to the finish,” says Washington coach Chris Petersen during the commercial. “See,” the promotion seems to say, “here’s the Warhawks fan! She’s on the playing field, too, fighting just like the other, bigger schools.” Here, however, this promotion becomes more of a work of fiction than a true representation of the CFP. The economic reality of college football makes it less of a meritocracy, and more of oligopoly; it is very difficult for most schools to even be considered for the CFP, even most Power 5 schools.

Justification for Study

Despite the large audiences and money in college football in the U.S., the uneven playing field among universities and conferences, and unpaid labor of the players, there is relatively little political economic research in college football and college football broadcasting. This study contributes to communication and sport research by adding research from political economy to a field dominated by quantitative, cultural, and feminist studies. Conversely, this study adds to political economy of communication research by updating the previous work done on collegiate sports. Because the CFP is only four years old, relatively few academic studies have focused on the CFP, especially from a communications perspective. In addition to the economic study of the CFP, various perspectives regarding the CFP and its broadcast are explored to give a more through accounting of the CFP.

This dissertation and its research questions draw on a political economic framework and the sports media complex model to study how live television broadcasting has led directly to the commodification of the sport, the dichotomy of power between athletic conferences, the haves and have-nots, and any points of resistance from participants and viewers of the College Football

Playoff. This study provides a variety of perspectives on big-money college sports. Empirical data came from three sources: organizational documents, semi-structured interviews conducted either in-person or over the phone, and interviews conducted by news organizations that have been curated on the internet. The documents were from various organizations, including the NCAA, universities and conferences, and the College Football Playoff organization. Analysis of the data from documents came from not only the content but also the historical context of the document. Interviews, both semi-structured and curated, were transcribed and then coded into categories for analysis and synthesis.

College football

In order to understand the issues facing college football today, it's helpful to understand the history of college football. It has risen from a structured campus activity designed to incorporate militaristic principles of physical fitness and obedience to authority to the multi-billion-dollar industry it is today. Media, and especially television broadcasting, have been essential to that rise.

The rise of big-money college football

College football was quickly commercialized from its humble beginnings in 1869 (Ingrassia, 2012). The first football game was a contest between Princeton University (then known as the College of New Jersey) and Rutgers College in New Jersey. Rutgers won the game by a score of 6-4 ("Chronology," n.d.). It was mostly a kicking game at that time and more resembled soccer. Initially a college campus game among the rich, the game quickly evolved to include inter-school games and the bringing in of players on campus simply to play and win at football (Ingrassia, 2012). Walter Camp, the coach at Yale, fashioned many of the rules that define American football and is considered the father of American football.

Intercollegiate sports began as a marketing and commercialization tool as early as 1869 (Gurney et al., 2017). Shortly thereafter, the Intercollegiate Football Association played its first championship game in 1876 in New Jersey, but moved to New York in 1880 in search of greater revenues. By the 1890s, crowds of more than 40,000 were packed into stadiums to watch college football. As more money poured into the game, coaches were the first to reap the benefits. Stanford paid Walter Camp handsomely to move from Yale to Stanford, the University of Chicago brought in Amos Alonzo Stagg as coach, and the University of Notre Dame recruited Knute Rockne (Gurney et al., 2017).

Governance: The NCAA

The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) was formed to regulate collegiate sports, including football. Founded as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS) in 1905, it changed its moniker to NCAA in 1910 (Gurney et al., 2017). In 1905, 18 players were killed playing college football, which was a brutal sport from its inception. By 1905, more than 300 players had died on the football field. The NCAA, initially founded by 38 universities, began to regulate the extreme violence out of the sport. But safety was the only area where the NCAA had any real power. Until 1952, there was no legislative power within the NCAA to implement binding policy upon its members. The NCAA defined amateur athletics, which was the basis for collegiate sports, as playing for pleasure and “social benefits” (Gurney et al., 2017).

Nominally, all students who participate in collegiate sports are still under that guise of an amateur.¹ But it was never enforced by the NCAA; the Carnegie Foundation found violations of amateurism in collegiate sports among 112 NCAA member institutions in 1929. In 1948, the

¹ Data in this study were gathered prior to the NCAA establishing rules allowing student-athletes to profit on their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL).

NCAA began to allow universities to reward student-athletes with scholarships. This policy was expanded in 1957 to include room, board, tuition, books and other fees, which is called the cost of attendance stipend that still exists today (Gurney et al., 2017). At the same time, universities were beginning to receive the benefits of having their athletic competitions—especially football—broadcast on the networks around the country.

The following section demonstrates just how closely sports and media were interconnected as they grew over the years, which provides context for the examination of college football's involvement with the media.

Sports in media

The rise of the sports in the media is tied to the rise of the journalistic and broadcast media in the United States, especially seen in light of the progress of capitalistic society. Sports and media have been intertwined since 1830, starting with the first magazines that began to cover sports. Sports, being considered vulgar in society at the time, tended to be primarily horse racing, although some boxing was covered for the lower classes as well. The modern newspaper was also born during the 1830s and 1840s, with the penny presses aimed at middle and working classes. Journalists covered sports during this time as well and fit with the sensationalistic media coverage that drove readership at the time (McChesney, 1989).

As the country entered the Civil War, baseball took over from boxing and horse racing as the national sport and received the majority of coverage in the press. The publication of these sports also increased the commercialism of sports. Toward the end of the 1800s, newspapers supplanted magazines as the primary outlet for sports coverage. Capitalism evolved as cities became industrial hubs. At the same time, the population of those cities read the large newspapers of the day. Newspaper advertising and circulation profits made for big business,

coinciding with the increasingly commodified sports and society they covered. It was during this period that newspapers began to expand operations to focus on sports coverage. The first sports department was formed by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and in 1895, the first sports section was introduced by William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* (McChesney, 1989).

By the 1920s, sports coverage in the U.S. was largely homogenized in terms of the types of sports and the professional leagues covered—with regional focuses—and how they were covered, i.e., game reports, columns, art, and statistics. Baseball continued to reign as the national sport, and it led the way as Americans fell in love with the professional athlete. Maturing capitalism led to greater consolidation of the news industry into local monopolies and larger oligopolies, reflecting the political economy as a whole. Newspapers, in turn, enthusiastically covered professional sports heroes and teams in the large cities.

Alongside baseball, one other sport was elevated into public consciousness by extensive newspaper coverage in the 1920s: college football (McChesney, 1989). Once the sport of upper-class boys and their families, college football became a national sensation in the newspapers. As the number of stories covering college football tripled, revenues likewise tripled during the 1920s. Radio broadcasts of sporting events continued the growth of sports audiences nationally through the 1950s. And in that decade, another medium began to grow in popularity: television.

The rise of NFL broadcasting elevated college football

The National Football League (NFL), as opposed to baseball and college football, recognized a way to grow through increased media exposure (McChesney, 1989). As men who played football graduated from colleges and universities after playing organized football, they eventually began a professional league, a ragtag organization in the 1920s called the National Football League (NFL; Oriard, 2007). But the game was primarily the province of collegiate

sports until the 1950s when the NFL began to embrace the new technology of television. Up until then, college football was considered far more popular nationally and had a more enthusiastic fan base than did the NFL.

In the second half of the 20th century, television was unrivaled in sports promotion and distribution. The NFL's commissioner, Pete Rozelle, embraced television in the 1960s, as football became more well known for the professional version across the nation. College football, once far more popular than the NFL, was relegated to a regional sport with a regional appeal because of a lack of television exposure. The NFL had attained unprecedented heights in terms of profits and market appeal and has never looked back. The league's championship game, the Super Bowl, is generally the highest rated show in television every year ("Super Bowl ratings," 2019).

The NFL has become even more popular and profitable in recent years because of continuing changes in broadcast technology. As cable and satellite began to enter the television market, a small cable network known as the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, or ESPN, was born in 1979. The network rose quickly in popularity as sports broadcasting began to be explored as a 24-hour venture (McChesney, 1989). ESPN began broadcasting the NFL in 1987, and it has become a cornerstone in its programming lineup, consistently producing its highest rated shows ("ESPN acquires," 2005). The astronomical ratings of the NFL have led to huge broadcast rights deals that net the league billions of dollars a year.

College football conference commissioners and university presidents, however, (again alongside Major League Baseball) initially declined to be featured on television, as worries about the visual broadcasting of the games would lead to a further decline in attendance (McChesney, 1989). College football and Major League Baseball relied on gate receipts—fans in the stands—

for their primary sources of revenue at the time and any potential interruption was seen as potentially damaging. Because of the success of televised professional football, universities in major conferences also embraced television in the 1960s (McChesney, 1989). There was one major roadblock to the universities and conferences that wanted more television exposure, however. The NCAA, fearing that revenues would be hurt if universities brokered television deals by themselves and not as a bloc, restricted the televising of games until 1984.

NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1984)

Until 1984, the NCAA was the partner of the television networks, as the organization bargained on behalf of the conferences and universities for scarce television time among the three major networks. National and some regional games were the sole property of the NCAA and the network partner. The universities and athletic conferences felt there was more money to be made from football if they bargained on their own with the networks.

With the rise of cable television and its 24-hour sports channel, ESPN, there were more opportunities for broadcasting of games. “With the expansion of cable television systems, universities that would otherwise have been locked out of television have found new opportunities for exposure and revenue” (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986, p. 11). When the NCAA challenged the rights of the universities to create their own television deals, the College Football Association (CFA) and the universities sued. That suit was eventually brought before the United State Supreme Court. During the proceedings, the universities of Oklahoma and Georgia represented the College Football Association, though only Oklahoma appeared on the court case title. The ensuing court battle culminated in the June 27, 1984, ruling by the Supreme Court, *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1984), which found the NCAA could no longer be the sole distributor of college football games to broadcasters, decreeing the

NCAA was a cartel in violation of the Sherman and Clayton antitrust acts (Carroll & Humphreys, 2016). The ruling, made along the lines of a commercial enterprise rather than any of the governing principles of the NCAA or amateurism, ruled that college football is a business, and “commercial values [are] the basic organizing principle of competitive college sports” (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986, p. 7). The result is “corporate athleticism” (p. 7).

Following the SCOTUS ruling, the future of college athletics and football in particular was seen by academics as a path to greater commercialism based on a university’s own status in the market. If the university has a higher position in the market, that will lead to a greater market opportunities, which will elevate some and leave others behind (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986). Academics also saw the power of broadcasters increase relative to the position of universities, leaving the universities to be dependent on the whims of market forces, especially when deciding which games to broadcast.

At the same time, however, deregulation of college sports will place universities in a more dependent position vis-à-vis television producers. Such producers, in turn, will become more powerful in that they can select sports contests on the basis of audience appeal and on the resulting willingness of advertisers to pay more to sponsor such appearances. (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986, p.12)

While the NCAA still negotiates on behalf of all other sports broadcasting contracts today, the Division I athletic conferences, and in some cases, individual universities, negotiate their own television contracts for regular season and postseason games, including the CFP.

The CFP has come to represent the culmination of college football and its broadcasting and media evolution since *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1984). This dissertation is a political economic examination of the CFP. The CFP represents the pinnacle of college football’s profitability via broadcast among multiple mediums. College football has become more popular and profitable than any time in its history, yet it has been beset by student-

athlete commodification and exploitation, and has led to wide gulfs between the haves and have nots among universities and conferences. This dissertation seeks to analyze the CFP by examining its history, economics, and media coverage for economic inequalities, labor exploitation, its relationship with the media and fans, and its future.

The next chapter addresses the theory of Marxist political economy along with sports communication research to inform the analysis of the CFP as both a commodified property and as a sports and communication topic of research. Methods used in this study are detailed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the results of the study. Chapter 4 is a document analysis, which examines the economic conditions of the CFP within the NCAA and college football overall. Chapter 5 examines the CFP's history, and various perspectives, including student-athletes, media, and administrators of the CFP, and economic conditions that gave rise to it. Chapter 6 examines the media and its roles vis a vis the CFP. It also addresses any points of resistance from the media and student-athletes. Chapter 7, the discussion and conclusion, synthesizes the data, analyses, and perspectives and includes the potential for praxis, or the work of the author, in response to the critical analysis of the CFP.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter addresses the theoretical approach of this study: Marxist political economy and political economy of communication. Sports and college football are big business, and Marxist economic thought is effective in providing a deep understanding of capitalist production, which generates surplus value while commodifying every part of the process. Capitalism also creates instability, conflicts in production and distribution, and competition. Marxist political economy seeks to not only understand each element of production, but also the human costs of exploitation and inequity necessary for commodification and the creation of surplus value. Marxist political economy also addresses hegemonic inequalities and exploitation through praxis and social movements and has been applied to the study of sports industries by a number of scholars.

Theoretical approach: Political Economy

Political economy is the study of social relations, particularly power relations, including the production, consumption, and distribution of resources, particularly in this case, communications resources (Mosco, 2009). Adam Smith (2014) developed the theory of political economy in the 18th century, and his approach has become known simply as economics, or neoliberal economics, and is the dominant form of economic study today (Mosco, 2009). Smith theorized that the “invisible hand” of the economy moved goods and services along to the consumer at certain prices in the supply chain. This form of economics silos the basic elements of production, distribution, and consumption and focuses on the individual as producer and consumer (Hall, 2003). Marx’s radical critique of political economy, however, took issue with this individual focus and introduced the concept of historical materialism.

Historical materialism

Historical materialism is a critique of the capitalist mode of production. It seeks to understand the mode of existence of a phenomena, in this case the CFP (Saad-Filho 2002). This materialist analysis involves an understanding of the historical and societal conditions that led to the creation and reproduction of the phenomena—the CFP (Bourdieu, 1993). This approach argues that history is the result of material conditions rather than ideals (Historical materialism, 2022). Rather than focusing on individuals or ideology, Marx believed that “socially determined individual production” is influenced by historic material conditions that have evolved over time (Marx, 2005, p. 17). Although Marx never specifically defined historical materialism in one work, his ideas have been modified and expanded by numerous Marxists and non-Marxist theorists over the years. As Marx and others explained, modes of production produces social relations in order to protect and reproduce themselves (Marx, 2005). And historical materialism helps account for the production of laws and ownership modes that evolve to protect and reproduce modes of production, such as capitalism. As Stuart Hall notes, the “capitalist mode of production depends on social connection” and the individual is the “result” of such production, the “sum of many, prior, determinations” (Hall, 2003, p. 115, 116). Thus, it is important to study broader aspects of society, including history and material conditions, in order to understand how people are being exploited and how to remedy such exploitation.

Economic base/superstructure

The historical nature of Marx’s thought involved the roots—or, the base—of the material conditions of a society, as well as its various means of survival— or, superstructure—and its effect on individuals. Marx (1976) disagreed with Mill, who posited universal laws, such as private property and its protection by the police and courts, etc. (i.e. the State). Marx instead

pointed out that private property was a relatively recent development, as previously property had been held in common, and that the policing of private property illustrated how the mode of production creates its own structures and relations (Marx, 2005).

Similarly, Marx demonstrated the interconnectedness of production within society through four phases of production—production, distribution, exchange, and consumption (Marx, 2005). As Hall explains: “Production produces goods; distribution allocates them; exchange makes the general distribution of goods specific to particular individuals; finally, the individual consumes them” (Hall, 2003, p. 121). However, these are not independent processes but are interconnected: production involves the consumption of raw materials, while consumption produces the ultimate form of the final product.

Marx further introduced the concept of mediation, which is the “mutual dependence” of these phases of production: “Production, then, forms objectively the modes of appropriation of the consumer, just as consumption reproduces production as a subjectively experienced impulse, drive or motive” (Hall, 2003, p. 123). The consumption of a product creates the reproduction of the product, forming a cycle of production/consumption. This study examines both the production and consumption of the CFP.

Commodification and surplus value

Another concept involved in this process is commodification, or the transformation of anything into an object of value (Marx, 1976). One of the key focuses of the theory of commodification is the analysis of capitalist exploitation (Saad-Filho, 2001). It includes commodity fetishism, which gives value to things that may not have any intrinsic value. Marx was primarily concerned with commodification and the way that capitalism promoted inequality among classes as a critique of the political economy (Marx, 1972; McChesney, 2000). Marx

observed the contradictions within capitalism, including the repressive realities of the working class, who experienced increasingly more and more of their lives commodified, including time not spent working (Marx, 1972). Marx saw the historical commodification of labor and time as key elements of capitalism and provided the ruling class opportunities through the concentration of resources (Marx, 1976).

Another important concept in the study of political economy is surplus value or the difference between the cost of production and the sale of a product (Marx, 1976). In other words, profit is redistributed surplus value (Saad-Filho, 2001), which is appropriated by the owner, rather than the laborer. As profits are maximized, the exploitation of the laborer becomes clearer.

Commodification, profits, and nonprofit organizations

This study includes universities, most of which are nonprofit organizations, and there is some debate over whether the terms “profits” and/or “surplus value” can be applied to their excess revenue. Some nonprofit organizations have increasingly relied on market activities (such as commodification) typically associated with for-profit enterprises. Some analysts have classified these as “hybrid” organizations, which include both for profit and nonprofit features (Suykens, De Rynck, & Vershuere, 2019). Universities have been commodified in a variety of ways, including their academic research, teaching, administration, and intercollegiate sports (Radder, 2010). Radder and others discuss “profit by academic institutions through selling the expertise of their researchers and the results of their inquiries” through market forces (p. 4). Thus, universities might be classified as "hybrid," of both nonprofit and for profit. In their meta study of nonprofit organization management research, Suykens, De Rynck, and Vershuere (2019) found that studies of nonprofits used the term “revenue” to describe the income of nonprofit organizations that have adopted for-profit practices but did not use the term “profit” for

excess revenue. Because universities and athletic departments are defined as nonprofit, but engage in various forms of commodification, the term “profit” can be used for some their activities.

Critical study of political economy and communication

The Frankfurt School built on traditional Marxist thought by focusing on how ideology is maintained and spread through media and popular culture, stemming in part from its members’ experience with Germany’s totalitarian government in the 1930s. Horkeimer and Adorno (2012), for example, critiqued the popular culture industry and its industrialization. They claimed that capitalism and reproduction of the repressive government limited creativity. This media-centric, neo-Marxist analysis led to a critical tradition of media research that critiqued the mode of production by focusing more on the superstructure aspect of communication and a homogenized, corporate version of culture that has been inflicted on the masses (Kellner, 2002).

Gramsci introduced the notion of hegemony as a way of understanding the combination of means of production, its efforts to reproduce itself, and the encompassing ideology of society. Hegemony is the all-encompassing, dominant mode of life, which works to reproduce itself, including through communication (Gramsci, 1971). Williams (2012) further defines hegemony as a “dominant system of meanings and values” (p. 118). Gramsci’s experiences in Italy in the 1930s and 1940s, during which he was imprisoned by the fascists as part of their oppression of Marxism, informed his writings concerning the work for a more moral society. Gramsci promoted praxis, or the work to bring moral philosophy into society, as he strove to bring about the demise of oppressive fascist hegemony, even from prison.

Neo-Marxist political economic study of communication diverged from the Frankfurt School in two ways. First, as Mosco (2009) writes, “Communication is not just the transmission

of information; it is also the social construction of meaning” (p. 68). Political economy takes into account not just communication but communication as part of a greater framework of processes of production within the wider capitalist system (Mosco, 2008). Political economists were less focused on ideology and more concerned with the mode of production and its relation to “the social whole or the totality of social relations that make up the economic, political, social, and cultural areas of life” (Mosco, 2008, p. 1).

While critical political economists were also concerned with how communication tools of the superstructure helped the capitalist mode of production to reproduce itself, they did not focus as much on the ideological aspects of the capitalist mode of production, as did the Frankfurt School. Political economic research in Great Britain found its footing in the 1970s with Murdock and Golding’s analysis of the British media (1973). Their approach was concerned with Marx’s concepts of capital, class, contradiction, and oppositional struggles (Mosco, 2009, p. 95) but also the concentration and distribution of media. Golding and Murdock, along with Garnham (1979), praised the Frankfurt School for recognizing the distribution of ideology and culture through communications, but called for more research on the economic base of media/communication. At the same time, Mattelart also emphasized the Marxist notion of class and the study of political economy of communications in France (Siegelau & Mattelart, 1979). Overall, Mosco (2008) defined four central characteristics of critical political economy as 1) social change and history, 2) social totality, 3) moral philosophy, and 4) praxis.

Meanwhile, Dallas Smythe (1960) and Herbert Schiller were developing the study of the political economy of communications in North America (Mosco, 2009). Mosco points out that their approach was less theoretical and based mostly on American capitalism (Mosco, 2009). One of Smythe’s contributions was to develop the concept of the audience commodity (Smythe,

2012). Smythe pointed out that media audiences performed unpaid work and were the commodity produced by the media because what the media and advertisers are really buying is the audience. Studying the audience as commodity forms one key entryway into understanding media and sports, among others noted in the following section.

Sport and communication research

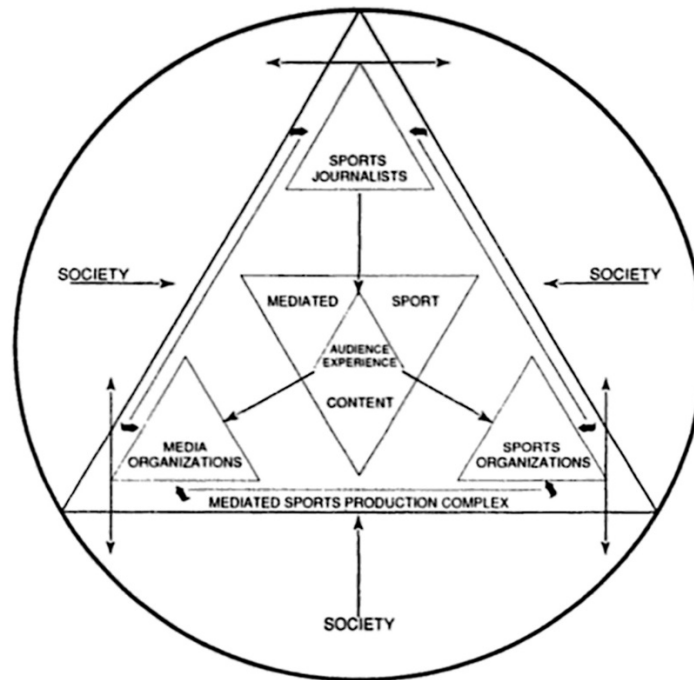
Sports “is not like American business; it is American business” (Real, 1975). In addition, people “consume” sport as a primarily communicative act. Communication is the central way people watch, interpret, evaluate, and even play sport (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2017). The political economy of communication and sport, which centers the mode of production, distribution, and reproduction within the greater social whole combined with praxis, is a constantly hinted at, yet not often explored, field of study within communication and sport research.

The field of communication and sport research began in earnest with Wenner’s groundbreaking edited book, *Media, Sports, & Society*. Wenner (1989) placed sports communication research on the map by creating the sports media complex model to help understand the place of mediated sport in society (Figure 2.1). Wenner’s model situates the audience at the center of three distinct organizations that all contribute mediated sports content: journalists, sports organizations, and media organizations.

Wenner’s (1989) framework is key to understanding how mediated sports content is created, received, and economically benefits the producers within society as a whole. Because people interact, produce, consume, and organize sport as a communicative activity (Kassing et al., 2004), Wenner (1989) placed the audience at the heart of all mediated sports content. Content

Figure 2.1

The sports media complex model.



Note: From Wenner, 1989.

creators, such as professional leagues and sports news media, often work together to publicize content to the audience. Media organizations and sports journalists work to publicize what the sports organizations have created. There are also times when sports organizations respond to sports journalists, who can set an agenda to follow. According to the model, all work together to expand the reach, money, influence, and power of the sports media complex within society in a hegemonic manner (Wenner, 1989). This expansion can be seen in television ratings, which are dominated by live sports programming.

Wenner (1989) described four primary areas of study in sport and communication: media sports production, the content of media sports, the audience, and the social system in which these elements relate to each other. Surveys of research in the field have found that researchers have

followed those four lines, with research on “the messages and content of mediated sports texts” the most popular (Kinkema & Harris, 1998; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2013, p. 85).

Sherwood and Nicholson (2013) found the most widely used theories in communication and sport research tend to be social scientific: framing, agenda setting, uses and gratifications, cultivation, disposition theory, self-categorization, social identity, and then what they call hegemonic theory, i.e. masculinity and gender. Much of the current critical research in the field of sport and communication research, also associated with hegemonic theory, is concerned with the cultural and racial impacts within sport and communication.

In terms of method, social scientific quantitative methods outnumber qualitative approaches (Yoo, Smith, & Kim, 2013). Research in sports and communication primarily uses the following methods in order of usage: content analysis, surveys, qualitative interviews, case studies, and experiments (Kinkema & Harris, 1998; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2013). Wenner’s Sports Media Complex model was created to bridge the divides between the quantitative and the qualitative, the administrative and the critical research in the field (Wenner, 1989). The following section outlines the work that has been done using a primarily political economic approach.

Sport and political economy of communication

Because sport relied on the communication industry to help it rise to greater popularity, it was natural that neo-Marxist communications scholars turned their critiques toward the influence of sport and communication in society. Many of the political economic analyses of sports are concerned with professional sports (e.g., Beamish, 2002; Bourg & Goujet, 2010; Dittmer, 2013; Dittmore, 2017; Nauright & Schimmel, 2005; Oriard, 2007; Sage, 2007; Schimmel, 2002; and McChesney, 1989). Jhally (1989) employed Marxist theory in his examination of professional

sports leagues and communication to better understand the commodification of sport via communication in a cultural setting. Jhally (1989, p. 71) uses Marx's phrase "the opiate of the masses" to describe modern sports "as a form of celebration of the dominant order" in society. He then tied this "celebration of the dominant order" to hegemony.

Jhally also was concerned with the commodification of sport. Sports are commodified in three primary ways: through the selling of tickets, the selling of broadcast rights, and corporate sponsorship (Jhally, 1989). Media are a key partner along the way, as media outlets act as publicity agents to get people to attend games or as broadcasters to take sports to the people – and, of course, often profit nicely from these activities (Jhally, 1989).

Sport is a distinct field of study within Marxist political economy not only because it is a supply that meets a cultural demand but also because of the relational aspect of sport product produced by leagues, teams, equipment manufacturers and media that share a common economic and social interest operating within the economic and social conditions of their respective societies while vying for power and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1996). These conditions, Bourdieu says, have their own history, from which the continuation of their own existence are the *habitus*, or systems and structures that are designed to generate practices, that makes sport in society possible. And perhaps the greatest call for a Marxist study of communication and sport comes from the great profits seen in mediated sports.

Current sports media and ESPN

The seemingly ever-expanding sports audience has steadily grown, and technological innovations in communications have evolved to meet the audience along the way. The medium of sports communication changed over the years, from newspapers to radio to television, culminating in a hybrid mix of broadcasting and internet communications. In recent years, the

power of newspapers has declined significantly, while television, combined with an increasing consumption of internet-based broadcasting, has remained the primary medium of consuming sports. The sports communication industry has embraced social media and web-based news, including many of the larger newspapers, for both readership and viewership of sports and sports news. Social media have been seen as both a boon and a hindrance to creating a more democratic and diversified sports communication environment (Sanderson, 2011; Wenner, 2014). Another recent development in sports communication, streaming and over-the-top (OTT) video, has been the focus of broadcasters and entertainment providers. One sports broadcasting example of multiple streaming channels is ESPN's streaming service, which is included with its subscription price to its cable and satellite programming, and ESPN+, which is a standalone subscription streaming service that features unique content. But its future is uncertain as a recent spate of streaming services and subscription fatigue has begun to set in among consumers (Jerde, 2019; Spangler, 2018).

Televised sports, however, dominate sports media currently based on the amount of money spent to obtain content. Television networks have paid large sums of money to obtain the rights to broadcast sports content, starting with the NFL, followed by college football, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association. Live sports broadcasting dominated the Nielsen ratings in 2018, with 89 of the top 100 broadcasted shows being sporting events. Of those, 61 were NFL games, including the perennial number-1 rated show, the Super Bowl ("Live sports," 2019). In 2017, 81% of the top-100 rated shows were live sports, and in 2016, 88% were live sports (Karp & Ourand, 2018). This enormous audience has translated into billions of U.S. dollars. Professional sport leagues in the U.S., such as the National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Major League Baseball, as well as smaller

organizations, such as the National Hockey League, the Professional Golfers Association, and college football and men's basketball, all have lucrative deals with broadcast networks. The NFL charges broadcast networks NBC, Fox, CBS, and ESPN a combined \$5 billion for its games (Young, 2019). The NBA receives \$2.6 billion from ESPN and Turner Broadcasting, and the NCAA makes nearly \$1 billion annually from Turner for the broadcast of the March Madness men's basketball tournament (Soshnik, 2020). College football has also reaped the rewards of broadcasting games to large audiences. The largest broadcaster of college football is ESPN.

ESPN, the self-proclaimed "worldwide leader in sports," was founded in 1979 as a cable network devoted to sports entertainment and news programming. ESPN content is currently available on ABC, a broadcast network, and eight U.S. cable networks (including three college sports networks: the SEC Network dedicated to Southeastern Conference sports, the ACC Network dedicated to Atlantic Coast Conference sports, and the Longhorn Network dedicated to the University of Texas sports). It also owns ESPN Radio, ESPN.com, and several other websites. ESPN+, which is billed as a direct-to-consumer product, had 17 million subscribers as of January 2022. ESPN also owns events, such as the X Games, the ESPYs awards show, numerous college bowl games (which are detailed in Chapter 6), and basketball events. ESPN is 80% owned by ABC, Inc., an indirect subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company (ESPN, 2022). Hearst Communications holds the other 20%. ESPN (the channel) had 76 million subscribers as of January 2022 and generated an estimated \$3 billion from mostly channel subscription fees (The Walt Disney Company, 2022).

The Walt Disney Company was founded in the late 1920s and grew into an independent film studio led by Walt Disney and his brother Roy Disney. Since its early Mickey Mouse cartoons became global sensations in the 1930s, the Disney Company has grown its global brand

into one of the largest entertainment corporations in the world. The company attracted more than \$67.4 billion in revenue in 2021 and owns a variety of entertainment networks, movie studios, theme parks, and real estate holdings (The Walt Disney Company, 2022). After not making a profit in 2020 due to Covid-19 shutdowns of its theme parks, the company reported income of \$1.995 billion in 2021. Disney is ranked No. 53 of the world's largest companies in the Fortune 500 list in 2022. Its streaming service Disney+ had 129 million subscribers as of January 2022 (Fortune, 2022).

Hearst Communication, Inc. is privately held and is estimated to have made \$1.4 billion in revenue in 2021 (Zippia, 2022). Hearst partners with Disney not only in ESPN but also with A+E Networks. Though best known for its media companies, including cable, broadcast, and magazines, its largest company is the Fitch Group, a credit ratings and financial data and analysis company. It also owns healthcare data and software companies, transportation data, and software companies (Swartz, 2022).

Political economy and the commodification of collegiate football

College football has become what some call a minor league for professional football (Gurney, Lopiano, & Zimbalist, 2017). College football is currently the second most popular sport in the U.S. behind only the NFL as 56% of adults in the U.S. self-identify as college football fans (Jones, 2017). The NFL, by comparison, has declined in fandom recently but still retains a slightly greater level of people who identify as fans at 57% (Jones, 2017). The combined broadcast viewership of college football games in the 2017-18 season was more than 200 million unique viewers (National Football Foundation, 2018).

The CFP championship game between the Universities of Alabama and Georgia in January 2018 was the second-most watched cable broadcast ever, with a total of 29.9 million

viewers (National Football Foundation, 2018). The 2018 championship game was second only to the first CFP title game in 2015. Additionally, 47.6 million people attended games in person in 2017 (National Football Foundation, 2018). The attendance in college football had risen steadily from the 1950s to the mid-2000s and has plateaued since then (National Football Foundation, 2018). This has translated into enormous revenues.

Along with the revenue football can provide, there are other benefits for the university, such as greater visibility:

Even though their sports teams are explicitly subsidiaries of their educational goals, mediated coverage of their sports teams may be the most visible products they offer to the mass marketplace, and, as such, are often the key to the institution's visibility in the educational marketplace. (Wenner, 1989, p. 35)

College sports at a university may be the reason why a student chooses to attend (Sperber, 2000).

Television marked the complete commodification of the student-athlete through increased exposure and marketing efforts, creating both the superstar and the superpower: "Access to the lucrative sport system associated with performance on television defines the corporate nature of the new sports system and television supplants the universities and colleges as the prime producer of sports" (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986, p. 11). By embracing football broadcasting, universities fully commercialized college sports in the mid-1970s with the formation of the College Football Association (CFA; Oriard, 2009).

The NCAA, in addition to regulating college sports, also regulated the number of college football games on TV. National broadcasts of college football games were limited in a two-pronged effort to keep gate receipts high and to create demand for a limited television product on the basis of the market principle of scarcity. The number of nationally televised college football games in 1978 was 23, rising to 28 by 1984 (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). The NCAA sold those limited national games to ABC for \$29 million in 1978. The price had risen to \$68.5 million in

1984. But it wasn't until the CFA challenged the NCAA's exclusive broadcast contract that the sport's full revenue potential would be unleashed.

Supreme Court ruling in favor of universities vs. NCAA

The 1984 *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* Supreme Court ruling stripped away the NCAA's power to regulate the broadcasting of college football and turned it over to the CFA. Though it is not mentioned in the name of the Court ruling, The University of Georgia joined the University of Oklahoma to challenge the NCAA's authority to regulate the television exposure of college football by petitioning the court for an injunction against the NCAA, claiming the national broadcast contract was a violation of the Sherman Act. The Sherman Act was, essentially, designed to break up large interests that might limit consumer choice. The universities, acting on behalf of the 63 member institutions of the CFA, claimed the NCAA was acting as a cartel and limiting consumer choice through price fixing and anticompetitive behavior, among other actions (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). Even though the revenues from the NCAA television broadcast deal were lucrative, far more college football games are played during the fall, and consumers couldn't watch very many of them. The universities won the case in every court in which it was adjudicated, starting with the U.S. District Court, then the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, to the Supreme Court. The courts granted universities the ability to bypass the NCAA and deal directly with broadcasters. The Supreme Court ruling relied heavily on the District Court ruling. The District Court ruling highlighted priorities and a blind spot—student athletes were not mentioned as a stakeholder:

It is the Court's fond hope and genuine belief that the result of this litigation will be an open and competitive market which will ultimately serve the best interests of the football-playing colleges, the telecasters, television advertisers and, most importantly, the viewers of college football television. Congress had determined that free competition will yield this result and that therefore competition shall be the rule of commerce in our nation. By its decision today, the Court gives effect to that rule. (Board of Regents, 1982)

Following the ruling it was generally thought attendance and money in college football would decline overall (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). The list of predictions was as follows: (1) in-stadium game attendance would go down; (2) that the termination of the NCAA system of regulation would result in saturation of the television market with college football; (3) “that the price of advertising during college football game telecasts would correspondingly go down; (4) that the amount paid per exposure to the competing universities would go down; and (5) that money would be lost all around” (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995, p. 670).

Initially, those predictions were justified as the number of games being broadcast increased, but broadcasting and advertising revenue declined. Attendance figures, however, remained largely the same (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). It wasn't until nearly 10 years after the Court ruling that the conferences began to make large revenue gains. As the conferences found their revenue footing, the realignment period began as schools joined new conferences to chase the revenue sharing of new broadcast deals.

Following the 1984 Supreme Court ruling, critical political economists Hart-Nibbrig and Cottingham (1986) saw the realization of “corporate athleticism” (p. 7). The full commercialization of college football (and to a lesser extent men's college basketball) had been a long-time in coming. By the 1950s commercialization had developed to the point that football and basketball players had become commodities in a growing mass entertainment industry, one that now includes many of the leading universities in the United States (Hart-Nibbrig &

Cottingham, 1986). As TV became more entrenched in U.S. households in the 1960s and 1970s, professional sports entertainment in the U.S. experienced extraordinary growth. But few predicted that college sports would join the ranks of major providers of sports entertainment. Broadcasting of college football has turned this once regional sport into a multi-billion-dollar industry within an even larger mediated sports environment (Dunnivant, 2004). Broadcasting led to the increased popularity of the sport, which then led to the CFA wanting more broadcasting, and, eventually, broadcasters paying record sums of money to continue the trend. The result was a major reorganization of athletic conferences among NCAA universities.

Divisions in college football based on athletic budgets

Among NCAA participating schools, divisions are based on the size of the athletic budget, which is directly tied to college football broadcasting (Gurney et al., 2017). In 2016, there were 1,092 four-year schools in the NCAA. Of those, 346 were Division I, 307 were Division II, and 439 were Division III (Gurney et al., 2017).

Division I is the top division, comprised of schools with the largest athletic budgets. Among Division I schools that have football, there is more stratification based on athletic budgets. The Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) comprises the largest schools, with athletic budgets ranging from \$11.4 million to \$146.8 million in 2012-13 (Gurney et al., 2017). Even at this level there is more stratification among schools as there are two groups of conferences among the high-budget FBS schools. Thirteen years after the 1984 *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* ruling, many longstanding athletic conference ties were broken as some schools found they could be better marketed than others. New alliances formed through a period called realignment. Starting in 1997, 44 schools changed conferences (Maisel, 2014), not including the 12 that moved up to FBS level or started new football programs during that time.

Some conferences were eliminated, such as the Big West and the Western Athletic conferences (Maisel, 2014). The Big East Conference was renamed the American Athletic Conference. The 10 Division I FBS conferences that were left separated into two groups. One group is more powerful than the other and consists of the five conferences with the schools with the largest athletic department budgets. These are the so-called Power 5 conferences. The smaller and less powerful are the Group of 5 conferences. The NCAA has designated the Power 5 conferences as “autonomous” because they have enough power to make their own rules within the NCAA (Tracy, 2014).

The Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) comprises schools with athletic budgets ranging from \$3.9 million to \$43.8 million in 2012-13 (Gurney et al., 2017). A total of 94 Division I institutions don't have football. Division II athletic programs with football had budgets that ranged from \$1.3 million to \$15.4 million, and Division III had athletic budgets ranging from \$811,665 to \$16 million in 2012-13 (Gurney et al., 2017). The CFP is part of the bowl system and is the postseason of the FBS schools. The FCS schools have their own 16-team playoff to end the season. Division II and Division III football teams have a similar 16-team playoff to end the season. But it is the bowl system, the CFP, and the stratification among FBS schools that generates the largest revenues in college football. The CFP is part of the bowl system in college football. Its creation and broadcast – the mode of production including commodification, the seeking of surplus revenue, and the exploitation of the student-athlete – are the focus of this study. Because the CFP is a new way to crown a college football champion, there have been relatively few studies of it in sport and communication research.

Who are college football fans?

Those who have some sort of affiliation or allegiance to a university or college have

primarily a sports affiliation (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2017). The college football fanbase consists of both alumni and non-alumni fans. The ratio of alumni to non-alumni fans of college football is difficult to measure, but there is some data. An academic survey of football season ticket holders at a major midwestern university showed 56% of respondents indicated they were alumni of that university (Calavio, 2011). Facebook data also provide a ratio of alumni to fans, as a comparison of people who “like” a university’s football team page and who self-identify as alumni to those who don’t shows the median to be 19% of fans self-identifying as alumni (Trahan, 2015). Though the study is not academic, it can be helpful in understanding who are fans of a university’s athletic teams.

College football is the second most popular sport in the U.S. with 47.5 million fans attending games in the 2019-2020 season (National Football Foundation, 2020). College football had 392 regular season telecasts that season, reaching more than 145 million fans and 38 postseason bowl games reaching 90 million fans.

Nielsen, the audience measurement firm, found in its research that nearly half the total viewers in the 2015-2016 season were broken down thusly: There were 77.5 million female viewers, which is about half of the total viewership. There were 28.7 million Millennial viewers (ages 18-34) and 71.9 million viewers between the ages of 35 and 64 (which is nearly 60% of that demographic’s population). College football reached about 23.5 million African-Americans, which was nearly 60% of all African-American viewers at that time. College football also reached about 15 million Hispanics, which is nearly 30% of all Hispanic viewers (Nielsen, 2016).

Research questions

The literature provided for this study gives the political economic conditions that have

given rise to the CFP, given that major college football is a revenue-seeking venture that has been enabled by media broadcast contracts and has resulted in the stratification of college athletics. In describing the four primary areas of study in sport and communication, this study falls within those boundaries (Wenner, 1989). Critical political economy of communication is also a useful theoretical entry point for studying the CFP because it centers not the media or the message but rather the commodification, exploitation, and consolidation of the product, its workers, and college athletics. The first two research questions are derived from this literature:

Research Question 1: Does the CFP extract surplus value from college football laborers, and if so, who benefits from this arrangement?

Research Question 2: How do the power inequities manifest themselves within the CFP, and how do disempowered entities manage them?

Smythe's notion of the audience commodity fits well with sports broadcasting in that it's a tailormade approach to studying televised sports. In the context of this dissertation, the consumer's role in college football is also contemplated to determine if perhaps more credit should be given consumers. Consumers as laborers may have more power historically, and now, to shape college football's championship structure.

Research Question 3: Is there evidence that the audience functions as both a commodity and an area of resistance to the CFP?

As noted from the 1984 *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* ruling, many stakeholders stood to benefit from the ruling, including the universities, conferences, broadcasters, and fans. Missing from that ruling was a benefit to the student-athlete. The following research question focuses on student-athlete labor in the CFP.

Research Question 4: How are student-athletes used a labor, and do they also function as an

area of resistance?

Finally, the political economy of college football shows a system that is being propped up by broadcast media revenue. As college football has produced the CFP based on this formula for growth, the following research question addresses the future of the CFP and its broadcasting:

Research Question 5: Can the CFP reproduce itself both ideologically and materially, and what is the media's role in shaping its future?

The next section focuses on the methods used to gather data to answer the research questions.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This dissertation is a mixed-methods study employing two qualitative methods: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research helps the researcher understand people's perspectives, retrieve experiences of the past, gain expert insight or information, obtain descriptions of events that may be unavailable for most people, and create a record of communication that can be analyzed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 3). This chapter describes the two methods in detail, as well as how the samples were created, and how those samples were analyzed in relation to the theoretical underpinnings and research questions in this study.

Document analysis

Scott's (1990) document analysis is well suited to understanding economic texts regarding revenues, organizational structure, employment, and regulatory agencies. The expansion of the state and economic growth, along with ingrained documentary procedures within government and capitalist enterprises, can help the researcher peer into the past, even provide "direct insight" into past events (Scott, 1990, p. 10).

Documents are defined as embodied texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). "A document is an artifact which has as its central feature an inscribed text," including paper or electronic media (Scott, 1990, p. 5). The text is often script that is the written expression of the spoken language and the most obvious aspect of that document.

Documents may be divided into two categories, public record and private (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Scott, 1990). Public documents are designed to be a record of an event or an account. These can be both government or corporate and often have a structure meant to give credibility to the information. Private documents are produced by an individual and can be

considered “self-expression” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 234). Private documents are often considered personal documents, such as diaries, letters, household account books, address books, etc. (Scott, 1990). They can provide a look into the historical nature of the time through an unofficial account of an event or period. This study does not examine private documents because the documents relevant to this study are generally public or available upon request.

Documents as they are produced become “fixed” in time and should be handled “scientifically,” much the same as any physical science would examine an inert natural element like a rock (Scott, 1990, p. 2). Documents that have a fixed nature in time can be considered to be “nonreactive” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 236). Their meaning is fixed because as the documents are produced in their final form, they “endure unchanged across time and space” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 237). As Marx was concerned with the historical material conditions, using documents was one of his primary evidence gathering techniques (Scott, 1990).

Documents produced in history give direct insight into the material condition of that time and its relevant labor conditions. While some theoretical approaches consider documents’ meaning to vary across time, place, and reader (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), the historical materialist focuses on the material condition of society (Mosco, 2009). Political economy of communication traditionally has been effective in studying large-scale, macroanalyses of power (Mosco, 2009).

Documents are also partially defined by their availability, that is the access one has to the documents (Scott, 1990). State produced, public, official documents that have been archived and published are open and can be accessed for information. However, some government documents are closed to researchers, and a researcher must meet some form of gatekeeping requirements in order to study them. Documents from universities and athletic departments are, at times, closed, requiring a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. This limitation varies across

institutions. Some universities are forthcoming with documents, and others do not make them publicly available, limiting their immediate availability. This variation in availability was the case in this study.

Authenticity, credibility, representativeness, meaning

The authenticity of a document is critical to its use as a source because questionable and inauthentic sources can mislead the researcher. Once a document is considered to be authentic, it can be considered “trustworthy” as a source (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 237). Because so many documents have been produced over time, Scott (1990) gives a four-part test for determining the quality of documents and their data: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning.

The authenticity of a document rests in judging the soundness and the authorship of the document. Even a copy of an original may introduce small errors in type. In some historical research, some forgeries are more realistic than others. The researcher must “authenticate the identity of those responsible for its production” (Scott, 1990, p. 20).

The credibility of a document rests in the level of distortion of its contents (Scott, 1990). The question of the author’s sincerity needs to be determined by the researcher, whether the author “believed” in what they recorded (p. 22). Did the author mean to give authentic information or was the intent to deceive? Is an event represented by a “sincere observer,” and what level of personal bias can be seen from the author (p. 23)? Inauthentic documents may be used in research “so long as they are recognized as being inaccurate” (p. 24).

Representativeness of a document is its similarity to the totality of relevant documents (Scott, 1990). This is especially relevant if there is a collection of papers or if financial records purported to be fulfilling a requirement for documentation for one governing body but from many different organizations.

Meaning is the final determining factor of quality. It is the culmination of authenticity, credibility, and representativeness wherein an understanding of the meaning and significance of a document is achieved. Documents have content, and that content requires analysis (Prior, 2003). If the document is not authentic or unreadable, no meaning can be derived. The literal reading of a document may yield words that can be read, but without interpretive understanding, there is no meaning produced. Interpretive understanding comes when the literal meaning of the text comes in conjunction with any available relevant historical or cultural context brought by the researcher (Scott, 1990). Understanding more fully the content of a document requires studying the document in context and how people use the text in action (Prior, 2003).

The researcher therefore must come to an understanding of the historical or cultural period of time in which the document was produced. “The ultimate interpretation of the meaning of the text will derive from the researcher’s judgement that this interpretation ‘makes sense,’ given his or her understanding of the author’s situation and intentions” (Prior, 2003, p. 31). Because the document is situated in a fixed point in time, “texts must be studied as socially situated products” (Prior, 2003, p. 34). The next section discusses the documents used in this study.

How documents were gathered, measured, and analyzed

Official, open sources from several governing and participating organizations, such as the NCAA, the CFP, and universities were examined for this study. Other sources were the Internal Revenue Service and some state governments. These sources satisfied Scott’s (1990) four-part documents test. All of these sources have official websites that are deemed to be authentic by examining their domain names. Government websites usually have a .gov domain, while universities have a .edu domain. The CFP and NCAA both have .com websites, though the

NCAA also has a .org website, which has economic and governing documents. Websites were searched for economic and other governing or organizational documents. Often this was done through a search of the website, though a Google search was also helpful. Other documents included news articles and media reports, which can be used as part of a systematic evaluation (Bowen, 2009).

Sources of documents

Because the documents come from known websites of universities, governing bodies, and other official sources, the documents are considered genuine. Their meaning is discerned through the economic information given, such as revenue amounts, sources of revenue, and even the lack of transparency. Most, if not all, documents analyzed for this study were produced since 2010, emphasizing the recency of the CFP and ongoing evolution of the FBS championship.

Information given freely about economic data was somewhat rare and could be held up as an example of what should be the standard for reporting economic data and its availability. Because of some inconsistency from source to source in terms of standardized reporting and availability, the representative nature of the documents could be called into question. Not all documents, even when purporting to have the same data as another, similar source, reported the data similarly or even on the same scale. In some cases, the documentation only infers desired information. The following examples shed some light on the documents examined.

In examining documents pertaining to the CFP's nonprofit status with the IRS, a search was done for documents that included the status and any relevant tax information. An internet search of the nonprofit listings of ProPublica showed the CFP is a tax-exempt organization, but the site didn't provide any documentation. A link to the IRS database of tax-exempt organizations was provided. The IRS search by state was helpful because the CFP is

headquartered in Texas. The Texas listing of all registered tax-exempt organizations and their ruling number by the IRS is on an Excel spreadsheet, which was downloaded from IRS.gov. A search of the spreadsheet quickly showed there was only one entry for the CFP, and it is indeed tax-exempt, as registered with the IRS. The IRS listing also shows the CFP has no assets, income, or revenue.

Document sources include local, state, and federal governments. Additionally, the CFP is a source of documents, as well as the NCAA. Several university athletic departments and athletic conferences have available records, though they are not consistent. For example, the University of Oregon and Washington State University both have detailed financial information available on their athletic department websites. But many other schools do not have much or any financial documents available.

There are some databases, including the College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database and USA Today, which have hard-to-get financial records through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Both databases are used in this study.

I obtained some historical records through now defunct institutions, such as the Bowl Coalition Series (BCS), the Bowl Coalition, and the Bowl Alliance, which provides detailed historical data with media guides. Other sources include the Football Bowl Association (FBA), National Football Foundation (NFF), the National Championship Foundation (NCF), College Football Researchers Association (CFRA), and the Football Writers Association of America (FWAA). Overall, 59 documents containing economic and historical information were obtained and analyzed, and 25 of which were used in this study. The list of documents used in this study is in the References section. Documents obtained but not used in this study were either repetitive or didn't contain information relevant to the study.

Analysis

Measurement, as described by Scott, is the process of coding and classifying source materials into theoretically defined categories (1990). This coding and classifying does not have to be a quantitative procedure. The qualitative classification into theoretical categories are ways of “operationalizing theoretical concepts” (Scott, 1990, p. 9; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). This can also help define the “topic” of a text for categorization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 247). When documents were gathered, they were sorted according to their topics through theoretically defined categories and then immediately analyzed for relevant data. Documents were analyzed in terms of historical materialism to help tell the story of commodification, the search for greater surplus value through fan and player participation, and government involvement in order to answer the research questions. The categories were political economic concepts, such as commodification, surplus values, and player and fan resistance. Documents may have had relevance in more than one category. For example, financial documents from the CFP were categorized based on profits generated and distributed. They also were classified as related to commodification of the sport and players. NCAA documents also showed revenue information for that organization, but because the NCAA is a separate institution from the CFP, the revenue information is more of a contextual nature as well as illustrating the money from the commodification of NCAA athletics.

Semi-structured interviews

Although documents can provide historical and economic data relevant to this political economic study, another method was included to provide historical and economic data from the perspectives of the administrators, the participants, and those of the media who have reported on the CFP. This additional source of data is from semi-structured interviews. Interviews have a

“specific structure and purpose” (Tracy, 2013, p. 131.). Interviews for this study are semi-structured in that they are not so rigid in questioning that it does not allow the interviewer any leeway when asking questions, yet are not completely unstructured and unguided. An interview guide with questions for the respondents was developed to help answer the research questions, while keeping in mind the critical theoretical perspective of historical materialism. The interview guide was slightly altered for each line of questioning based on the respondent. For example, media members were asked relevant media questions first, while other CFP structural, student-athlete, and historical questions were saved for later in the interview. An administrator, however, was asked about the CFP structure and history first. The student-athlete version was similarly altered. Interview guides are included in Appendix A.

Interviews help bring out perspectives, viewpoints, and experiences through questions and responses that are often organic and adaptive. Among the purposes of a qualitative interview, this dissertation focused on four:

- Understanding the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations ...
- Gathering information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means,
- Inquiring about the past,
- Verifying, validating, or commenting on information obtained from other sources. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173)

Through interviews, respondents can share stories or accounts that frame how they view and understand the world (Tracy, 2013). As respondents respond to questions or prompts, they can give explanations or rationales for their actions. They can also express opinions. The way

respondents talk, using jargon or clichés, shows a specific language or vocabulary that also helps reveal their experiences and expertise. Interviews can also bring out hidden experiences that can be buried within memories or under “official” accounts and other formal documents (Tracy, 2013). Meaning can also be generated within interviews as the interviewer and the respondent swap ideas and experiences that are sometimes shared between them. In this way, interviews are helpful for understanding past events, and getting perspectives on historical events, fitting with historical materialism (Tracy, 2013).

Interviews are best conducted face-to-face (Tracy, 2013) because body language and facial non-verbal cues can help give the researcher further context in the interview. The interaction between the researcher and the participant also becomes more of a social interaction because the non-verbal cues also can build rapport and even greater expansion of responses. Participants were relaxed and thoughtful during face-to-face interviews. The rapport was built through a shared understanding of events and the importance of those events. Reporting on and participating in the CFP was a memorable experience for the participants in this study. They seemed eager to discuss their perspectives and experiences at the CFP. Each of the face-to-face interviews were recorded on my phone, and I took additional notes on the printed question sheet. Each participant was informed they could choose to answer any question confidentially, and any information obtained would then be attributed to an unnamed source. None of the participants chose to answer a question confidentially, and each agreed to have their name and position used in this study.

If interviews can't be done face-to-face because of the location of participants, interviews can also be conducted from a distance via phone or other mediated means (Tracy, 2013). The interviews can be either synchronous or asynchronous, and this study employed both. All but one

of the mediated interviews were done synchronously, via a phone call. The phone calls were recorded on my laptop, and each participant was made aware of the recorded nature of the interview. As with the face-to-face interviews, each participant was also informed that they could choose to answer any question confidentially, and any information used to answer a question would be provided as a confidential or unnamed source. Again, none of the participants chose to answer a question confidentially.

The one instance of asynchronous interviewing was done via email and consisted of questions that couldn't be asked in the time frame given by the participant. They also included some follow-up questions. The emails became transcriptions of the conversation and were included with other transcriptions of the face-to-face and mediated interviews.

Sample

This study employed snowball sampling to find respondents who can provide a variety of perspectives while still staying within the study's criteria. The snowball begins with one respondent, and at the end of the interview, that respondent is asked to help the researcher to identify and give contact information for more interviews (Tracy, 2013). While the snowball can expand quickly, the snowball sampling in this study seemed to stall quickly. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) warned snowballs can "freeze" or "melt"—hit a dead end—if respondents are unable to give an adequate amount of potential respondents in their social circle (p. 115). In this study, the respondents could be characterized as falling into three general tracks, or social circles, of those who have at one time participated in the CFP: former student-athletes who participated in the CFP at some point, media members who covered the CFP, and CFP administrators and management. All participants were asked for further leads on participants to help the snowball grow. The snowball was successful, but problems arose in all three tracks.

Table 3.1*Participants interviewed.*

Participant name	Classification of participation	Interview date(s)	Type of interview
Stetzon Bair	Former student-athlete	07/20/2019	Face-to-face
Dr. Rodney Bennett	Member of the CFP Board of Managers	08/05/2019	Telephone
T.J. Daniel	Former student-athlete	05/31/2019	Telephone
Bill Hancock	Executive Director of the CFP	06/27/2019, 07/20/2019	Telephone and email
Austin Meek	Journalist	06/07/2019	Face-to-face
Rob Mullens	Chair of the CFP Selection Committee	06/03/2019	Face to face at an extended press conference
Ryan Thorburn	Journalist	08/09/2019	Face-to-face

The administrators who were interviewed declined to give any additional specific names or contact information during the interview. The administrators I contacted who agreed to give an interview were contacted via their organizations. The organizations contacted were the College Football Playoff organization, and multiple universities seeking presidents who serve on the Board of Governors, athletic directors who serve either on the Board of Managers, the Selection Committee, or have been critical of the CFP, and conference commissioners of both Power 5 conferences and Group of 5 conferences. Most inquiries didn't make it past organizational gatekeepers. Of those I contacted, two agreed to be interviewed. Three more presidents or athletic directors responded for more information on the study but didn't respond to further inquiries. One administrator who declined to be interviewed for this study was invited to be a speaker at the Northwest chapter of the Associated Press Sports Editors conference in Eugene, Oregon. I was invited to the public meeting by the organizer and recorded the hour-long

meeting. That recording was edited for length and only the relevant portions when he talked about his time as the chairman of the CFP Selection Committee were kept. That recording was also made into a transcript by a paid transcription service and is included in the time and transcript results.

The media members I interviewed were helpful in providing some names of other media members but did not give contact information for other media members to be included in the snowball at the time of the interview. There were no responses from suggested media members after I found contact information. As my snowball didn't yield as many interviews as I would have liked, I contacted other members of the media who had covered the CFP at one point. These included ESPN on-air talent along with media members from around the U.S. who cover schools that have played in the CFP, including newspapers and television stations that cover Clemson University, the University of Alabama, the University of Washington, and the University of Oregon football teams. Most media members didn't respond to requests for an interview. Despite a brief negotiation, a public relations representative of ESPN's college football programming declined to be interviewed or make any on-air talent available for an interview. Direct appeals to ESPN on-air talent for interviews via emails went unanswered.

The sampling of former college football players who had participated in the CFP began with one player who was known to the researcher previously, though we had never spoken of his experience in the CFP leading up to this study. Following the interview, the player was asked for any other players who might be interested. He provided three names and contact information. One agreed to be interviewed, while the other two did not respond to messages. The second player was also asked for former players. He suggested one name, but as the player was still an active student-athlete, I declined to reach out as I would have had to go through that university's

athletic department for an interview request. I was interested in former players because they are free from any institutional limitations on responding and don't have any restrictions on how they can answer critical questions.

In all, eight interviews were recorded. The interviews averaged 30 minutes, 38 seconds. The shortest was a follow-up interview that lasted a little over 12 minutes. The longest was more than 45 minutes. They generated 86 pages of transcripts. All people interviewed for this study were either interviewed face-to-face or via a phone call. All people interviewed for this study were given an informed consent document either in person or via email. This study was reviewed by the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board, and it was deemed to be exempt. All were signed at the time of the interview or shortly before it. All interviews were recorded on either my phone or on my computer if the phone was being used for a call. The interviews were transcribed using a paid transcription service, Rev.com. All transcripts were checked against the original recordings to determine if there were errors in transcription. One interview transcription had some mistakes, but all others were not modified. The transcripts were downloaded and printed out. At that point, the transcripts became documents. These transcripts were categorized in theoretical terms like the documents, such as of commodification, the search for greater surplus value through fan and player participation, and government involvement.

The variety of participants' perspectives, in addition to the documents gathered, provided a large amount of data for better understanding the historical materialism of the CFP. But I did not reach data saturation for the interviews. With three general categories of respondents, there was a good amount of redundancy. But because data saturation was not reached through interviews alone, another means of gathering data was explored.

Other sources of interview data

To help reach data saturation, I searched archived media interviews on YouTube for those who were invited to be interviewed for the study but declined to participate: conference commissioners, athletic directors, and media personalities. The search yielded 23 recorded and archived media interviews of relevant people who hadn't agreed to be interviewed or recorded for this study (Table 3.2). Though the exact questions I asked the respondents who were interviewed were not asked in the recorded interviews, there were many topical interviews that fit within the theoretical framework of the study. The archived interviews that I examined were also what was available on YouTube during the same time period as when I conducted my interviews during 2019. The most recent videos examined in this study were published in 2018 and reflected the state of the CFP at the time.

Table 3.2:

Interviews archived on YouTube that provided data.

Name	Publisher and date	YouTube URL
Danny White after American Championship: Put UCF in or expand the Playoff	UCFSports Published on Dec 1, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0a6bg4Rx9o
UCF AD Danny White Media Session: College GameDay Week (11.14.18)	UCF Knights Published on Nov 14, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=II_7MRCuXLI
Is the College Football Playoff broken? Is it just so biased against UCF?	10News WTSP Published on Oct 22, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9Bix2j0-Zc
Nick Saban discussing CFP expansion 120717	AP Steadham Published on Dec 7, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBExtNWk0jE
Urban Meyer on the CFP criteria, expectations	TheColumbusDispatch Published on Dec 2, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PiYHwB8CEk

Table 3.2: Continued

Name	Publisher and date	YouTube URL
SEC Commish Greg Sankey on Possibly Expanding CFB Playoff The Dan Patrick Show 11/28/18.	Dan Patrick Show Published on Nov 28, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0ggR_jXlvs
SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey before Alabama-Georgia championship game.	Tide 102.9 Published on Jan 7, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8xXVJdGe8c
Greg Sankey discusses expansion of the CFP	Sports Business Journal Published on Dec 6, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW7jxTT5lK4
SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey on conference realignment	Saturday Down South Published on Jul 14, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YMwZhurAAk
SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey Talks Expanding CFB Playoffs w/Dan Patrick Full Interview 11/28/18.	Dan Patrick Show Published on Nov 28, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfb4nTz9jCA
Jim Delany Talks College Football Playoff	Big Ten Network Published on Dec 3, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_otgPiQaqTo
Jim Delany discusses better positioning the Big Ten teams to make the College Football Playoff	Sports Business Journal Published on Dec 5, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgBDtjf_SJk
Jim Delany Interview - BTN Live in NYC	Big Ten Network Published on Jan 29, 2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhU7ndyOF30
Larry Scott on the future of collegiate football	Sports Business Journal Published on Dec 5, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcTVRfU3Hqc
Larry Scott on the Pac 12 and the College Football Playoff	KSL Sports Published on Jul 31, 2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmDTNVbkEQ
Pac-12 Football Media Day: Commissioner Larry Scott's Q&A session	Pac-12 Networks Published on Jul 25, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XECPsTbWqd4
College football playoff: Pac-12 commissioner Larry Scott on the committee, selection process	The Oregonian Published on Nov 1, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-LonSN9DsU

Table 3.2: Continued

Name	Publisher and date	YouTube URL
Peach Bowl President Gary Stokan Talks National Championship, UCF, & CFP Expansion	Chat Sports Published on Jan 8, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nNzGpdACWc
Scott Frost would love to see College Football Playoff expand SportsCenter ESPN	ESPN Published on Jan 7, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1ISBQaH0B4
Executive Director Of Bowl Association Wright Waters Interview in Las Vegas	Dugless57 Published on Sep 29, 2012	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Bi4ZOa7_6o
Sit Down with Wright Waters of FBA	College Football Bowls Published on Mar 31, 2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1ADU6oUwsY
Wright Waters the Executive Director of the FBA live from ACC Kickoff	Carolina Sports Network Published on Jul 17, 2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoCen8xMWVI
Bowl Game Radio, 10.22.14: Wright Waters, Football Bowl Association Executive Director	SanDiegoBowlGames Published on Oct 24, 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpWTQmMaL38

These interviews were transcribed and sorted into theoretical categories as described in the previous section on document analysis. For example, interviews of conferences commissioners regarding the current state of the CFP and its future could provide answers to RQs 1, 3 and 5, as administrators seek to extract surplus value, commodify the audience, and reproduce itself. The interviews were conducted by news reporters and seem to be candid, increasing their credibility as sources of data. In all, 36 pages of transcripts from the 23 archived interviews were examined. Noticeably lacking from the YouTube interviews are interviews of college football players and their opinions on the CFP. There is little video evidence of players and former players in the CFP speaking out about it, other than preparing for a game to be played at the time. There were some players' voices found in a few media reports that were not archived

on video, such as in a column by *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Bill Plaschke (2015), who asked players in the first CFP about being a part of the CFP that would make hundreds of millions of dollars for all the stakeholders except the players.

Results

The following chapter presents the results of the document analysis, focusing on the economic conditions of the CFP. Chapter 5 makes use of interviews to present the historical conditions that gave rise to the CFP. Chapter 6 shows media power in relation to the CFP using both document analysis and interviews.

CHAPTER IV

FINDING SURPLUS VALUE AND REVENUES

Revenue generation and expenses in college sports

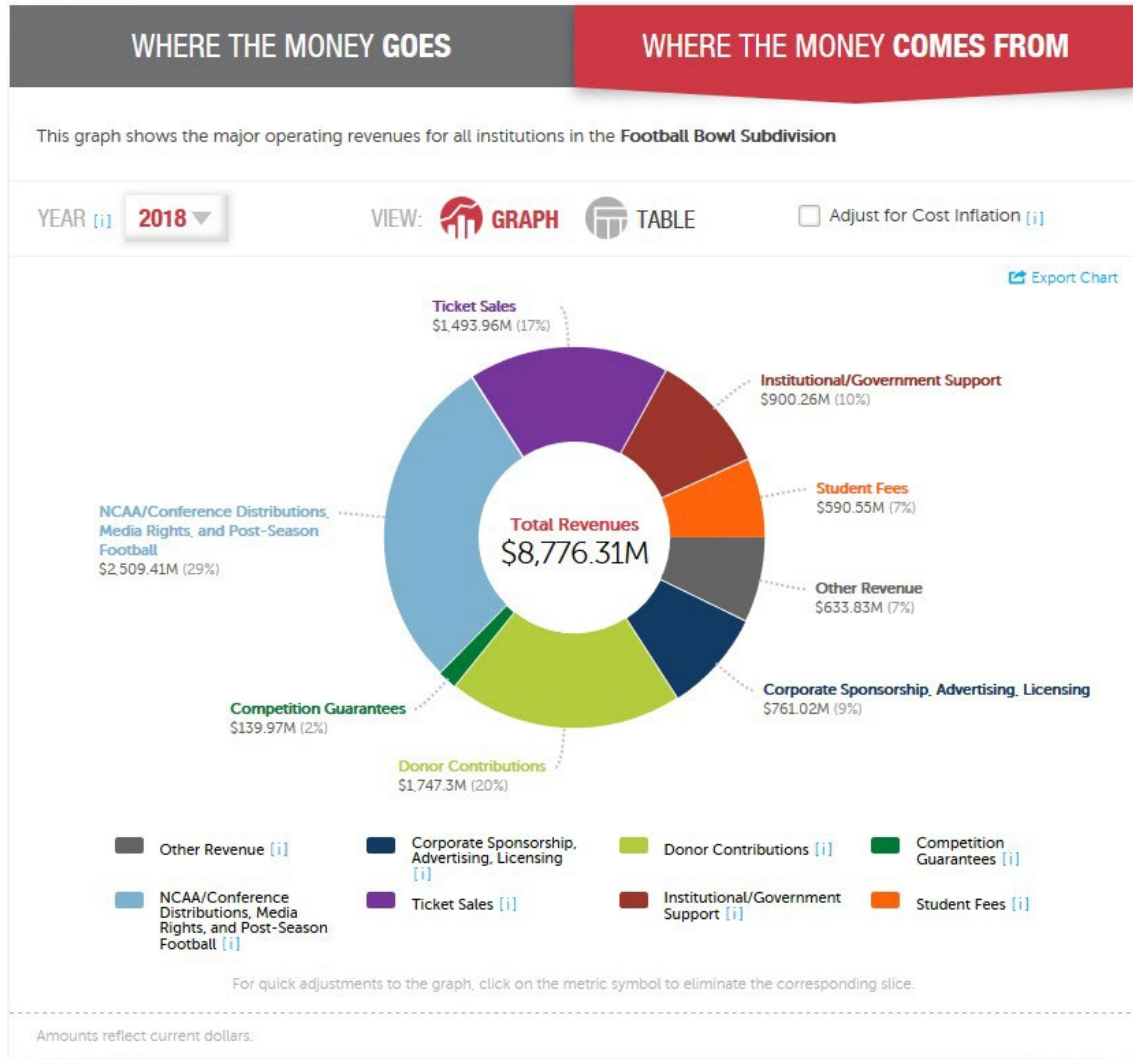
This chapter presents the results of a document analysis of athletic department funding. The analysis includes documents collected by the researcher, along with collections of documents found in the College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database and the USA Today database of athletic department revenue documents. These financial documents are not readily available but have been procured through Freedom of Information requests by these organizations. The chapter explores all revenue sources in athletic departments, followed by a focus on football and the CFP.

Total athletic funding

The Division I FBS universities brought in a total of \$8.8 billion in revenue in 2018, according to the CAFI database (Knight Foundation, n.d.). The majority of the money comes from three distinct areas: NCAA/Conference Distributions, Media Rights, and Post-Season Football (Figure 4.1). That portion represents \$2.5 billion, or 29% of the revenue, of which the CFP is a part. Donor Contributions were \$1.7 billion or 20% of revenue. The third largest revenue area comes from ticket sales, which accounted for \$1.5 billion, or 17% of revenue. Other sources of revenue are institutional and government contributions; competition guarantees; student fees; corporate sponsorships, advertising, and licensing; and other. The largest athletic departments by revenue are the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, and Ohio State University, as each brought in more than \$200 million in revenue in 2018 (Berkowitz, 2019).

Figure 4.1

A screenshot of the CAFI database of Revenues for Football Bowl Subdivision athletic departments in 2018.



Note: The data in this online database are self-reported by institutions on NCAA financial reports and on reports required by the federal government. From Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. (2021). *College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database*. Football Bowl Subdivision | College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) Database.

FCS schools, on the other hand, brought in \$1.38 billion in total revenue, the vast majority of which came from two sources, institutional and government support (\$557 million,

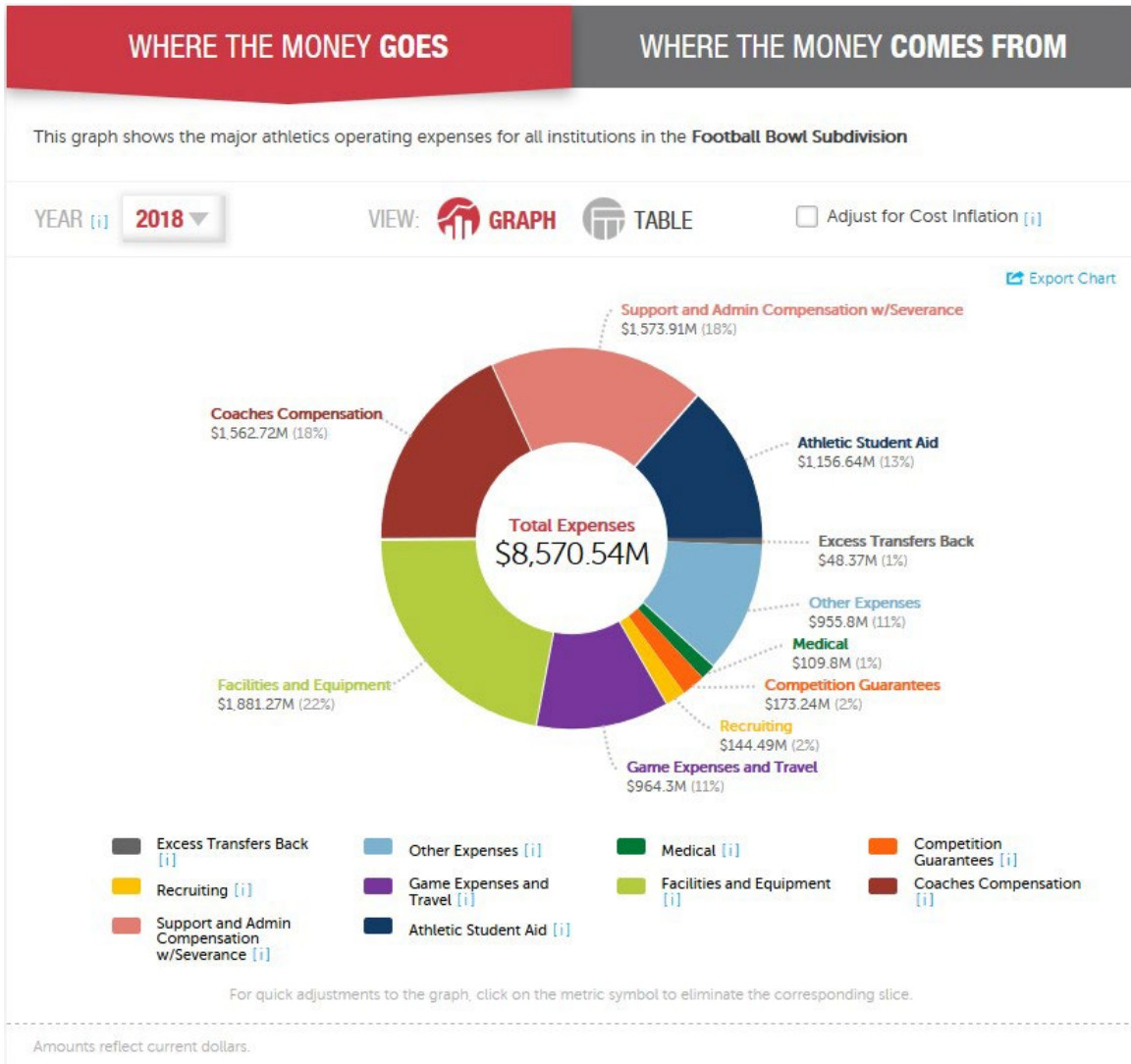
42%) and student fees (\$339 million, 26%), according to CAFI (Figure 4.2; Knight Commission, n.d.). For non-football Division I schools, the disparity is even more glaring, as those schools raised \$709 million in total revenue, with the same two primary sources as the FCS: institutional and government support (\$275 million, 39%) and student fees (\$246 million, 35%). Student fees at the FCS level are far greater in terms of percentage than the FBS. Though the total amount was greater at FBS schools with student fees generating \$597 million, it was only 7% of all revenue.

14-year trends in NCAA Division I athletics finances

The analysis of trends in Division I athletics finances showed athletic departments primarily received revenue through their television contracts from the NCAA and conferences. The NCAA paid universities from its broadcast contract and other sponsorships from the Men's Division I basketball tournament (Tracy, 2016). The Final Four is the NCAA's most profitable property, bringing in more than \$1 billion annually for all Division I universities, regardless of their football classification. This revenue is divided among all 20 Division I conferences and makes up 29% of all NCAA distributions to Division I schools. In all, the NCAA distributed \$589,875,809 to Division I member schools in 2019 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019c). The NCAA does not receive or distribute football money to the member schools following the 1984 *Oklahoma vs Board of Regents* ruling.

Figure 4.2

A screenshot of the CAFI database of Expenses for Football Bowl Subdivision athletic departments in 2018.



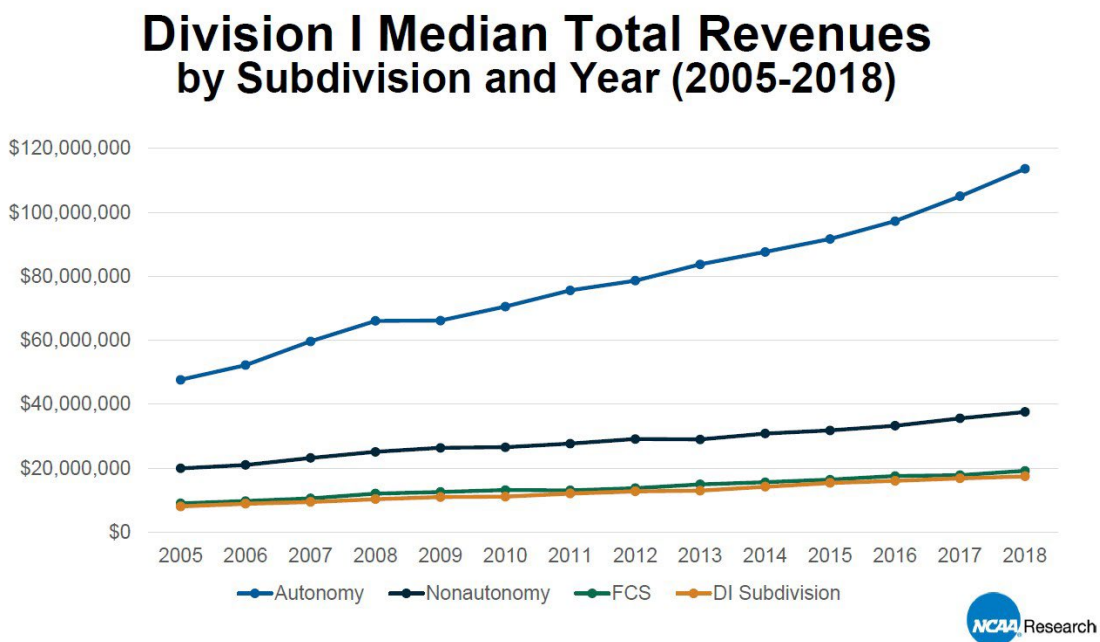
Note: The data in this online database are self-reported by institutions on NCAA financial reports and on reports required by the federal government. From Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. (2021). *College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database*. Football Bowl Subdivision | College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) Database.

The NCAA lists revenue from a variety of sources in its “14-year Trends” document, including ticket sales to home games of all sports, NCAA and conference distributions from

broadcast deals, contributions from alumni and other individuals, guarantees and options, third party support, concessions, broadcast rights, royalties, advertising, sponsorships, sports camps, endowments, and investment income (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019f). Other sources of revenue include “allocated” revenue from student activity fees, direct government support, direct institutional support, and indirect institutional support. Figure 4.3 shows the NCAA’s revenue tracking over the years.

Figure 4.3

A screenshot of NCAA Division I Athletic Department Median Total Revenues.



Note: From the National Collegiate Athletics Association (2021f). 2005-18 NCAA Revenues and Expenses of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics Programs Report.

Revenues have increased across all Division I subdivisions but are clearly greater for the FBS Autonomy (Power 5) schools. For the Group of 5 (Nonautonomy), FCS, and DI Subdivision (Division I schools without football), revenues have also increased but at a slower rate. The figures are calculated using the median school for each subdivision and year and are not a total or an average.

An analysis reveals minor inconsistencies between two consecutive reporting documents, including the number of Division I schools and the initial year of current reporting standards. In 2018 there were 347 reporting institutions, and in 2019 there were 351. Therefore, there may be a small difference among reported media incomes because the median is in a slightly lower rank than in the previous year.

CFP funding

The NCAA does not track football broadcast revenue. Total media rights income includes both football broadcasting and NCAA broadcasting revenue of the men's basketball tournament. For FBS institutions, total media rights income is the largest source of revenue, according to CAFI (Figure 4.1). These schools receive revenue from broadcast deals designed to showcase the best of the best in collegiate athletics. One such deal, reportedly worth \$7.3 billion, was made by the Division I football schools (acting through conferences and separate from the NCAA) with ESPN to broadcast the College Football Playoff (Palotta, 2015). The CFP, which began play in the 2014-15 season, is a new format where the top four Division I schools are chosen to play each other in a mini-tournament to decide the national championship. The money from ESPN goes to each of the conferences in Division I football, with the most going to the top five conferences, known as the Power 5, made up of the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the Atlantic

Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference, the Big 12 Conference, and the Pac-12 Conference.

The CFP is the championship of the FBS institutions and is nominally open to all FBS schools. As a whole, FBS institutions have far more resources to be successful athletically than all other divisions in college athletics. In the first six years of the CFP, from the 2014-2015 season to 2020-2021 season, there have been 24 spots in the CFP. Only a handful of schools have the resources to qualify; just 11 different universities have qualified for the CFP (Table 4.1). In the six years of play, three conferences have had champions, with the SEC having three (University of Alabama twice and Louisiana State University once), the ACC twice (Clemson University both times), and the Big Ten Conference once (Ohio State University, which won the inaugural championship in 2014-2015).

Table 4.1

A list of universities that have participated in the CFP from 2015-2022.

University (Conference)	CFP appearances	Win-Loss record	Championships
University of Alabama (SEC)	6	7-4	2
Clemson University (ACC)	5	6-3	2
University of Oklahoma (Big-12)	4	0-4	0
Ohio State University (Big Ten)	3	2-2	1
University of Georgia (SEC)	2	3-1	1
Louisiana State University (SEC)	1	2-0	1
University of Oregon (Pac-12)	1	1-1	0
Florida State University (ACC)	1	0-1	0
Michigan State University (Big Ten)	1	0-1	0
University of Michigan (Big Ten)	1	0-1	0
Notre Dame University (Independent)	1	0-1	0
University of Washington (Pac-12)	1	0-1	0
University of Cincinnati (AAC) ²	1	0-1	0

² The University of Cincinnati of the American Athletic Conference was the first Group of 5 school to participate in the CFP when the team was chosen in the 2021-22 season.

The line of demarcation of those who have the resources to qualify and those who don't has at least one primary factor: an institution is most likely a member of a Power 5 conference. The Power 5 conferences are composed of the most intensively invested football programs in the FBS (Lavigne, 2016). The conferences are also heavily televised through broadcast deals with either their own networks—BIG Network or Pac-12 Network, for example—or negotiated deals with major broadcasters, such as ESPN or CBS Sports. Notre Dame University has its own broadcast deal with NBC Sports.

CFP revenue generation

The CFP generates surplus value for its member institutions by leveraging the popularity of football and college football through broadcast contracts, sponsorships, and ticket sales. The majority of its revenue comes from the 12-year broadcast deal with ESPN signed in 2012, to broadcast its playoff and the New Year's Six bowl games. The deal was reported to be worth about \$470 million annually, for a total of \$5.64 billion (Bachman, 2012). Another report put the deal closer to \$7.3 billion (Pallotta, 2015). ESPN and the CFP have never disclosed the exact figures of the contract, but in 2018, the CFP distributed \$465,065,074 to all the FBS, FCS, and independents (College Football Playoff, 2018).

The television audience seems to take precedence, as the ratings for the CFP show. The first-ever College Football Playoff Championship – Ohio State's 42-20 win over Oregon – is the largest audience and highest rating in cable television history – an average of 33,395,000 viewers, based on an 18.2 rating (ESPN, n.d.). That first CFP championship in 2015 allowed ESPN to charge \$1 million per ad (Pallotta, 2015). For a network that has nine cable broadcast networks, ESPN on ABC, and the new ESPN+ streaming service, the CFP has become the biggest event each year for the entity.

Ratings over the years have fluctuated for the CFP semifinal games. The network has had the semifinals as part of the traditional New Year's Day bowl lineup, but it has also broadcasted those games on the closest Saturday to New Year's Day. The broadcasts on New Year's Day have larger audiences than those on other days because it is not only a holiday but it is also a traditional college football bowl game day. Historical bowl games, such as the Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl, have been entrenched on New Year's Day for decades. Both times the Rose Bowl has been a CFP semifinal game it has been played on Jan. 1.

Revenue could slow from the various media outlets that broadcast college football because of continued fracturing of the media environment. ESPN showed the 2019-2020 CFP championship game on a total of 15 different platforms and mediums. But for other broadcasters that don't have the Disney-backed infrastructure of ESPN, there may be deals to broadcast over several different companies and mediums, such as the NFL on Amazon.

The next two sections are first, the scheduled revenue distribution from the CFP to the conferences and universities for the 2019-2020 season based on information from the CFP, which is then followed by the actual revenue distribution for that time period, which was based on NCAA documents.

CFP revenue distribution

The CFP schedule of conference payments indicates even more revenue distribution in the 2019-2020 season than in the previous 2018-2019 season. For most college football programs, success on the field leads to greater payouts. A document analysis shows the setup for distribution is simple, with greater payments based first on academic progress, followed by on-field success. Schools must meet a minimum standard of the Academic Progress Rate (APR) in order to reach the first threshold of money distribution. It's a relatively small amount: \$300,000

per school. Looking at how football teams stack up against other men's sports (where football is classified), the APR for Division I FBS football teams is the third lowest among men's NCAA sports. It is only eclipsed by men's basketball and FCS football teams, which had the worst APR rates out of all NCAA sports in 2018 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019d).

The next threshold is being a part of a Division I FBS conference Power 5, or as the NCAA refers to them, autonomy conferences. Those five conferences were slated to receive a baseline of approximately \$62 million each in the 2018-19 season from the CFP for a total of \$372 million (College Football Playoff, 2017). The other five FBS conferences, the Group of 5, were slated to receive a combined amount of \$85.2 million. With 64 Power 5 teams, that is an average of \$5.8 million per school. With 66 Group of 5 teams, that is an average of \$1.3 million. What is not generally well known is there are also the 125 FCS teams that now qualify for some money from the FBS. The FCS was to receive a total of \$4 million to divide among "certain" conferences (College Football Playoff, 2017).

The four independent schools were slated annually to receive their own share based solely on meeting the APR standard. Notre Dame, which is represented on the CFP's Board of Managers, was to receive \$2.9 million in 2018, and the other three independents were to receive a total of \$1.24 million to divide among themselves, according to the CFP.

The final hurdle for revenue distribution is on-field success. A conference receives \$6 million for each team that is selected to be in the CFP. There is also a \$4 million payment for making a New Year's Six bowl game, one of the three other bowl games in the CFP rotation of bowl games.

More success generally leads to greater amounts of money, which makes success more likely, seeing that the largest revenue generators in college athletics tend to be the most

successful on the field. The amounts above were the estimated revenue distributions from the CFP in 2018-2019. The section below shows what the conferences actually received during that time.

CFP revenue distribution—bigger payouts and wider reach

The CFP has more than doubled the amount of money that conferences received under the BCS. In the final year of the BCS, each of the Power 5 conferences, plus the former Big East conference [which is now the American Athletic Conference (AAC) and a Group of 5 conference] received \$27.897 million each (Dosh, 2018). The remaining four conferences received a total of \$13.168 million to split among themselves, for a total of \$180.6 million for all FBS conferences in the final year of the BCS. The 2018-2019 CFP payments to the conferences was \$462.4 million, a 260% increase from the amount generated by the BCS just five years previous.

In the 2018-2019 CFP payment period, each of the Power 5 conferences received an average of \$71.1 million, with the Southeastern Conference (SEC) receiving the most, more than \$83.6 million, and the Pac-12 Conference receiving the least, \$64.1 million (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019a). The average Power 5 institution received \$5.56 million. Notre Dame, the independent treated as a Power 5 school, received \$11.24 million. It also participated in the CFP as the No. 3 seed. The other three teams in the CFP that year were the University of Alabama from the SEC, Clemson University from the Athletic Coast Conference (ACC), and the University of Oklahoma from the Big-12 Conference. Clemson defeated Alabama in the championship game. There was no additional payment for schools that participate in the championship game. In addition, each conference that sends a team to the CFP semifinals has different rules for distributing the money. Most conferences distribute bowl money equally

among its member institutions. The SEC and the Big-12, however, allot more to a school that makes the CFP semifinals than it does to its other member institutions (Dosh, 2019).

The other Division I universities, the Group of 5 and the FCS schools, all received much more money in the CFP era than they did in the BCS era. The lower five conferences in the BCS area received a total of \$13.17 million to divide among each conference in 2018-2019. During that time period each Group of 5 conference averaged a payment of \$18.28 million. The AAC received the largest amount, \$24.56 million, led by the University of Central Florida's bowl payment of \$4 million to play in the Sugar Bowl in 2018. The CFP revenue also filters down to the FCS level, where each of the 10 conferences received \$263,218 for a total of \$2.63 million.

State institutions and government support of Division I athletics

The most successful schools in college football, with some exceptions, are large, public, state-run universities. A few notable exceptions to this rule include powerhouses Notre Dame, Stanford, and the University of Miami, which are private institutions. However, most of the schools that make the weekly top-25 rankings, and in the end, the CFP, are state-run universities, adding a governmental element, along with its accompanying regulations, to college football. State universities, including the athletic departments, receive some of their funding from states. State funding, however, has declined in recent years from pre-2008 Great Recession levels (Mitchell et al., 2017).

The NCAA acknowledges that there is "direct governmental support" (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). The College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database, run by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, shows that as of 2017, Division I FBS athletic departments received 10% of revenue from government support, but that is also combined with institutional support (Knight Commission, n.d.). For FCS schools, the

revenue is much lower than for FBS schools. While FBS schools receive millions of dollars from the CFP, FCS schools receive a much lower amount. But expenses are large to maintain an athletic department, so the levels of other revenue are much higher percentage-wise, including governmental support. According to CAFI, FCS institutional and government support constituted 42% of revenues, and the non-football Division I schools show a similar amount of revenue at 39% in 2018.

In Focus: Government support of athletic departments on the West Coast.

What the NCAA and the CAFI data don't specify is what type of governmental monetary support is given. Those athletic departments that demonstrate the source of their revenue show it comes not from federal government sources but rather from state sources. Athletic departments vary by either receiving government money or not, and those that do receive government money vary by source and allocation amount.

Few university athletic departments provide financial documents to the public, and of those, even fewer break out revenue in much detail. For example, the largest athletic department in the NCAA by revenue, the University of Texas, doesn't break out the amount of money from state or government support, but it does acknowledge that it receives it as part of its definition of revenue:

Revenues means revenues attributable to intercollegiate athletic activities. This includes revenues from appearance guarantees and options, an athletic conference, tournament or bowl games, concessions, contributions from alumni and others, institutional support, program advertising and sales, radio and television, royalties, signage and other sponsorships, sport camps, state or other government support, student activity fees, ticket and luxury box sales, and any other revenues attributable to intercollegiate athletic activities. (University of Texas, 2019, p. 10)

The University of Texas led the nation in 2019-20 with \$216,176,164 in revenue. Its report is typical of Power 5 universities in that 72% of the total revenue (\$156,147,208) that flowed into

the athletic department in 2019-20 was from football.

Among universities on the West Coast of the U.S., the University of Oregon is one of the few athletic departments that breaks out specific sources of revenue on its financial documents. Of the university's athletic department's FY 2020 revenues of \$123 million, "Lottery Proceeds" accounted for \$453,200. This is consistent with the amount listed in the Oregon state lottery's documents of allocated money to public education. The lottery breaks down the funding disbursements by county, and Lane County, where the university is located, has an entry for Oregon Public Universities, which includes University of Oregon Athletics. The most recent document available is the 2015-2017 biennium lottery funding. This three-year period shows funding of the athletic department at \$906,400 (Oregon Lottery, 2017). Other Division I institutions show a variety of Oregon state revenue funds. The Oregon State University Athletic Department doesn't break out revenues like the University of Oregon does, so the lottery revenues aren't listed. But the Oregon Lottery document showed an identical payment of \$906,400 to the Oregon State University Athletic Department during the same 2015-2017 time period as the University of Oregon. The Oregon Institute of Technology Athletics was listed in that document as receiving \$803,650, Portland State University Athletics received \$2,004,259, Western Oregon University Athletics received \$1,023, 190, and Eastern Oregon University Athletics received \$803,650.

Just one state to the south, it is a different story. While the California State Lottery helped fund both the University of California (UC) system as well as the California State University (CSU) system (Calottery, 2019), there are indications that no lottery funds reached athletic departments. The University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) said in a news release that the athletic department doesn't receive any state funds. "In the coming year, athletic department

expenses are projected to reach more than \$115 million. With no state funding, nearly 97 percent of all total expenses are the direct responsibility of UCLA Athletics” (UCLA Athletics, 2018, para. 7). The most recent University of California Berkeley Athletic Department revenues and expenses document does not have a line item for any government or lottery funding, though it could come under the Direct Institutional Support line, which is the University of California Berkeley administration. That amount was \$4,789,951, or about 5% of total revenues of \$96,481,814 (University of California, Berkeley, 2018). In contrast, CSU Bakersfield, a no-football Division I institution, had “record” revenues in 2018 of \$3,000,000 (CSU Bakersfield, 2018). However, it too did not have revenues broken out sufficiently to see if it was the recipient of any state funding.

Washington State University (WSU) released a detailed income and expenses report, including a line to report any government income. WSU did not receive any government support for its athletic department, including from local and state governments. Other universities in Washington state, such as Seattle University and Eastern Washington University, did not make their income and expense reports public.

The University of Washington did not sufficiently break down its revenue statements to show any government funding. The “other” category shows revenue and is a line in a budget statement where government funding appears in university athletic department documents like the University of Oregon and WSU. One note about the University of Washington is that unlike most of its peers, it did not show any student fees in the athletic department budget in its most recent release (University of Washington, 2016).

Though this is not a survey of all Division I athletic departments on the West Coast, it gives a picture of the hit-or-miss nature of financial reporting of athletic departments, indicative

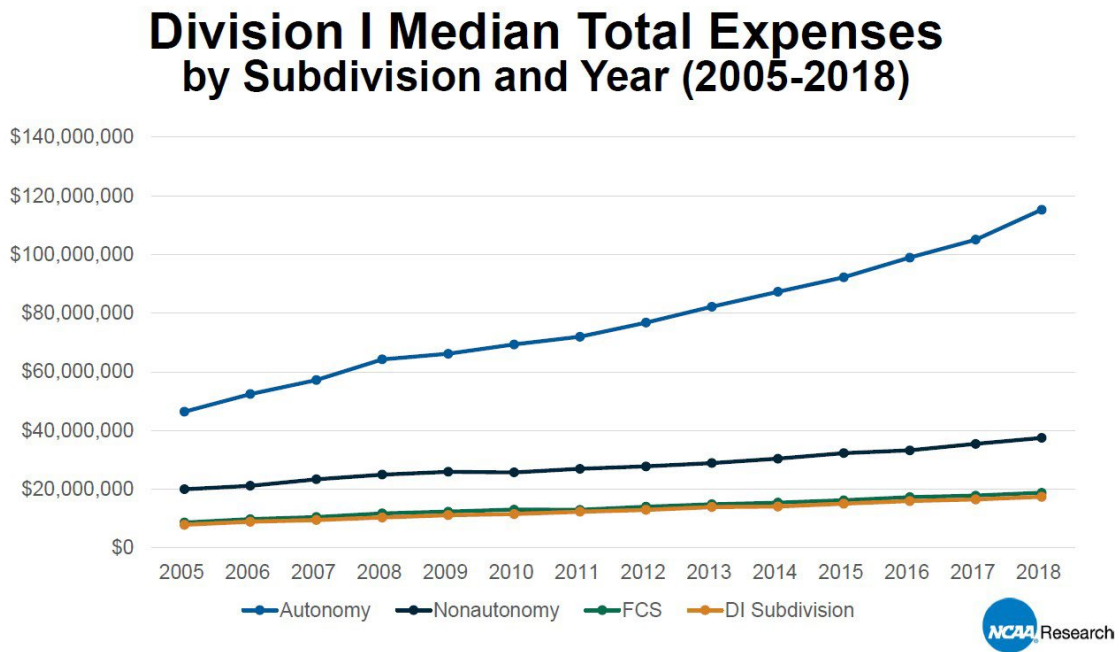
of the differing degrees of transparency within the industry. Another factor in the relationship between athletic departments and the state is coach pay, which is a large part of expenses at Division I universities and is examined in the following section.

Expenditures at Division I universities

Similar to the revenue figures from the NCAA, there are expenditure trends among Division I universities in the “14-year Trends” document (Figure 4.4). Similar to the increases in revenues are the increases in expenditures along the same subdivision lines.

Figure 4.4

A screenshot of NCAA Division I Athletic Department Median Total Expenses.



Note: From the National Collegiate Athletics Association (2021f). 2005-18 NCAA Revenues and Expenses of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics Programs Report.

Expenses are increasing across all Division I subdivisions but are clearly greater for the FBS Autonomy (Power 5) schools than for the others. For the Group of 5 (Nonautonomy), FCS, and DI Subdivision (Division I schools without football), expenses are increasing but at a slower rate. The figures are calculated using the median school for each subdivision and year and are not a total or an average. A comparison of the growth of expenses can be seen in the next section, which is driven by athletic facilities and coaches' salaries.

Expenditures: Facilities at public universities

Expenditures at FBS institutions are much higher than they are at their counterparts at the FCS level. As larger revenues are generated from being at the FBS level in pursuit of the CFP, so also are the expenses related to that pursuit. According to CAFI, fully 18% of expenses went to pay coaches and staff salaries, along with another 18% of expenses going to severance payments for staff who are let go, along with compensation for administrative staff and other support personnel (Figure 4.2). The largest single expense is facilities and equipment: 22% – \$1.88 billion – of all athletic department expenses. Athletic facilities are a selling point for recruiting student-athletes and reflect the state of the athletic program at a university. The most successful college football programs have the largest and most luxurious athletic facilities. Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 show the top three facilities, No. 1 Clemson, No. 2 Oregon, and No. 3 Texas A&M, as rated by a sports website.

Figure 4.5

A photo of Clemson University football facilities.



Note: From Crawford (2020).

Figure 4.6

A photo of University of Oregon football facilities.



Note: From Crawford (2020).

Figure 4.7

A photo of Texas A&M University football facilities.

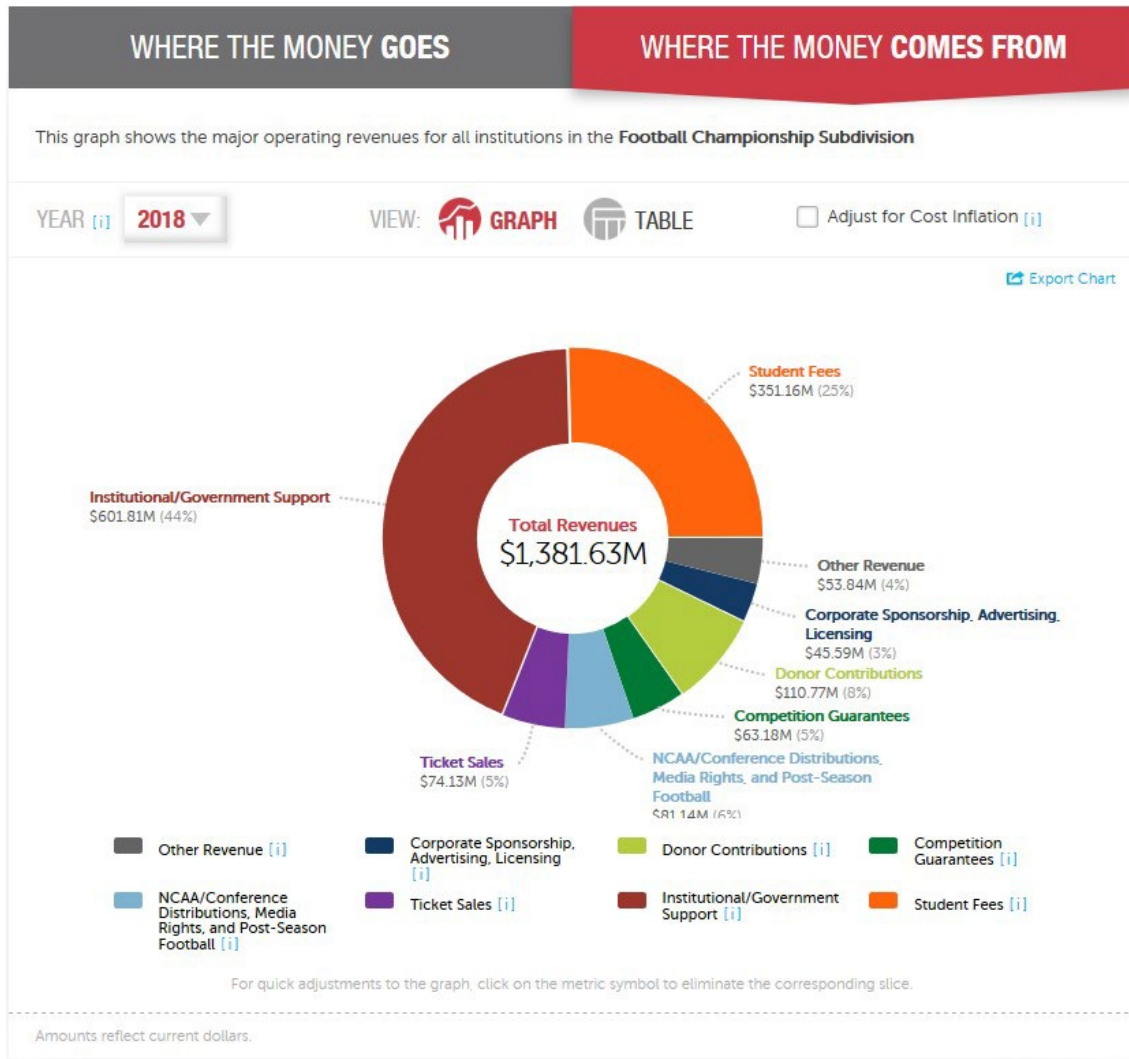


Note: From Crawford (2020).

At the FCS level, however, the largest expense is student-athlete directed, with student aid being 27% of the expenses (Figure 4.9). The two categories of coaching salaries and staff salaries (along with severance) still make up a combined 33% of expenses. The expenditures at the FCS level totaled nearly \$1.4 billion, according to CAFI. The FCS expenditures are dwarfed by the FBS expenditures, which total nearly \$8.6 billion (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.8

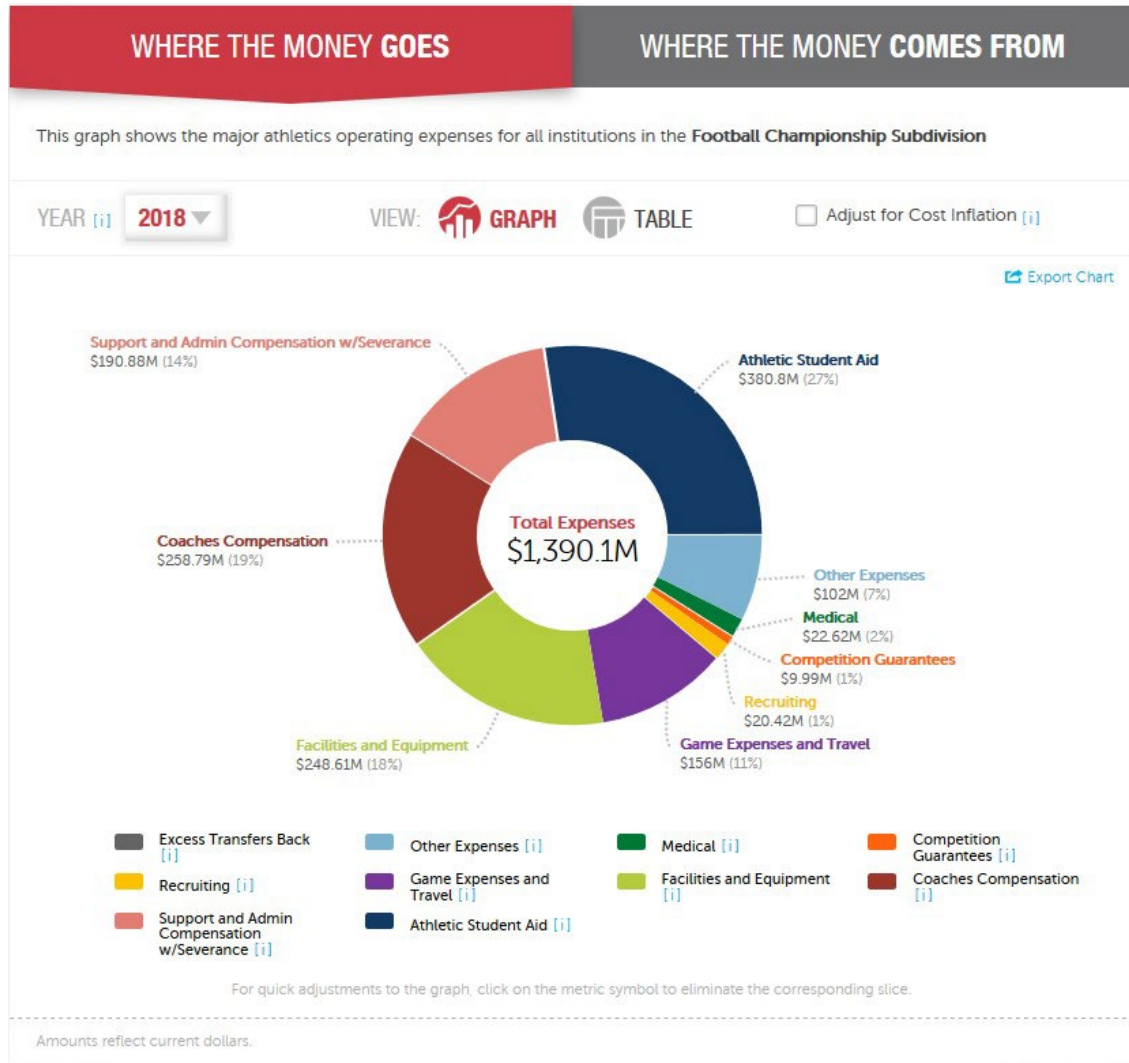
A screenshot of the CAFI database of Revenue for Football Championship Subdivision athletic departments in 2018.



Note: The data in this online database are self-reported by institutions on NCAA financial reports and on reports required by the federal government. From Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. (2021). *College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database*. Football Bowl Subdivision | College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) Database.

Figure 4.9

A screenshot of the CAFI database of Expenses for Football Championship Subdivision athletic departments in 2018.



Note: The data in this online database are self-reported by institutions on NCAA financial reports and on reports required by the federal government. From Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. (2021). *College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database*. Football Bowl Subdivision | College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) Database.

Coaches' salaries at FBS level

Coaches at large Division I universities are often the highest paid state employees

according to a recent media examination of salary data. Although their salaries may not come directly from state funds, they are state employees, according to university payrolls. According to a 2019 ESPN survey of the top salaried state employees, coaches were the highest paid in 40 states (Gibson, 2019). Of those, 28 were football coaches and the other 12 were men's basketball coaches. A coach's salary was often many times higher than that of the governor of the state. Winning on the field has translated into the highest salaries in the nation among state and public employees. Clemson University coach Dabo Swinney and University of Alabama coach Nick Saban are regular participants in the CFP. These two coaches led their teams to five of the six CFPs, including in 2019-20, when Clemson was again in the championship game. The teams they coach played against each other for four straight years, with three of their games coming in the championship game. The highest-paid state employee in the nation in 2019 was Swinney, who was paid \$9.3 million annually, nearly 88 times more than was South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, who makes \$106,100 in annual salary (Gibson, 2019). University of Alabama head football coach Saban, whose \$8.9 million annual salary dwarfs Gov. Kay Ivey's \$120,400, is the second highest paid football coach and third-highest paid public employee in the nation (Gibson, 2019). Among the top two football coaches is University of Kentucky men's basketball coach John Calipari, who also makes \$9.3 million annually. Not on the list is former Louisiana State University head coach Ed Orgeron, who vaulted into the top four highest-paid coaches shortly after the list was published in 2019. Orgeron made \$8.7 million per year following the signing of his contract in 2020. It is a similar story around the nation as coaches dominate public employee top salaries (Figure 4.10).

Table 4.2*A table of top collegiate coaches' salaries in 2019.*

Coach	School	Salary	Sport
Dabo Swinney	Clemson University	\$9.3 million	Football
John Calipari	University of Kentucky	\$9.3 million	Men's basketball
Nick Saban	University of Alabama	\$8.9 million	Football
Jim Harbaugh	University of Michigan	\$7.5 million	Football
Jimbo Fisher	Texas A&M University	\$7.5 million	Football
Kirby Smart	University of Georgia	\$6.9 million	Football
Jeff Brohm	Purdue University	\$6.6 million	Football
Lincoln Riley	Oklahoma University	\$6.4 million	Football
Dan Mullen	University of Florida	\$6.1 million	Football
James Franklin	Penn State University	\$5.7 million	Football

Note: These data were compiled by Gibson (2019).

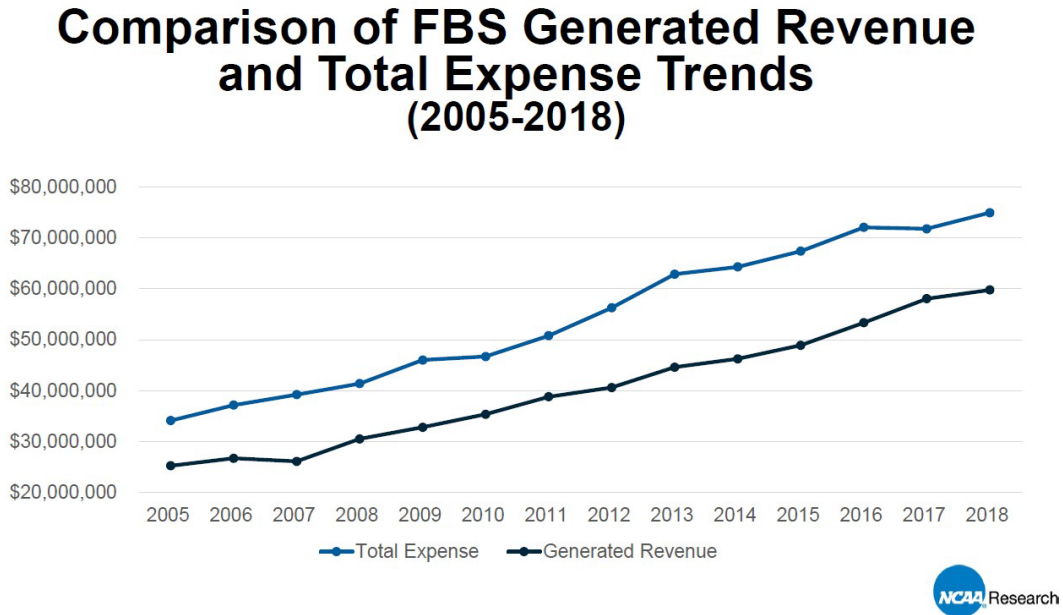
Expenses versus revenues

By its own admission, the NCAA Division I university athletic departments suffer from large disparities of both revenues and expenses, and expenses are outpacing revenues in their rate of growth (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2019f; Figure 4.11).

According to the CAFI database, total revenues at the FBS level were greater than were expenses, but according to the NCAA, the rate of growth of expenses outpaces the rate of growth of revenues. At the FBS Power 5 level, where the stakes are the highest, revenues are higher along with expenses. For example, in the Big Ten conference, the revenues by the top teams are among the highest in the nation, and all but one made a profit (Table 4.3).

Figure 4.10

A screenshot of NCAA FBS Revenue and Expense Trends from 2005-2018.



Note: From the National Collegiate Athletics Association (2021f).

Table 4.3

A table of Revenue and Expenses from the Big Ten Conference in 2018.

University	Total revenues	Total expenses
Ohio State	\$205,556,663	\$203,809,715
Michigan	\$195,769,104	\$183,414,032
Penn State	\$165,373,214	\$155,184,697
Wisconsin	\$151,966,795	\$149,798,158
Michigan State	\$145,640,289	\$137,416,056
Nebraska	\$142,223,226	\$135,627,283
Iowa	\$137,093,027	\$130,117,820
Minnesota	\$124,847,642	\$115,090,006
Indiana	\$122,933,136	\$116,277,652
Illinois	\$115,132,186	\$108,696,540
Purdue	\$103,092,204	\$95,176,957
Rutgers	\$100,745,386	\$102,518,486
Maryland	\$98,294,571	\$97,819,892

Note: From NCAA Finances: Revenue & Expenses by School - USA TODAY.

Within the Big Ten Conference, however, there is a disparity among revenues and expenses. The top teams, the Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, had revenues of \$205.6 million and \$195.8 million respectively in 2018, while middling Big Ten teams, the University of Nebraska and the University of Iowa, had revenues of \$142.2 million and \$137.1 million respectively in 2018 (“NCAA Finances,” n.d.). The bottom of the Big Ten, the University of Maryland, had revenues of \$98.3 million. Rutgers was the only school in the conference not to turn a profit in 2018. The difference in total revenues between the top and bottom teams is \$107.3 million.

In the largest Group of 5 conference, the All-American Conference, only one school made a profit, and that was UCF, which received extra revenue from qualifying for a New Year’s Six bowl game (Table 4.3). The revenue disparity isn’t as pronounced as in the Big Ten conference. But the lower revenues in the Big Ten are greater than the highest revenues in this Group of 5 conference. Compared to both of these, the top FCS conferences fall behind even further.

Table 4.4

A table of Revenue and Expenses from the American Athletic Conference in 2018.

University	Total revenues	Total expenses
Connecticut	\$79,308,421	\$80,905,645
Central Florida	\$61,968,057	\$61,118,971
Cincinnati	\$61,778,960	\$64,755,303
Memphis	\$55,409,530	\$55,462,505
Houston	\$55,142,417	\$57,106,913
East Carolina	\$46,861,190	\$47,410,809
South Florida	\$45,556,113	\$50,674,340

Note: From NCAA Finances: Revenue & Expenses by School - USA TODAY.

In a large FCS conference, the Big Sky Conference, three schools showed a profit (Table 4.4). Similar revenue disparities by percentage of total revenues exist as in the Big Ten; the top school makes more than double the revenues of the bottom school. However, none of the schools at the FCS level make it into the top 100 highest revenue producing schools.

Table 4.5

A table of Revenue and Expenses from the Big Sky Conference in 2018.

University	Total revenues	Total expenses
Sacramento State	\$26,504,987	\$27,375,899
Montana State	\$22,286,147	\$21,883,805
Montana	\$21,940,122	\$22,538,037
Idaho	\$20,468,275	\$21,581,532
Northern Arizona	\$19,178,924	\$18,626,542
Northern Colorado	\$17,560,434	\$17,575,435
Weber State	\$14,899,691	\$14,901,147
Southern Utah	\$14,770,661	\$15,462,201
Portland State	\$14,125,441	\$12,476,314
Eastern Washington	\$13,810,812	\$15,841,035
Idaho State	\$12,755,755	\$13,121,236

Note: From NCAA Finances: Revenue & Expenses by School - USA TODAY.

Summary

This chapter has shown through document analysis that the universities and conferences at the top level of college football make and spend significantly more money than those at the lower levels. The FBS, Power 5 conferences and universities also have the highest paid coaches, the best facilities in college sports. Revenue from the CFP has grown in recent years, while the number of teams and conferences that qualify for the CFP has remained small. Revenue sources vary among universities and conferences, with television revenue, driven by the CFP, being the greatest source among FBS universities and conferences. There are also discrepancies among

universities in reporting revenue and expenses, with some more transparent than others. The next section addresses perspectives among participants and administrators, as part of the historical formation and reproduction of the CFP.

CHAPTER V

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE CFP

In this chapter, the results of the semi-structured interviews and curated interviews with administrators, student-athletes, and members of the media are presented, demonstrating the historical materialistic evolution of the CFP. This chapter builds on Chapter 4 to qualitatively answer research questions about profit-seeking in the CFP by examining the formation of the organization. The direct payment of players for producing the game is also discussed.

Evolution of the national championship: A search for greater market value

I found in talking with administrators that the creation of the CFP was a seminal moment for them and that its present market value and future sustainability are a direct result of its founding, which built upon the foundation of the BCS. As previously described, being the “national champion” in Division I FBS college football has been a largely subjective affair. My findings suggest the administrators of the CFP were focused on preserving the regular season, making sure the top four teams in college football participate in the CFP to ensure there is no debate about the national championship being won on the field, continuing the financial success of the BCS and postseason expansion, and broadening the fanbase.

Preserving the regular season

According to the creators of the CFP, having the regular season preserved as the key indicator of a successful season was paramount, illustrating the tension between the regular season games and the postseason bowl games and their relative importance. Preserving the regular season has been a focus of the universities since media began broadcasting the games. Television was thought to threaten the home attendance of football teams, and universities fought to preserve their ticket revenue. Ticket revenue amounted to \$1.5 billion or 17% of all FBS

revenue in 2018, according to CAFI (Figure 4.1). Bill Hancock, executive director of the CFP, has spoken about the need for organizers to maintain the importance of the regular season on several occasions.

The CFP has enriched regular season schedules. It has become apparent that, in order to qualify for this playoff, you have to give your athletes an opportunity to prove themselves against the very best competition. If you want to be in the payoff, you have to play somebody. (Big Ten Network, 2016)

He said that in 2016 at Big Ten Media Days. He told an audience at the University of Oklahoma in 2013, “We had chosen to put everything into the regular season. ... That’s the good thing. It makes college football unique. Every game matters in the regular season.”

Rob Mullens, Athletic Director at the University of Oregon and a former head of the CFP Selection Committee, said, “The regular season is absolutely relevant. The conference championships matter. So I think right now, the system is off to a great start.”

Another concern regarding the CFP and the regular season was voiced by ESPN’s Kirk Herbstreit, who cautioned that some may see a team coming up short of the CFP as being a failed season. “That’s my only concern for the sport, for the well-being of the sport, because think about that, you have over 100 teams that are playing college football, and you have four teams that get into the playoff, and everybody else is looked at as a failure, and that’s not really realistic or right” (Negron, 2020).

Building on the BCS and continued postseason expansion

The CFP Board of Managers tied the formation of the CFP to the much maligned BCS in a number of ways. Fans did not favor the BCS because of a perceived inability to determine the true FBS champion on the field without a playoff. But the administrators of the BCS saw it as one more step toward determining the true champion while increasing revenue year over year.

First, the BCS Presidential Oversight Committee, 11 university presidents (one from each of the 10 FBS conferences plus Notre Dame), met in 2011 as the final year of the BCS was approaching in 2013-14. The CFP then was designed with nearly the same oversight structure of university presidents, 10 university presidents from conferences and one from Notre Dame. The only difference was the BCS had one additional university president who was the chairman of the committee. The structure of the CFP was built on the BCS, and its goal, according to Hancock, was the culmination of an evolution to make sure that the FBS had a clear champion.

The biggest driver was eliminating the uncertainty about who the national champion was by matching ... by ensuring that number one and two teams would play in the booked season. That was the biggest driver. And that continued to be the biggest driver when the CFP came along. ... We build it on top of the BCS, and we built it on top of the tradition of the Bowl's structure.

But the biggest hurdle to this goal had already been overcome with the creation of the BCS after the Bowl Coalition and Bowl Alliance. What was once thought of as a revolutionary concept in college football, the playoff was could be seen as a natural outgrowth of the BCS because it was built by the creators of the BCS on the foundation of the BCS, which was itself built in a similar fashion on the back of the Bowl Alliance and Bowl Coalition. The CFP was therefore built on a successful run of more than 20 years of the Bowl Alliance (3 years), Bowl Coalition (3 years), and the BCS (16 years). But those three had to come first to be the foundation of the CFP. The college bowl stakeholders, administrators of the bowls, conferences, and universities, then came together with the goal to ensure the top two teams in college football would play in the postseason because of previous missteps along the way that didn't always achieve that goal, Hancock said.

And the mindset that the creation of the BCS was the biggest leap comes from the fact that there was really no guarantee that number one and two would meet in a

Bowl game until the BCS came along, and the leap was getting the conferences and the bowls altogether to participate in the new venture. It was a phenomenal change in college football.

Some administrators who helped form the CFP from the BCS feel they have found the right combination now. Not only are the spots available to compete directly for the national championship doubled, but the computer rankings that the BCS relied upon to determine the top teams was scrapped in favor of a human selection committee. The selection committee's job was to rank the top 25 teams, the top four of which, at the end of the season, would play in the CFP. Dr. Rodney Bennett, one of the creators of the CFP and President of Southern Mississippi University saw this as a point of pride, breaking from the previous method of anointing the top two teams, despite the repetitive results of this system.

But I think that, from a founding member perspective, where we were when we started and what the national conversation was with the computer-generated system to what we have created some five years later, I'm very proud of it, and I'm very proud to be a part of it, and I think that it's working in a very positive way for the institutions and also for the student athletes who are participating in that process.

The revenue from the CFP, even at smaller athletic departments, has made conferences happy with the CFP, according to Hancock:

But let me say that from my perspective, if they are happy with the CFP, they would see more ... They have more inclusion in the top-tier ballgames under the CFP structure than they ever had before than they never had a name. They are receiving more revenue from post-season football than they ever had, so with those two pillars alone, those pillars alone are enough to support the fact that they are happy with the CFP. ... Obviously, it's brought more revenue to colleges. Many of whom are using a significant amount of that revenue to support our other sports.

But for one journalist, finding greater surplus value drove the formation of the each of the changes in college football:

Well, as a cynical journalist I would say the money. I think the power brokers in

college football were so hesitant to scrap the BCS because it made money for the programs or the conferences that were in it every year. I think they realized if they doubled that number, and kept it at an access point that would be difficult for the Group of 5 schools, they would make even more money. So, I think money fueled not only college football, the conference realignment, but the playoff.

One former player said the CFP's goal of finding the true No. 1 team is a good thing in college football's CFP evolution, but the formation of the CFP was always a monetary decision: "The players are like, 'Now we have a chance to be able to actually prove that we are the better team.' So I think it's definitely helping everybody and they're doing what's best for everyone. But behind the scenes it's a business."

Addressing antitrust concerns

When the BCS was college football's endgame, scholars, legislators, and regulators took aim at the BCS, accusing those involved of violating federal antitrust laws (Munson & Lavigne, 2009; Blevins, 2011). The BCS was set up much like the CFP, wherein, at the time, there were 11 conferences, with six automatic qualifying conferences and five nonautomatic qualifiers, much like how the Power 5 and Group of 5 conferences of the CFP are divided. And, as with the CFP, most teams simply did not have much of a chance at a BCS bowl or the national championship game, even if they finished with an undefeated season. "Under antitrust law, where an agreement among competitors tends to adversely affect competition in the market rather than promote it, the agreement may be illegal" (Blevins, 2011, p. 154). The United States Justice Department and the U.S. Senate investigated the BCS antitrust concerns in 2009 (Clifford, 2009). According to Hancock, however, that investigation uncovered no violations of any antitrust law:

And the fact is the BCS that was set up with antitrust laws in mind. So, there was some saber rattling about antitrust concerns and BCS, but in our opinion, they weren't valid. And we had a Congressional hearing. Maybe there were two. We had someone from the

Department of Justice call to address antitrust, and I spent the better part of a day and a half hearing the DOJ stuff about antitrust, and we never heard back from the DOJ after we walked out of their building.

Because Hancock was the executive director of both the BCS and the CFP and was a key figure on the creation of both, he was able to address the concerns as few could. According to Hancock, the CFP was built purposefully in the same way as the BCS because the antitrust concerns had already been investigated by the federal government.

The same antitrust mindset was present when the CFP was created. The last thing we wanted to do was to be in violation of any law, antitrust law or any other law. And so we were very deliberately setting up the structure of CFP to make sure that we comply with every law there was, every law, every business law.

For Hancock, the fact that the investigation never amounted to any charges or changes from the federal government meant the case against the BCS and by extension the CFP was closed.

Antitrust has been a consistent theme of outside interests to try to change the governing structure of the postseason but did not factor into the creation of the CFP because of the previous investigation's lack of success in the case of the BCS.

Clearly, they decided that there was no antitrust risk with the BCS, so but there were people who used antitrust as a cudgel to try to get what they wanted from the BCS, probably access or wanting ... either access or wanting it to go away, but legally there was no antitrust.

Academic concerns

In addition to antitrust concerns, academic researchers sought to help guide the formation of the CFP by addressing the concerns of creating such a system. Though not part of my interviews, these perspectives point to the many and varied concerns when creating a playoff system in college football that has many factors to consider from the ineffectual leadership of the NCAA to the size of the playoffs and its impact on the regular season, to the size of a potential playoff field and the risk of not having the best teams competing for the title. This information

was not included in the literature because of the CFP-specific nature of these studies and their relationship to the development of the CFP. It is not known if any of these studies were ever considered to the formation of the CFP. But since these are academic studies with authors who are generally employees of universities, their voices would seem to be valid in the historical formation of the CFP.

One researcher argued the NCAA should have created a football playoff much in the same way the NCAA men's basketball tournament was forged, which was by using "cutthroat tactics" (Thieme, 2007, p. 454). The NCAA's men's basketball tournament is a "commercial success" and "wildly popular with fans" because the NCAA bought the rival, and historically more important, NIT tournament, and then forced universities and conferences to participate in the NCAA tournament by reducing money in the NIT, upping the rewards in the NCAA tournament, and expanding the tournament to include greater numbers of teams. Thieme, however, conceded that the BCS would be unlikely to sell the tournament to the NCAA and that the NCAA was incapable of organizing a playoff anyway given the state of the organization at the time.

Carlin and Stern (1999) argued that 8- and 16-team playoffs was the best way to include all teams in the FBS that had a "significant probability of winning the tournament" (p. 24). That is because a 2- or 4-team tournament would leave out teams that would make up a 34% chance of winning an 8-team tournament and 64% chance of winning a 16-team tournament. Other researchers, however, suggest that having a larger field like an 8- or 16-team tournament would devalue the regular season, and having a tournament with greater than 8 teams would be impractical (Annis & Wu, 2006). They also conceded that, although smaller field sizes would put more emphasis on being successful in the regular season, not having a larger field potentially

excludes the best teams in the country. They seem to have recommended the current CFP structure of a championship game following two bowls with the top four teams pitted against each other, but call such a system “far from perfect” (p. 155).

Researchers also addressed the tension between the regular season and the postseason in terms of suspense, arguing college football fans favored greater suspense in terms of “significance and excitement” when it comes to both regular season and the bowl games (Olson & Stone, 2014, p. 520). They argued, having a 2-team playoff, i.e. the BCS system that was in place at the time of their writing, was best for retaining the optimal amount of suspense for fans. The BCS also led to great changes in the structure of the sport, which will be addressed in the next section.

Realignment period

The BCS era brought about the greatest upheaval in college football—the realignment period from 1997-2014. The realignment period was a byproduct of the Bowl Coalition, Bowl Alliance, and BCS, along with the expansion of bowl games beginning in the mid-1990s. Going into the 1990s, there were 12 bowl games, most of which were contractually locked in with certain conferences. The best example is the Rose Bowl, which, dating back to 1946, had contracts with the Big Ten and the Pac-12 conferences to invite the conference champions to play each other (Tournament of Roses, 2020). But the Bowl Coalition and Alliance began changing that, with the BCS finally bringing all the major bowls together to determine a rotating schedule for the BCS national championship game.

As the bowl revenue became greater through the BCS and consolidation of the top-ranked football teams annually, conference affiliation became more important. As the Bowl Alliance, Bowl Coalition, and BCS were tied to the largest bowls, berths for teams to play in

those bowls were often tied to conference championships. Joining those conferences became the goal of many universities in the search for greater football revenue. Major conferences combined, while others became defunct. The venerable Big East Conference dropped football as the top-tier football schools fled to the ACC and Big Ten conferences with guaranteed BCS bowls.

The bowls also formed their own league of sorts, the Football Bowl Association (FBA), to interface with the NCAA and the conferences, and selected a chairman to represent them. The head of the FBA, Wright Waters, described himself and the organization as a “conduit” between the NCAA, the bowls, and the conference commissioners (Carolina Sports Network, 2017). The bowls had grown from just 12 exhibition games as late as the 1970s to more than 40 games by 2010 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021). An NCAA rule change allowed bowl eligibility for teams that win six games. If there’s not enough teams that win six games, the top teams that win five games are selected to play in the bowls based on their academic progress (Carolina Sports Network, 2017). According to Waters, \$616.8 million was paid to 10 conferences plus two independents for bowl games in 2016 (Carolina Sports Network, 2017).

With the increased inventory of games and seats for fans, some bowls do not sell out all of their tickets. Watching the games during their broadcast shows that often many of the lesser games outside of the major bowl games have a great number of empty seats. Waters, however, says more than 2 million people attend bowl games: “I know that our attendance numbers are strong” (College Football Bowls, 2016). The key to the success of the bowl games is rooted in helping teams have “national visibility” (Carolina Sports Network, 2017).

BCS and CFP building a broader national fanbase

College football teams, once indicative of a state or region, have seen their national visibility expanded along with the search for greater profits. Led by the bowls and their championship consolidations of the BCS and the CFP, college football has developed a broader, more national fan interest, according to Hancock. He went so far as to say that the sport has been nationalized.

The CFP has been the nationalization of the sport, by that I mean before the CFP, before it was BCS, college football was mostly a regional sport, I mean an extremely popular regional sport, but under the CFP fans had to pay attention to—the fans in the west had to pay attention to what's happening in the SEC country and the Big Ten country and vice versa.

One sportswriter agrees with Hancock that the CFP has been a “net positive” because of the increased attention paid to all areas of college football across the nation. “I certainly don't think it's been a bad thing for the sport. I think it has generated some attention and some discussion about the sport, which has been positive.”

Nominally, the CFP expanded the number of teams that can compete for the national championship on the field, and that has created more opportunities for a greater number of conferences and universities. However, it's often the same top teams year after year that compete in the CFP, and fewer still win the CFP. The question then becomes whether the CFP is indicative of greater inclusion of a broader range of schools and conferences or not. More teams may not be playing in the CFP, but more teams may feel as if they can make it. According to one sportswriter, even though there may not be actual equity among teams playing the CFP, there is more of a feeling that teams have a shot at playing in the CFP.

So the end result may not have been a whole lot different than if we were in the old system, but I do think that it has created more opportunity for teams, which has made it feel like more teams were a part of it, and for those teams that are kind of in the three to seven or eight range, whereas maybe some of those teams

in the past wouldn't have felt like they had an opportunity to win a National Championship, now they feel that way.

The Group of 5 schools, however, seem to have mixed feelings about this subject. One administrator expressed frustration at being excluded from the CFP, while another said the costs of trying to compete at the CFP level are too great for a university that doesn't have the budget but that he was okay with that being the case.

The Group of 5 and the CFP

Despite nominally being given more opportunities for more teams to compete for the national championship in college football, one of the primary critiques of the CFP is that it is fundamentally unfair to the Group of 5 conferences. With the lack of representation in the CFP—there were no Group of 5 schools in the CFP through the 2021 championship—the highest rated Group of 5 team is guaranteed a spot in a lucrative New Year's 6 bowl. But there have been some complaints. This is especially true for the only Group of 5 school to come close to the CFP through 2021, the University of Central Florida (UCF), which went undefeated in both the 2017 and 2018 regular seasons (Newport, 2018). As the top-rated Group of 5 school in both years, it appeared in two straight New Year's Day bowls: the 2017 Peach Bowl in Atlanta, GA, where they defeated Southeastern Conference power Auburn, and in 2018, when they lost to another SEC power, LSU, in the Fiesta Bowl (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2021). The 2018 UCF team had won 25 straight games, and many considered the Knights worthy to appear in the CFP, especially in light of their previous year's bowl win over an SEC team. Following the Selection Committee's overlooking of UCF for the 2018 playoff, the university's athletic director called the CFP "broken" and a "monopoly," while calling for it to be expanded so more teams can get a shot at the title (Newport, 2018). UCF's athletic director, Danny White, said after

his school was snubbed from the CFP in both 2017 and 2018 that the CFP needs to be expanded for the sake of fairness.

Our football team, our student-athletes, have now won 25 straight games. They deserve to be in this playoff, and I hope that's the decision that is made tomorrow. If that does not occur, then that is yet another example that a four-team playoff is not adequate for the postseason of college football. ... I hope that the leadership across the country in college football recognizes, and I think the story of our team, hopefully has educated them about the quality of the football being played in our conference and really across the country. That there are more teams than four that should have the opportunity to compete and have it settled on the field. I'm hopeful we get in. But to answer your question if we don't get in I think we need to ask ourselves a serious question, 'Why are we the only sport in America, college or pro, where it is not settled on the field.' It doesn't make any sense. (UCFSports, 2018)

A former student-athlete sees the same inequity in the CFP based on the exclusion of UCF, which he says should have been included not only in 2018 but also in 2017.

UCF (University of Central Florida) should have been in the playoff last year. And that's definitely something that should have happened. The only undefeated team in college football. So it's like there's no reason. Yeah you look at their power of schedule but you look at who they beat and how bad they beat them, they should have definitely had a shot at it. And so no they don't. Everybody goes off of the divisions and how strong the division is, but that doesn't compare. If you have a team that's like that, that's just blowing people out of the water, they need a shot.

A sportswriter agrees that the lack of Group of 5 participation is a weakness of the CFP. But he also noticed that there does not seem to be a large number of Group of 5 administrators speaking out against the inclusion of their schools in the CFP. He says it may be because they are getting more money from the CFP than they used to from the BCS and previous championship schemes. Or it could lead to the Group of 5 schools forming their own championship.

It seems like some of the other conferences just go along with whatever the Power 5 wants, because they're getting more money because of the playoffs, even though it's a fraction of what the Power 5 are getting. So, I just find it interesting why, I don't understand why the Group of 5 aren't beating the drum more for inclusion.

Maybe they figure their regular schedules aren't hard enough to justify it in most years for their champion. Maybe they are satisfied with Boise State going to just the New Year's Six bowl if they're the highest ranked. And UCF clearly isn't satisfied with just going to the New Year's Six bowl. I just find that dynamic interesting, and I'm wondering in my lifetime if we'll see a premier level of college football, where the Power 5s just play each other, and then there's another level below that. A Group of 5 crowning their own national champion.

For that sportswriter, for a Group of 5 team to genuinely have a shot at the CFP title calls for expansion because of the precedent set by the previously unbeaten UCF teams. The Group of 5 teams in the American Athletic Conference and the Mountain West Conference don't have enough strength of schedule to be considered a semifinalist. But unless a Group of 5 team joins a Power 5 conference—like the University of Utah during the realignment period—or has an unbeaten year, including defeating several Power 5 teams, the teams they play within their conference are not considered good enough as a group compared to a Power 5 conference.

Hancock had a different view of the Group of 5 conferences, saying that the CFP has become a net positive for them based on two factors.

They have more inclusion in the top tier ballgames under the CFP structure than they ever had before than they never had a name. They are receiving more revenue from post-season football than they ever had, so with those two pillars alone, those pillars alone are enough to support the fact that they are happy with the CFP.

He also has not seen any evidence that the Group of 5 conferences would want to break away from the CFP, as some have suggested.

That UCF has been shut out of the CFP twice has given some the impression that all Group of 5 administrators are either for expansion of the CFP or for setting up a playoff for Group of 5 teams. But this may be a mistaken impression. One of the creators of the CFP was Dr. Bennett, President of Southern Mississippi University. Southern Miss, in Conference USA, is

a member of the Group of 5. Dr. Bennett sees the creation of the CFP as not only fair to the Group of 5 but a real step forward from previous incarnations, such as the BCA and Bowl Alliance. From his perspective, he is satisfied not only as a Group of 5 administrator but also as a manager and co-creator of the CFP. He also explains why there aren't more widespread calls from Group of 5 administrators for greater inclusion in the CFP.

So I think for the group that I'm in, the Group of 5, we are very happy with what we do as a university and the way that we interact with our students. We want our programs to be competitive. We want to play and be able to compete at the highest level. But this idea that somehow we're angry with our colleagues who are part of the Power 5 is not a position that I think is a sweeping across-the-board position.

Bennett's stance on the lack of Group of 5 teams in the CFP reflects the mindset of a school not interested in having a large athletic program and chasing the highest degrees of football success. Football is the primary driver of revenue for athletic departments, but as seen in Chapter 4, the costs to be a part of and maintain the highest levels of competition can be prohibitive. Smaller athletic departments are not calling for revolution among the athletic programs, Bennett says.

I think that there's an assumption that everybody wants to be a part of Power 5, that everybody wants to be at a school that's doing what those schools are doing. And a lot of schools do. But there are a lot of schools that don't. There are a lot of schools that want to have an intercollegiate sporting department or activity or program, but their mission is very different. Their mission is not to compete for a national championship in every sport every year. Their mission is something other than that. So I think we have to not assume that everybody that's in the Group of 5 is angry at the Power 5 because of whatever resources they have, and whatever facilities they have, and whatever national recognition that they might receive.

The notion that there are Power 5 schools that do not want to compete for a CFP berth or compete at the highest levels may seem counterintuitive, especially because the CFP represents, at least nominally, the fact that the field is expanded for more teams to have an opportunity to

compete at the highest levels of college football. And why not? The money for the most successful schools is great. But the expenditures are also prohibitive. All costs in pursuit of the highest athletic success don't consist solely of money. The time commitment and sacrificing of other university resources, such as student fees and going heavily into debt for new athletic facilities and upgrades for sporting glory, can be daunting.

And I just know some university presidents who really don't want to do, for their institution, what you have to do to be able to compete for a national championship year over year, over year. ... And I also think that we should not assume that every group, every school that's in the Power 5, wants to be in the Power 5. I would submit that there are probably some schools that if they had an opportunity to not be a part of that, and not have to direct so many institutional resources and other resources to that affiliation, that they maybe would make some different decisions about what their school's priorities are. (Bennett, 2019)

Some schools, it seems, are content with getting their conference money payout while not exerting much in the way of producing wins at the highest levels of competition, according to one sportswriter.

I guess the other argument is you could argue that there's teams in Power 5 conferences, whether you're talking about Oregon State lately, or Kansas, or Rutgers, that are getting the money and also have no chance, because their records are so poor in their conference. I don't think there's a perfect solution to college football, but I'm just struck by the fact that they're all part of one thing, and yet it feels like two different levels of football.

NIL and the CFP

Following the passage of the NCAA of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) bylaws in 2020 allowing all collegiate athletes to be paid by through sponsorships and advertising, the debate over paying players seems to have been settled. NIL prohibits universities from paying players directly, but the players can work out their own individual deals for sponsorships. As such, players are cut out from a direct line of profits from the CFP because CFP payouts go to

conferences and universities. During the formation of the CFP the payment of players for their services on the field was an issue for administrators. The following section deals with the decision-making process of paying players in a pre-NIL time-period as it has relevance to the line of thinking during the formation of the CFP.

Student-athletes: Employees, media workers, or students?

The question of the student-athletes' status as professionals is as old as collegiate athletics. For most collegiate sports, the answer is they are amateur athletes because there is no revenue to speak of associated with those sports. These are referred to as either non-revenue sports or Olympic sports because of their niche popularity. Student-athletes are receiving athletic scholarships that help them get an education to set them on a path to success. The scholarships were the primary reward for student-athletes at the time, according to Hancock. "I think it will be continuing to help young people. ... I'm fascinated by it, that the second biggest scholarship, the higher education scholarship program in American, right after the GI bill, is college athletics. We are helping people start on the path to life."

There are two collegiate sports that generate enough revenue to be profitable operations: Division I FBS football and men's Division I basketball. These sports make enough revenue from a combination of ticket sales and broadcasting money to potentially operate in the black. For all others, if there is a profitable sport, it is a school-to-school proposition. At some schools, baseball will make enough money to note in the athletic department's profit and loss statement. For others, softball or gymnastics might also bring in money. But the money often doesn't come close to matching what the two big revenue sports bring in.

The commodification of college football comes through its broadcast and its postseason CFP, and its primary workers are the student-athletes. College athletes—especially football and

men's basketball players—are considered by some to be professional athletes given the commodified nature of the top sports programs in Division I athletics (Zimbalist, 1999). Division I athletic programs are not only the most commercialized but also the schools that have “most compromised the educational standards of academia” (p. xi). It has only gotten bigger since then, and the CFP is the crowning example of major college sports and commercialism.

Seemingly left out of the commercial venture of big-time college sports, however, are the student-athletes. Nominally amateur athletes, those who perform for the love of the game, can be considered unpaid labor. Although the student-athletes receive a cost-of-living stipend, a scholarship to the university (which can be valued in the tens of thousands of dollars), athletic apparel, room, board, and tuition, there is no direct payment per se, despite the millions of dollars being injected into the Division I athletic departments via television rights and bowl appearances.

Paying players: Varying perspectives

Student-athletes in men's basketball and football that perform on the court or the field are in a much-disputed space. Are they employees of the university, media workers who produce content paid for with billions of dollars, or are they amateur athletes who play, as the NCAA has insisted for years, “for the love of the game”? All three? Dr. Bennett saw the players as students and not employees.

They're not 30-year-old NFL employees. They're students. ... They're students studying something. And I know that the board of managers, CFP people who were managers, looked at college athletics through that prism. ... As someone who's been in this business for a long time, I feel like we have to continue to do as much as we possibly can for the students and their families, but let's remember that they're students and not employees.

Dr. Bennett made it clear that from an administrator perspective, student-athletes are students first, and not employees of the university. And if a student-athlete participates in the CFP, paying them directly for this activity could distract from the experience.

I think the number-one thing that stands out to me is that there are a group of people who are involved with the highest levels of governance, who really have the students and the student athletes as their number-one focus. And we have worked really hard to not lose sight of the fact that the CFP is a collegiate undergraduate activity, and that we don't want to do anything that cheapens that experience for those students who are playing, for those students who are attending the championship game, and for the parents and families who are there to support their children.

Because his perspective of the CFP is as an undergraduate, student experience and not a professional one, Dr. Bennett does not believe paying players is appropriate, even if he considers his opinion to be “old school.”

Well, I think, maybe I'm just sort of old school in this thought process. It's an interesting argument and an interesting concept, but it's not one that I've subscribed to. I still believe that it's an amateur experience. And I think that there are other areas on campus for which students are making significant contributions to the institution who don't receive any compensation. And so the ability to select a student athlete over some of the other areas for which students are excelling, just seems a little bit unbalanced to me.

The student-athletes interviewed for this study who participated in the CFP considered themselves worthy of payment for their work on and off the field for the athletic department. At least one former student-athlete, while not specifically coming out and calling himself an employee, sees college football as a job and not some extracurricular activity while attending school.

And so people don't realize how much we're putting in because it's more than a full-time job. We were putting in way more than 40 hours a week. And yeah, they are paying for our school, they are paying for that kind of stuff. But that's still not, I don't think it's equivalent to what you're putting your body through. But somebody who has never played that level of football, I don't think really

understands the commitment and that there's a lot of players who quit just because they don't enjoy it anymore. It's no longer the game they grew up loving. It's now a job. And it's hard to transition into that. But once you understand that it is a full-time job and that this is a business, I think a lot of the players are better off. They realize it, they know how to play the system, and they start growing from that point. But yes, I agree that it should be increased and they should pay the players.

The sportswriters I interviewed consider paying student-athletes an appropriate response to their appearance in a paid broadcast of games, including the CFP. Because college football is worth billions of dollars in broadcast money and donor contributions, even at the lower levels of Division I football, just paying the student-athletes in tuition, room, and board isn't enough of a reward for the money the conferences and schools reap from the sport.

Yeah, it's tough because it's certainly true that the revenue generated by the Playoff in college football is on a completely different scale than the revenue generated by other sports. And so, how do you go about treating those sports equitably, when one of them generates so much more revenue than the others? I really believe that a bare minimum should be allowing players to accept endorsements, which would mean football players, even if they're not getting an extra stipend or a salary for appearing in the College Football Playoff, at least they can benefit from being on that platform and market themselves.

Another sportswriter saw the payment of players in the CFP as being more complex because revenue sports pay the bills for all the other sports in an athletic department, which brings up whether only revenue sports student-athletes should get paid. "It's a complicated thing, because if you start paying football players because the football program makes a lot of money, what is that going to do when the soccer program and other minor sports want the same paycheck?"

When it comes to making the CFP, the student-athletes in this study feel there should be some monetary reward, beyond the usual bowl game swag that players receive (Sports Events, 2020). A former student-athlete feels direct payment for work on the field during the CFP is

warranted from the broadcaster. “I think we should receive an ESPN check.” He also said the player stipend, which is a minimal amount of money distributed monthly to student-athletes to cover cost-of-living expenses during the school year, is not nearly enough. Nor was the payment for being in a bowl game, headphones, and apparel enough.

I think the money should be shifted somewhere else, of course. Such as we speak, I want good players, but a whole another different type of compensation. I have seen, I've looked up the NCAA and where their big spending money's going or whatnot, and paying for other sports, like this organization, but they still sign them off as the nonprofit. And they still make a ton of money. They can do a small percentage, divvy that out to the players at some point. It doesn't need to be like during the playing. It could be like afterwards ... But we should've got paid a lot more than we did.

This same former student-athlete sees the money in the CFP and NCAA as an opportunity to help players, at least for some time, after their playing days are over. He points out that for Division I student-athletes a small stipend is distributed to them during the year. The amounts vary by institution, generally based on the size of the athletic department. The bigger the revenue, the larger the cost-of-living stipend student-athletes receive. But once the playing time is over, the stipend stops. He sees the revenue as a chance to help student-athletes make the transition from playing sports for the university to life outside the playing field.

Well, couple of things. I mean picked up this, perhaps what I mentioned before is like, you can't see the stipend off like 6, 10 months after they're done playing? To make ends meet. Isn't that what we're doing? Only a small percentage of people that are going through the week. And then majority of them are joining the workforce field or whatever. Or you can put aside money for each athlete, put it in a trust or whatever and pay them once you are like 35 or more experienced and more responsible to use the money and put it towards kids' colleges or whatever. But I don't think the way they're paying players is... and I get how smaller schools aren't able to do that and bigger schools are when they come because discriminatory whatever. There has to be some type of way to compensate the players. Especially I feel like the more well-known players, like where their jerseys being sold in there, but their names on the back of it.

That former student-athlete now works as a financial consultant following his college career and sees a missed opportunity for schools and the NCAA to help student-athletes make better financial choices.

Yeah. I mean I would tell the fellas, my teammates, while we're playing just to put money aside. I know it's not much, but put some aside. You can save some, but yeah, especially now. Looking back like, there should have been something education-wise to ask me. Like you're not too aware, or grew up getting to talk about anything like that.

Views on money in college sports with the CFP

As some universities have chased the CFP and greater football money, expenses have risen at an even greater rate. While smaller conferences have benefitted from the CFP, the top conferences are rewarded far more, leading to greater disparities every year. As a result, there is still a discussion about the amounts of money being generated and spent in pursuit of athletic paydays. There are differing views about the amount of money in college football and the CFP. The CFP executive director, Bill Hancock, noted that because college football tends to fund almost all of the other sports in any given athletic department, such as at the University of Texas, that there is not too much money, and that revenue growth helps student-athletes.

For those of us in top-tier college sports, the revenue is increasing at a desirable pace; in our sphere, money was not left on the table in the current contract. Because the money supports opportunities for student-athletes in all sports, I do not think there is “too much money.”

Student-athletes and media members who were interviewed for this study were concerned about the amount of money in college football and the CFP. All who were interviewed agreed that in their experience college football at the highest level is a business. One sportswriter took issue with college football being considered a nonprofit venture when it is really looking to expand profits as profits are maximized to build facilities and hire elite coaches to win at the highest levels, straying from college football being a student-focused activity at its heart.

I think that it would be hard to look at college sports right now and not say that it is a for-profit enterprise. I just feel like if you really look at the decisions that are made in college sports, that you can really see where those decisions are being made to maximize resources, and sometimes it's harder to make a direct connection between the decisions being made and the benefits for fans and athletes.

In the view of a former student-athlete who has played in the CFP, the CFP was created for greater profits for athletic conferences and departments. "More money. More money, more publicity, more opportunity to get sponsors in the mix." Another student-athlete sees that as well. "And then as much as people want to say it's just a sport, it's college sports, it's athletes. It's a business. They're running a business, they've got to make money." A sportswriter agrees that the money in college football reflects the market conditions of society.

How much money is too much is a question that seemingly surrounds college football. The money goes to the facilities and the coaches. But is the money out of place in society? Does that make sense from a societal standpoint? No, but it is the market we're in. A lot of people that have money donate to athletic departments instead of colleges, or to the academic side, so it's kind of just a reflection on our society.

Dr. Bennett agrees but sees the role of the administrators of the CFP within that market as one of preserving the integrity of the big-time college football portion of higher education.

Should we be happy to live in a society in which more people care passionately about sports than care passionately about nuclear biology? Maybe. Or maybe not. But the culture is what it is. Our duty as athletics administrators is to maintain sports as a positive, high-integrity element of higher ed.

This culture of sports has ancillary outgrowths. College sports, at least for one of the former student-athletes, builds more than just the coffers of the athletic department.

What's the purpose of collegiate sports? You learn as a player, you learn to be on different types of life-skills, like time management, discipline, mannerism, stuff like that. Like as a student and you feel like you are more to learn what's going on and often I'm sure there's some positives and life lessons learned while cheering the home team.

Those profits also go to the charitable wing of the CFP, the Extra Yard for Teachers, which claims to have raised \$38 million for teachers in 33,000 schools across the U.S. from 2014 to 2020 (College Football Playoff Foundation, n.d.). This program is touted by Dr. Bennett as an added benefit of the CFP that has “allowed a lot of boats to come up a notch or two.” It is aimed as a way for fans to get a greater appreciation of the CFP, Bennett said:

And I think that the CFP, and the individuals who are a part of it like me, are always looking at the fan experience, how we can do the things that we need to do to get more people excited about it and wanting to be a part of it, but also to think about how we share the success of the organization.

Another benefit of the CFP are the jobs created among media who cover the CFP as part of the ever-expanding college football footprint. One sportswriter acknowledges his job is enabled from the revenue that flows to the athletic department he covers. But he also was uncomfortable with the amount of money in college football, even though the popularity and revenue meant his job existed because of it. “It’s a weird subject for me, because as someone who works as a sportswriter, and covering an athletic department and a football program, in some ways I make money because of these programs, so it’s just kind of an interesting thing.”

Summary

The evolution of the CFP is a natural outgrowth of the revenue and profit-seeking nature of college athletics, including the universities, their conferences and the bowl games, who have built a near 30-year alliance. The alliance of the universities, conference and bowl games has led to the formation of first the Bowl Alliance and the Bowl Coalition, then the BCS, and now the CFP. The alignment of these parties has led to charges of violations of antitrust laws. But the BCS was never formally charged with violations of antitrust laws, and the CFP was formed after the pattern of the BCS. The perspectives in this chapter reflect different roles in the CFP. The administrators who were interviewed were supportive of the CFP and its goal of clearly

crowning an FBS national champion, which was not always achieved in the past, while reaching for higher profits/revenues and maintaining the status quo of student-athletes remaining unpaid “amateur” athletes. Former student-athletes and media members interviewed, however, were generally critical of the system, especially the treatment of student-athletes as unpaid labor. The next chapter addresses the power of media as it relates to college football and the future of the CFP.

CHAPTER VI

MEDIA POWER AND THE CFP

This chapter addresses media power in two forms: the rights to broadcast games and the journalistic reporting and coverage of the games. This chapter examines how media broadcasting of college sports is integral to universities growing their brand. The chapter then explores how both media forms—broadcast and reporting—exercise power in college football in general and in terms of the CFP. The chapter draws upon both interviews and document analysis.

Building the “front porch” through the media

Media broadcasting of college sports is a primary way to grow a university’s brand. Sports has been called the “front porch” of a university for years, inviting in more students and more revenue (see Thelin, 2007). This concept was reiterated by the executive director of the CFP, Bill Hancock: “Oh, I think the front porch is extremely important for most colleges. It has been proven time and again that sports drives greater success for most institutions of higher education.” Success in sports, especially the CFP, can also make a university more attractive for prospective students. As one former student-athlete said, “I think it attracts more students to the school. For sure. For sure. That builds the profitability and attendance.” This can be helpful in other ways for the university, according to a sportswriter. “It increases the number of people that are applying to your school, and therefore you can have a harsher selection process and have better students across the board, higher academic quality across the board.” But some, including a sportswriter interviewed for this study, say it may only benefit the athletic department and not the rest of the university because casual sports fans who aren’t prospective students won’t be interested in attending the university.

It's definitely a saying that I've heard a lot around athletics, and I think there's probably some truth to it, that it is an entry point for a lot of people who watch

college sports, and that's their connection to what happens with the rest of the university. I don't always think that interest in college sports necessarily translates directly to an impact for the rest of the university.

The direct benefit of mediated sports on universities has been somewhat disputed (Peterson-Horner & Eckstein, 2014), but there still is the notion that athletic success impacts the university as a whole. In some cases, greater athletic success can lead to greater academic ranking, which a sportswriter finds intriguing.

I think I'd have to find the article, but it seems like I read about Alabama, where 10, 20 years ago, if you were a resident of Alabama, it really wasn't that hard to get in, but because of Alabama football's return to dominance, that they have so many people enrolling just to go to Alabama and experience that, that the GPAs of the average student have gone up.

Partnering with media to broadcast football games, combined with success at the highest levels, may have an effect on the university as a whole, then, even academically. Therefore, it may be in the university's—especially a Division I Power 5 school—best interest to build a successful football program and have it broadcast nationally. Success includes being in a bowl game, with the CFP being the ultimate goal. This has led to not only the largest athletic departments seeking ever greater success through greater expenditures, but also allowing broadcast media to have a privileged place among the universities and conferences. The primary bowl game broadcaster, ESPN, has taken full advantage of that position.

ESPN is a full partner in the FBS postseason

A document analysis suggests ESPN and the college football postseason are entangled to the point of being one entity. Of the 41 Division I FBS bowl games, 35 are broadcast on ESPN or ABC (essentially the same thing since both are owned by the Disney Corporation), including the CFP and the New Year's Six. In addition, ESPN actually owns and operates 14 bowl games.

As of 2019, these were the

- Academy Sports + Outdoors Texas Bowl
- Celebration Bowl
- Bad Boy Mowers Gasparilla Bowl
- Makers Wanted Bahamas Bowl
- TicketSmarter Birmingham Bowl
- Cheribundi Boca Raton Bowl
- Tropical Smoothie Cafe Frisco Bowl
- Famous Idaho Potato Bowl
- SoFi Hawai'i Bowl
- Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl
- Mitsubishi Motors Las Vegas Bowl
- New Mexico Bowl
- Camellia Bowl
- SERVPRO First Responder Bowl (Volner, 2019).

ESPN planned on purchasing the rights to start two more bowl games in 2020. By 2022, ESPN owned 18 bowl games (ESPN, 2022).

ESPN is well suited to broadcast the postseason bowl games because it broadcasts the majority of college football games in the regular season. ESPN broadcasts more than 1,000 Division I FBS regular season football games every fall. Other broadcasters, as of 2019, include CBS Sports, Fox Sports, and the Power 5 networks, such as the Pac-12 Network, B1G Network, SEC Network, and the new ACC Network. Of those, ESPN is either the exclusive broadcaster or primary partner for broadcasting games in all but the Pac-12 and B1G conferences. Fox Sports had been the broadcasting partner for the Big-12, which had its own network until 2014, when the network opted not to partner with the conference (Dodd, 2019). ESPN and the Big-12 conference signed a \$40 million deal in 2019 to broadcast just its conference championship football game, which brings its conference broadcasting revenue to about \$22 million per year when added to its existing broadcasting deals (Ourand & Smith, 2019). The deal allows ESPN to

broadcast games on its networks, including on ABC and its online-only ESPN+. ESPN also broadcasts the championship games of the other four NCAA football levels—Division III, Division II, and FCS Division I.

The focus of the media and the CFP rests on ESPN because of its role in broadcasting and promoting the CFP and college football. ESPN, in a profit-seeking role, invests millions of dollars for the inventory to generate surplus value. In order to frame the games for the greatest interest from viewers, it has for years broadcast preview shows before the games and the highlight and analysis shows following the games, most notably *SportsCenter*. The CFP has increased the amount of time devoted to the coverage of college football with its Tuesday rankings show, which reveals the Selection Committee's choices for its top four, in addition to revealing a top 25 overall. This CFP rankings show on Tuesday has become a destination for viewers to see where their teams are ranked and then discuss the rankings on internet discussion boards or sports talk radio call-in shows. A sportswriter says this increased exposure feeds the growth of the game.

A lot of people tune in to the [CFP] Selection Show every Tuesday, where [former CFP Selection Committee chairman] Rob Mullens will get grilled this season about the rankings and stuff, so I think they definitely have an influence, and they have the platform where I think the College Football Playoff gets its most exposure on those ESPN shows. So, I think they've had a major role in the growth of college football, with the evolution of GameDay, and now with so many games being televised on ESPN, ESPN2, basically from 9:00 AM Pacific time until the middle of the night Pacific time, so huge role in the growth of the sport and the exposure to the sport, and really the saturation coverage now that it has on television.

Because of the CFP, a cottage industry of sports talk shows concerning the Selection Committee and their weekly rankings, driven primarily by ESPN's exclusive coverage, has sprung up. In turn, it generates more interest, which circles back to the semifinal games and the championship

game, which has been ESPN's top-rated broadcast every year since the inception of the CFP.

While ESPN seemingly thrives on college football broadcasting, competing conference networks are struggling somewhat. The Pac-12 Network, for example, is not benefitting its conference coffers quite as well. In 2018-2019, the Pac-12 Network had revenues of \$123 million and net operating expenses of \$90 million (Pac-12 Conference, 2020). That \$123 million is part of the total network broadcasting revenue of \$351 million during that year as ESPN and Fox Sports also had broadcasting contracts with the conference. Those amounts, however, lag behind the Big Ten, the SEC, and the Big-12 and are tied with the ACC in terms of television revenue paid per school (Witz, 2019). It may not be long until the Pac-12 Conference seeks the backing of ESPN, further entangling ESPN and college football.

Media members in CFP governance

Two journalists have been a part of the CFP selection committee, Paola Boivin, who was a newspaper columnist and now is a professor at Arizona State University, and Steve Wieberg, who is a former reporter for USA Today, both served on the Selection Committee (College Football Playoff, n.d.; Uthman, 2013). Hancock, the Executive Director of the CFP since its inception in 2012, is a former journalist who was once a newspaper editor (College Football Playoff, 2020). Hancock has been chosen to run the most lucrative college sports properties for nearly 20 years: before the CFP, he was in charge of the NCAA's Men's Final Four from 1989-2002 and the BCS from 2002-2012. At this point, there is not much separation between broadcast media and the sport. Although it may make sense for them to be working partners in terms of content, marketing, and broadcasting, media's power within the sport could make it more difficult for outsiders to have a voice in the regulation of the sport. A sportswriter believes ESPN's close-knit relationship with college football's bowl system and the CFP gives the

network certain structural benefits that other networks may not have.

I guess I think that it is good to have some separation between media interests and the interests of the sport, even though it feels like now they're so intertwined that it's really impossible to separate them anyway. In terms of a governing body that had some type of legislative power, it would feel to me to be at least kind of unusual to have a media entity with any kind of power in that, but everybody understands that ESPN wields a lot of power anyway, and whether they have a seat on a board or a committee or not, they certainly know who to talk to to make sure their interests are represented.

CFP as a media property

The majority of CFP revenue comes from the broadcast deal with ESPN, which is a product of today's sports media environment. The broadcast rights of the CFP, along with other sports mega-events, are bought and sold for hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars because of their large, guaranteed audience. As one sportswriter notes:

The marquee college sporting events are first and foremost media properties that are bought and sold as a way of generating revenue for conferences and schools. And I think you could definitely have a philosophical conversation about is that a good or a bad thing? Should there be this much money going back and forth between the schools and the conferences and ESPN? But you can understand why ESPN pays big money to broadcast these events because they're really popular with spectators, and you can understand why the schools want to be part of that, because it provides the funds that allow them to do a lot of the things that they do, so there's certainly a mutual benefit there for both of them.

The mutual benefit shows in the satisfaction the CFP administration has with how the CFP is being broadcast, the accompanying audience size, the marketing efforts, and the relationship to ESPN. According to Dr. Bennett, President of Southern Mississippi and a founding member of the CFP,

I think Bill Hancock and our chairmen have been very pleased with the relationship that we have with ESPN and with other media partners, and with other vendors who help us to be able to produce this championship game and experience. And I think that those are relationships that are very important to us. They're very important to the schools. I think that they're very important to the

fans. And I think that ESPN and other members of the media have been very willing to work collaboratively with us so that we all are putting out the best product, and we have the narrative in such a way that reaches, it connects with as many people as possible.

However, I found that, though the CFP's broadcast rights may be considered a media property to be bought and sold other than broadcasting the games and giving feedback on audience size and satisfaction. However, the media helped to shape the CFP initially by continually calling for its existence during the BCS years and continuing to call for changes in the current structure of the CFP.

Media power to historically call for change, especially in the formation of the CFP

An analysis of the media's influence in college football shows a history of being invested in its success, while continually calling for change in its postseason structure. The Associated Press college football sports writers have conducted a poll to rank college football teams nationally since 1936 (College poll archive, 2020). The AP poll has chosen its own national champion annually, even during the BCS and CFP eras. Although the AP poll champion has often matched the BCS champion and has always matched the CFP champion, they are separate entities. The AP poll was part of the computerized selection process for choosing the BCS championship game participants until 2004. The AP poll has no part in how the CFP Selection Committee chooses its four CFP participants.

Football coaches also ranked their own champions, and the coaches' poll has been represented by several media organizations, including United Press International (UPI; now defunct) and USA Today, along with a number of partners such as CNN (American Football Coaches Association, n.d.). But the more important of the two historic polls has historically been the media's AP poll. The AP poll, however, has been critiqued for being a subjective method of

crowning a national champion rather than the teams playing for it because the ranking is based on the opinion of each sportswriter. But this was the method to crown a national champion until the sportswriters themselves called for change in the wake of several years when there wasn't a clear-cut champion team.

The subjective nature of selecting a champion rather than letting the top teams play each other in a playoff had become a front and center issue in the 1990s because there were co-champions in 1990, 1991, and 1997. As journalists called for a clearer method of determining a champion, the option of a playoff was consistently suggested. The university presidents, conferences, and bowls took a more circuitous route to arrive at the CFP. They developed the Bowl Coalition, Bowl Alliance, and the BCS before arriving at the agreement to form the CFP in 2012, with the first games to be played in 2014.

The journalists may have called for a new way of determining the champion on the field, but they had no direct influence because they don't make policy for athletics. The CFP's executive director saw some media influence in the formation of the CFP, but he mostly credits the university presidents for seeing a need and then responding to it.

A case could be made that as it might reflect public opinion news coverage and opinion, not news coverage, opinion coverage of the BCS might have had a little bit to do with creating the CFP. I'm qualifying that because it may have had only a little bit of influence. My bosses have a pretty good read on public opinion and they have a great read on the opinion of their schools. Of the league schools. It's the latter that is more significant. If that makes sense. I guess I'm trying to characterize it as perhaps there is a minor influence from the media, but it's not the media as such. It would be the media as reflecting on the public opinion.

Dr. Bennett sees the media as having some say in the conversation, but he believes the real power to change the former system of the BCS to the CFP lies on-campus rather than in the media.

I think when you're talking about college athletics, you can never prevent the media or fans or whoever from saying whatever they want to say. I think that what the schools are doing, what the schools think, what the university presidents are talking about, what other faculty reps and faculty on campuses are talking about, I think what students are saying, are all things that weigh heavily on the final decisions that are being made. And that's not to marginalize the impact of any of the other groups. But I think that the people who are on campus every day, who live in it every day, I think those voices tend to come through stronger than some of the other voices do.

That's not to say the media haven't tried to be a direct influence on the creation and possible expansion of the CFP. The following section deals with those efforts over time to accomplish those goals.

Media calls for expansion of the CFP

Following the advent of the CFP, journalists have continued to call for an expansion of the CFP. The reasons for expansion of the CFP often come down to two factors. First, the Selection Committee's work in finding the top four teams is often debated. Some years the top four teams were very clearly the best four teams. But in other seasons, it's not so clear-cut. In those years the solution seems to be to expand the CFP to allow for more teams to be included, Dr. Bennett said.

And so it's just one of those things that's hard to know if you've gotten it right in a year. You just have to do the best that you can do and pick the best people that you can pick to be on this election committee, and then get out of the way and let them do their jobs. It's easy to be that Monday morning quarterback, right? Or second guess who should've been there, or second guess who the selection committee should have been. ... But every year ... we have a bunch of people who question that, who said we should have had eight teams playing as opposed to four teams playing.

The second reason for expansion of the CFP is that it could yield greater opportunities for revenue because of an increased number of games. As ticket marketers say, greater inventory leads to greater revenue. The combination of more teams competing in more games along with

the perennially high television ratings for all things college football is compelling for broadcasters. Media might call for expansion of the CFP because it could lead to greater revenue for them, according to a sportswriter.

I think that one thing that could accelerate expansion is if ESPN said, “We really want this, we’re going to pay a premium to have another round of games that we don’t currently have,” and create more inventory. So that’s a good point, I think that is possible.

One of the ways the media has power to call for the expansion of the CFP is to demonstrate what an 8-team playoff would look like. Every season, there are a number of visualizations of an 8-team playoff, usually including all five Power 5 conference champions, a Group of 5, and two more at-large teams (Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

Figure 6.1

An 8-team hypothetical playoff bracket in 2018 from 247 Sports.



Note. From 247 Sports [@247sports]. (2018, December 2).

Figure 6.2

Another hypothetical 8-team CFP bracket in 2019-20 from Fox Sports.



Note: From McIntyre, J. (2019, December 16).

There have also been calls in the media for even larger playoff fields (Figures 6.3 and 6.4).

Figure 6.3

A 12-team hypothetical field in 2015, following the first CFP.



Note: From MegaBearsFan. (2015, January 16).

Figure 6.4

A 24-team CFP field in 2019-20.



Note: From CFB Playoff Edits [@CFBPlayoffEdits]. (2019, December 17).

However, other than journalists calling for expansion of the CFP, Hancock doesn't see the media having any real power because they don't have a seat among the CFP board of managers, which consists of university presidents, including Dr. Bennett.

When our group said, "We'd like to have four team playoffs," we did that independent of any influence from television. We did that because we thought it was important, and we did think there would be a significant rights deal. But television didn't tell us to create the four-team playoff. ... People say to me, fairly often, "Well, ESPN will dictate the format." And that's just not true. Not only won't they, but they don't want to.

After ESPN purchased the broadcast rights to the CFP, it doesn't have much, if any, power after signing the contract according to Hancock. When asked if ESPN should push for any changes to the CFP, such as expansion, Hancock not only didn't think they should but also didn't think they would. "I don't really think so. ESPN's people will tell you that they have their hands full with televising the games; they don't need—or want—to get into administering them." And a media member agreed that once the contract is signed, the broadcaster wouldn't press for any real changes to the system.

I think to the extent that media drives the conversation, that I suppose media could have a role in kind of moving along the conversation toward some changes. I think one of the big questions that will continue to be asked about the Playoff is around expansion, and I do think that that question will be primarily driven by the media as an extension of something that fans are talking about.

However, ESPN did have some input on the scheduling of the individual CFP semifinal games. The semifinal games have had some scheduling issues when it comes to viewership and the date of the broadcast. Semifinal games have been held on New Year's Day, a traditional day for college bowl games, but they have also been played on other days. These include New Year's Eve and in late December. The games on New Year's Day have had a larger audience than games broadcast on other dates, which can give ESPN some guidance in suggesting to the CFP management committee when to hold the CFP semifinal games, according to Hancock.

Now, the example you gave was ... When we decided to move away from New Year's Eve, play the semifinals on Saturday ... But we did consult with ESPN about that. We did say, "Okay. People are telling us they'd rather not ..." Many people are saying they'd rather not watch the games on New Year's Eve. Now, I have to be careful about any of this because millions of people did watch the games on New Year's Eve. But when we heard from people who said, "I would have watched it but I couldn't on New Year's Eve because I was working or I have a New Year's Eve party that I've been going to with my friends for 20 years." Then we did consult with ESPN and say, "Okay, what might be better? What date might allow more people to watch the games?" And we did collaborate. We worked with them to make the change to Saturdays.

But one former student-athlete sees the media's power as greater than just being a consultant, especially after paying billions of dollars to secure the broadcast rights.

Well I think that the NCAA is going to listen to the big payers. That's where they're making their money. It's not so much the fans in the stands as media reaches out to everyone. So I honestly don't know but I would say yes, that media does have a huge pull on what's actually happening.

Game-day media power

Broadcasters have the power to dictate the time and day of games, impacting daily schedules and taking precedence over study and exam times at bowl season. ESPN and other broadcasters carry so many games, and there are only so many channels and time slots for games to be broadcast. Therefore, the networks have the power to affect game times and related impacts such as travel times and fan travel and attendance. A student-athlete recognizes the power the media have in the scheduling of regular season games.

They have a ton of power in it, yeah. They're always fighting over who gets what games and all that kind of stuff. And it's a To Be Announced game because you don't know who's going to get the highest bid to be able to broadcast that game. So yeah, I think they have a huge pull in it.

The commodification of college football is, at its core, made possible by media broadcasts, even of the regular season games as well as the bowl and CFP games. With that in mind, a CFP administrator acknowledges that the broadcast media are due some consideration for their investment and can create their own schedule for when games will be played.

I mean, they have spent a lot, they've made a significant investment to the media packages and media rights, and we have allowed and agreed to those terms and conditions. And so from their perspective, if I'm an executive with one of the outlets, I want to maximize the exposure of the games that I've purchased or broadcast so that I can do all of the things that I need to do from a broadcast perspective. And I don't know that, if I'm on their side of the ledger, that I disagree with that. It certainly has an impact on what we do and how we do it. I mean, there's no denying that. But I wouldn't characterize it as undue or totally

inappropriate relationship between the schools and the outlets that are carrying our ballgames.

Future media environment

The future media environment makes it more likely that broadcasting contracts will continue to grow in terms of revenue and cost, according to one media member. For example, ESPN's broadcast of the CFP across so many channels and platforms allows for many entry points for viewership. A sportswriter sees this as another way for media to commodify the game.

I mean, I think you see ESPN, even in how they broadcast the Playoff, trying to sort of anticipate those changing habits. Because if you watch the Playoff now, you can get the main feed, which is the classic announcers in the booth calling the game, you can get ... I think they do now dedicated broadcasts for both teams, where they have announcers catering to one side or the other. They do the coaches' film room, which has been really popular. So they're really trying to maximize their value with that and not just give people that classic sit in front of your TV with the two announcers in the booth experience.

Disney, ESPN's parent company, has expanded horizontally and vertically into various mediums and means of production, which has made it possible to broadcast across many Disney broadcast and digital platforms, including the primary broadcast on ESPN, the radio broadcast on ESPN Radio, and simulcasts on ESPN.com, including home team and away team broadcasts, and the "CFP broadcast command center" (Figures 6.5, 6.6, and 6.7).

Figure 6.5

A screenshot of the ESPN CFP broadcast command center.



Note: From Vollner, D. (2016, December 28).

Figure 6.6

A screenshot of the ESPN CFP Megacast of the 2018-19 CFP National Championship game.



Note: From Clapp, 2018.

Figure 6.7

A screenshot of the ESPN CFP Megacast lineup for the 2019-20 CFP National Championship game.



Note: From Davis, 2020.

But, if the investment doesn't pay off in audience, or if another technology comes along in the future, partnering can also mean greater opportunities for profit seeking with third parties, including an "over the top" (OTT) online streaming partner in addition to ESPN streaming platforms. A sportswriter sees this as a means for media to create partnerships to possibly consolidate their power.

So I won't be surprised if it's something where ESPN is partnering with one of those other entities to broadcast the Playoff, and it'll be interesting to see how that plays out, because ESPN does kind of have its own streaming platforms, and maybe it will be so protective of the really marquee properties like the Playoff that they'll say, "No, we're willing to pay whatever it takes to keep exclusive control of this," but I won't be surprised if in the future, we're seeing more different distribution platforms for those games.

Future of the CFP

When the future of the CFP is explored, generally it is an accepted fact that it will be not only continued, but expanded. These discussions originate in media coverage of college football, and critics in the media call for an expanded CFP to allow for more participation. The CFP is bringing more revenue to the largest conferences and even to the small conferences up and down Division I football. The revenue from the vertical and horizontal expansion of college football is greater than ever, and the profit seeking will most likely continue through expansion of the CFP, at least doubling in size to eight teams, according to the biggest college football media voices. “I think it’s inevitable we’ll eventually get to eight,” said ESPN analyst Kirk Herbstreit (Negrón, 2020).

Another ESPN commentator, Chris Fowler, who is Herbstreit’s broadcast partner, also sees the expansion as inevitable, but for the “right reasons.” The concern of the broadcaster is that if the CFP is expanded, more teams may be playing so it feels more egalitarian, but the same top four teams that the Selection Committee chooses now for the playoff will end up advancing anyway, and nothing is added to the CFP other than more games.

There's a philosophical debate about whether or not a Playoff exists to create access or whether it exists to determine a champion. Does the NFL have playoffs expanded so more teams can make it, more teams can be on TV? Sure. Ultimately it's about determining a Super Bowl champion. That's the same thing in other professional sports and with the NCAA tournament. Do you want a bunch of teams that can say, Hey, we made the Playoffs, the coach is happy, didn't get fired. If you have an eight-team Playoff, did quarterfinals at campus sites, somebody going into Tuscaloosa as the 8 seed, winning that game, Death Valley and win. Upsets happen. But there's a good chance you would have had at least three of the same four teams in the bracket. A very good chance you have the same two playing for the championship. You add a layer on so some teams can say, We made the Playoff. I think it's going to happen eventually, but I want it to be done for the right reasons. (Elchlepp, 2019)

Because of the contract with ESPN, it is not certain that ESPN analysts can say negative things about the CFP. But it appears that the pair of commentators, who are the voices of the CFP championship game, have concerns over the expansion of the CFP in two areas: (1) it could make the rest of the college football postseason more meaningless for teams, and (2) the same teams that are in the four-team CFP now will inevitably rise to the top year after year.

Another media member says ESPN should renew its contract for the CFP and use that opportunity to try to generate more inventory in order to generate more surplus value.

Certainly I would, and I would be very interested in the discussions over making it an 8-team playoff. Maybe just the five Power 5 champions during the regular season are in, and then three wildcards, or if you have the five Power 5 champions, the highest ranked group of five, to throw them a bone, and two wildcards. Whatever the format is, I think it would do for college football kind of what the wild card is for Major League Baseball, where more teams are going to have a shot at playing for the national championship, even if they lose a game or even two games during the regular season, and I think that would make those November games across the country more interesting.

One concern I found was the expansion of the CFP also makes the college football season longer, which makes it more comparable to the NFL in terms of season length. At what point does the college game become another professional league based on a full-time schedule designed to maximize profit? That is a question that critics have asked, even in the face of continual calls in the media for expansion of the CFP. A sportswriter points out the expanded schedule has professionalized the players:

It's interesting because at some point you have to admit that this is semi-pro football, and that there's so much money involved that there's going to have to be some rule changes in terms of players having access to some of that money, or getting money for their likeness, and all these issues that keep popping up, because if you expand it to eight teams or beyond, you're talking about a schedule that's really closing in on how the NFL schedule is. And the NFL, they're professional football players, and that's all they focus on is football, so I think the appetite is there for expansion. ... But all of a sudden the calendar is really getting

NFL length, so there would be a lot of negotiating whether to eliminate conference championship games, or reduce the regular season schedule.

Dr. Bennett also said the CFP and college football needs to crown a champion without losing sight of the fact that it's a college sport. At the time of the interview with Dr. Bennett, the NIL rules had not been implemented. But it's still a valid concern that the college football season is being stretched and commodified to the point where even the pretense of college football as a nonprofit undertaking is seemingly shed. The CFP, however, remains classified by the IRS as a nonprofit organization. Being, at least nominally, a nonprofit organization, the CFP, combined with the historical roots of college football as an amateur sport, would continue in that vein if possible, according to Dr. Bennett.

And I think that our evolution in the CFP has been, coming from the BCS, has been a very intentional, very thoughtful process of doing what we can do to get it right, and to make sure that, to the best of our ability, that we don't compromise the integrity of the member institutions, that we don't compromise the integrity of young people, and that we work really hard to keep in place the fact that this is an amateur sporting event that 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds are competing in.

After all of the debates of each college football season are done, the administrators of the CFP annually review the previous year's results along with the system overall to see if it needs any changes, according to former CFP Selection Committee Chair Rob Mullins.

We lift up the hood after every year. So we do a debrief meeting and really dig into it, of what worked. Are there some things ... We're constantly looking at how we put the resumes on the board, from our data company, our data analytics company, of how do we look at that? How do we evaluate the impact of an FCS game? How do we impact the sequencing of games, and just have a discussion.

As of 2021 there have been no major changes following a CFP season, which would seem to indicate that administrators are satisfied with the way the system is working and resistant to media calls for expansion.

Student-athlete resistance to CFP expansion

Because of the time spent working for the athletic department to create revenue, student-athletes are committed to winning games to get to the CFP, but the possible expansion of the CFP is troublesome for student-athletes because of the expanded time and work commitment. Student-athletes see points of resistance to the expansion for a few reasons, including the necessary time commitment.

So with college football, it's going to get hard to expand it even more. I think that they're going to try to find a way to do it, but it's going to make it that much harder. Just because with football, you're taking off a week to play one game. With basketball you just fly out, you play the game, you watch the game film, you go and play it, right? So it can be a lot harder and more challenging with football because you are taking off a week, you're getting familiar with the area you're playing with.

Student-athletes may also be a point of resistance to expansion of the CFP in terms of the time needed for top players to prepare for the NFL draft and free agency signing period in the spring. That type of time commitment is akin to interviewing for a job, and the risk of injury during the preparation needed to compete in the CFP is something that is being debated among student-athletes.

The hard thing with that is more and more these days you see the top players sitting out and not playing in these games because they're worried about their NFL career. Yes, they do have their insurance that if they get hurt that they're going to be covered at a certain point. But it's a big fear for these players who that's their goal is making it to the NFL. And now you're adding one more game in a short amount of time to be able to get injured. I think you're going to get a lot of backlash from that, or a lot of players that just aren't going to play and at that point the bowl games really aren't going to be what people are expecting them to be.

Summary

Despite being an internal stakeholder within the bowl system as an owner and paying millions of dollars to broadcast the CFP, media power appears to remain limited in the

administration of the CFP. The broadcasting of college football games, including the CFP, gives broadcast media certain insider functions and even some ownership of postseason bowls. Media power to report on (or cover) the CFP, I found, is often relegated to speculation on the expansion of the CFP. Media organizations have some power to shape discussion of the formation of the CFP and its possible expansion but no power within the CFP to change it or influence its governors according to its administrators.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This dissertation analyzed the CFP through a political economic lens, using Marx's theory of commodification and historical materialistic conditions and Smythe's audience commodity theory. The analysis sought evidence of surplus value and power inequalities and resistance in order to answer the research questions.

Finding surplus value in the CFP

Research question one asked: Does the CFP extract surplus value from college football laborers, and if so, who benefits from this arrangement?

The data suggest that the CFP generates surplus value from college football laborers, with the most successful universities and conferences benefitting the most from the CFP.

Universities and conferences and the freedom to pursue greater profits

Data from this study supports research (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995) that has found that the great popularity and revenue of college football is based on the ability to freely make media broadcasting deals. College football, once a regional sport played between local institutions with the reward of bowl games for a successful season between a few of the institutions, has morphed over the years to become the second most popular sport in the U.S. The popularity of the sport took off following the 1984 Supreme Court ruling in the case of *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, in which the College Football Association, represented in the case in name by the University of Oklahoma, won the right to negotiate television contracts directly with broadcast networks. Until the *NCAA vs Board of Regents* (1984) ruling, the commodification of college football via broadcasting was tightly controlled by the NCAA. Initial political economic analyses of the aftermath of the *NCAA vs Board of Regents* (1984) ruling and

other literature prior to the formation of the CFP was based on the scarcity principle—that the supply of college football games prior to the ruling was controlled by the NCAA, creating an artificially low inventory of games, which theoretically boosted broadcast revenue through limited supply. The economic results immediately following the ruling did show that when the supply of games increased the demand remained constant, which led to the prices paid for games to be televised initially dropped (Greenspan, 1988; Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986) Those analyses underestimated the power of universities and conferences to sell college football because of free-market principles that worked in the favor of the universities such as a better product equals more money paid by consumers for that product, and that when the schools could sell their games independently, those prices would soon draw higher prices (Greenspan, 1988) Initial analyses overstated the risk of possible antitrust law violations because of the removal of oversight by the NCAA leading to the biggest universities and conferences engaging in anti-competitive behavior by dominating the broadcasting landscape (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986). Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham (1986) did predict an environment of widening inequalities among institutions and a greater exploitation of student-athletes.

Inequalities among universities

Research Question 2 asked: How do the power inequities manifest themselves within the CFP, and how do disempowered entities manage them?

The literature indicated that inequalities among universities would be increased after the *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1984)* case (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986). This study confirms that the CFP has brought greater inequalities among universities and conferences in revenue, reinforcing that post-NCAA ruling prediction. Other analyses have suggested a return to a world of greater NCAA authority in college football

through the sale of the postseason national championship tournament or by legislation (Thieme, 2007). But, also as predicted by Thieme, the likelihood of that happening was not achievable in a climate of universities and conferences seeking greater surplus revenue, as the money generated by the sale of the broadcast rights of the CFP would be greater than any amount the NCAA could offer to buy. Additionally, all Division I schools, regardless of FBS or FCS status, receive revenue from the CFP. Whereas the NCAA, as a collection of universities, not only lacks authority following the 1984 *NCAA vs Board of Regents* ruling to govern broadcast rights, which is essential to the CFP's viability as a championship, it also lacks the money to buy any postseason rights from its own FBS (and especially the non-autonomous or Power 5) schools that organized and manage the CFP.

The University of Central Florida has been unhappy with the current structure of the CFP following its two CFP snubs, but it seems to be in a minority when it comes to Group of 5 universities. Data indicate that the majority of Group of 5 administrators are happy with the increased revenue the CFP brings to their athletic departments and conferences since the BCS era. And Group of 5 administrators are represented on the CFP's Board of Managers, and were a part of the creation of the CFP. Following the gathering of data for this study, a Group of 5 university was chosen to participate in the CFP: The University of Cincinnati played the University of Alabama in the semifinals of the CFP in 2022.

Research Question 3 asked: Is there evidence that the audience functions as both a commodity and an area of resistance to the CFP?

The data indicate both yes and no. The predictions in the literature of a post-NCAA regulation world following the 1984 Supreme Court ruling underestimated how much sports, and especially football, would be consumed by fans, led by the NFL and followed by college

football. The NFL rode the wave of broadcasting, starting in the mid-1900s, to become the most popular sport in the U.S. College football powers, although initially reluctant to have their games broadcast, eventually embraced broadcasting to the point they wanted to directly negotiate and benefit from being broadcast around the nation. An initial analysis indicated that only the audience would benefit from the 1984 ruling (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). The data indicate that following that landmark moment when college football powers could directly set their price for their college football product to broadcasters, after an initial hiccup revenues rose as the thirst for football also increased among fans enabling some of the greatest examples of audience commodity in all media because the games attract large audiences, which are “sold” to advertisers, thus potentially attracting huge profits for both media companies and advertisers. Fans are not all directly affiliated with the universities, as successful universities have grown their fanbase to a wider regional, and sometimes national, fanbase. The fanbases seem to have embraced the CFP in both calling for its inception, but also calling for it to be more inclusive through expansion.

Exploitation of unpaid student-athletes

Research Question 4 asked: How are student-athletes used as labor, and do they also function as an area of resistance?

NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma (1984) case sought remedies for the universities, conferences, fans, and broadcasters but excluded student-athletes as beneficiaries (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995). The student-athletes who were interviewed for this study, as well as members of the media, indicated a desire for greater monetary benefits for players, especially for those who play in the CFP. Because of the millions of dollars of revenue garnered from the CFP, the student-athletes who played in the CFP even went so far as to want a

check from ESPN as payment for their participation.³ The CFP administrator interviewed for this study who said student-athletes should remain unpaid because they are not employees seems to express a minority opinion. The student-athletes who were interviewed asserted that their work was worth more than what they received.

CFP, media and the future

Research Question 5 asked: Can the CFP reproduce itself both ideologically and materially, and what is the media's role in shaping its future?

The data indicate the origins of the CFP began with the ability of universities and conferences to make their own broadcasting deals with networks. Immediately following the ruling, political economic scholars saw the connection of the broadcasting of college football and networks, especially with the rise of a new network in the 1980s called ESPN, would lead to “the corporate nature of the new sports system” based on increased exposure and revenue (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986, p. 11). Those same scholars, however, predicted that the new corporate environment of college football would make the universities and conferences subservient to the television networks. They wrote at the time that a university's own status in the market would determine its commercial appeal. Academics also saw the power of broadcasters increase relative to the position of universities, leaving the universities dependent on the whims of market forces, especially when deciding which games to broadcast. Others predicted attendance and money in college football would decline overall (Meyers & Horowitz, 1995) as the end of the NCAA system of regulation would result in saturation of the television market with college football and “money would be lost all around” (p. 670).

The data, however, indicate just the opposite. Universities, conferences, and particularly

³ The data were collected before the advent of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) measures by the NCAA.

the broadcasters have benefitted from increased revenue from college football, especially since the advent of the CFP. Fans have also benefitted as their desire to consume the game via broadcast has been increasingly met with more games on more platforms since the 1984 ruling. Fan attendance seems strong, and viewership of the sport has risen through the transition of the national championship games from the BCS to the CFP.

Academic predictions and the creation of a playoff system

As far as the formation of a playoff system is concerned, the data suggest academic researchers who studied ways to implement a playoff system did not give the same weight to factors as those who created the CFP. The optimal size of the playoff was researched years before the creation of the CFP, with researchers suggesting the playoff should be either 2, 4, 8, or 16 teams (Annis & Wu, 2006; Carlin and Stern, 1999; Olson & Stone, 2014). Other playoff formats and sizes were researched but not considered suitable for the creation of a playoff. Another suggested the NCAA should regain the authority over college football and create a tournament much like the men's basketball tournament because of its commercial success and popularity among fans (Thieme, 2007). The data in this study suggest that the creation of the CFP was a steady expansion in games based on the previous BCS system, which was a 2-team playoff. The data suggest those who hold power in college football, the universities and conferences, in conjunction with the broadcasters, do not make large changes to the college football postseason, but instead focus on making incremental changes. The CFP may be expanded beyond its current 4-team format, but those interviewed suggest it will not be at the expense of student-athletes, who already consider playing football a full-time job. The data also suggest the administrators are happy with the current revenue stream from the CFP, which has been steadily increasing since its inception. It appears that media efforts for even greater

expansion of the CFP, even up to a 24-team playoff, are not likely to be fulfilled in the near future.

CFP and alleged antitrust violations

When the BCS was college football's championship, scholars, legislators, and regulators took aim at it, accusing those involved of violating federal antitrust laws (Blevins, 2011). The argument had been made during that time that the administrators of the BCS were operating to reduce competition in the marketplace, which would be a violation of antitrust laws. "Under antitrust law, where an agreement among competitors tends to adversely affect competition in the market rather than promote it, the agreement may be illegal" (p. 154). Scholars and some politicians tried to make the case that inclusion in the BCS was not allowing for more competition (Munson & Lavigne, 2009). However, an antitrust investigation was conducted into the BCS and no charges were ever formally filed following the investigation. The same administrators who created the BCS created the CFP. In the creation of the CFP, administrators used the BCS as a model knowing there were likely no violations of antitrust laws.

Impact on theory

Sports media complex

Wenner's (1989) sports media complex model placed the audience at the center of journalists, sports organizations, and media organizations producing sports media content. This study reiterates the relevance of Wenner's model, demonstrating how three parts of the model work toward producing the CFP for the audience. But at the same time the data suggest the model is somewhat simplistic because of the tensions in the CFP among the journalists, sports organizations, and media organizations and one other key element not mentioned in the model. The audience is named as the central facet in Wenner's model. But media organizations also

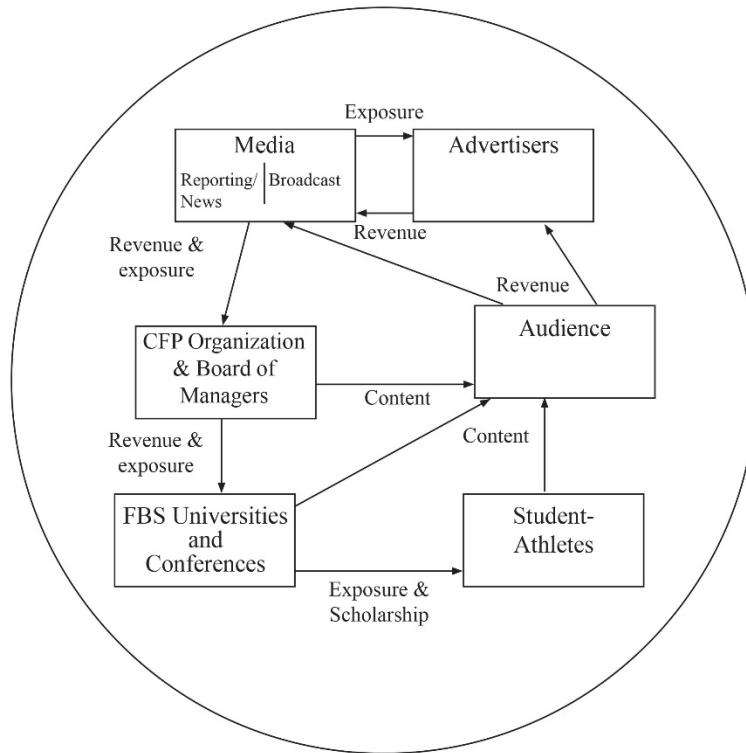
seem to situate themselves in the place of the CFP audience, advocating on their behalf for what they assume the fans want, which is more football in the form of an expanded CFP. Media representations of an expanded CFP with many more teams and games serve to illustrate a desire on behalf of the fans for more teams and games. The sports organizations, in this case, would be the universities and the conferences, which provide football teams to be consumed. But Wenner's model, which was created before the advent of the CFP, does not take into account student-athletes in the situation of the CFP. However, college football has long experienced tensions between the student-athletes who played the games for non-monetary benefits and the other pieces of the model that are generally professionalized and paid, such as the administration of the athletic departments and conferences and the journalists and broadcast media. Even in a post-NIL CFP media complex, it's unclear how many student-athletes are able to sign NIL deals, which means many student-athletes will remain unpaid labor. For a model of the CFP version of the sport media complex see Figure 7.1.

The distribution and concentration of media

The concentration and distribution of college football's bowl structure, and especially the CFP through primarily one media outlet, ESPN, confirms Murdock and Golding's (and other communication researchers') thoughts about the concentration of media meaning greater control and influence in the hands of a few large companies (1973). ESPN/Disney, in its continued concentration of the bowl system, owns the means of production, which in this case is a number of postseason bowls, in addition to the rights to broadcast them as is normally the case in sports media. This is the equivalent of a professional sports league being owned by the very network it broadcasts. However, this may not be as rare as it once was as Fox Sports owns the rebooted United States Football League, which launched in the spring of 2022 (USFL; McCarthy,

Figure 7.1

A model of the CFP sport media complex.



2022). The ownership of this event by the sports media is relatively new, and this study could lay the groundwork for future studies of similar sports media properties.

The vertical integration of media and sports property by ESPN/Disney suggests the focus of neo-Marxist scholars examining the concentration of media is still valid and merits further study of the concept of hegemony and the role it plays in the sports media complex. Gramsci (1971) proposed that hegemony worked to reproduce the dominant social order, and in examining ESPN and its ownership of sports properties along with the exclusive rights to broadcast the CFP, the data suggest ESPN is working to keep the dominant form of the sports media complex in place, which even keeps the student-athletes subjugated under the current

labor conditions. In the search for greater surplus value, it seems likely that media and sports properties will continue to work together in a variety of ways.

The data also suggest the search for greater surplus value in the CFP reiterates the theory of base/superstructure. The economic base of capitalism is continually reaffirmed by the superstructure, which not only works to continue to keep the base intact, but also to help influence the social relations of the superstructure, be it political, social, or cultural. The political efforts to regulate the BCS and the CFP through antitrust laws never came to pass, suggesting the laws were either aligned with the college football system or those who opposed the BCS and the CFP lacked the political will to enforce such laws. ESPN seemingly has also been rewarded with greater viewership for being a part of the communications in the superstructure, working to preserve the economic base.

The culture of college football has embraced the CFP as fan viewership has risen, revenues have risen, and calls for change are generally asking for more of the CFP, not less. The efforts of the media sports complex to preserve the CFP and its place in society have also seemingly reaffirmed another political economic theory, the audience commodity, which is addressed in the following section.

Examining the audience commodity

Smythe (2012) theorized that the media produced an audience, which is then commodified to earn profits/revenue. In the creation of the CFP, organizers were concerned with the demands of the audience to create a playoff system. Viewership data suggest the audience has indeed grown along with the inventory of games. The four-team CFP replaced the two-team BCS to crown the FBS champions, which increased the number of viewers overall. Live sports continue to dominate broadcast ratings, and college football is the second most popular sport in

the U.S. The audience for college football is among the largest of any audience in sports and in the U.S., seemingly justifying the billions of dollars spent by ESPN to obtain the broadcasting rights to the CFP. In this way, the audience as commodity theory is just as relevant as ever.

Based on the desire for college football, some believe that expanding the CFP to include more teams and more games is a logical outcome when considering the audience as commodity combined with the desire to extract as much surplus value as possible. But administrators and student-athletes both made statements suggesting the expansion of the CFP may not happen due to factors such as overworking the student-athletes, who now play up to 15 games in one season in pursuit of the CFP. Administrators interviewed for this study also indicated the CFP managers are also happy with the revenue stream as is.

Models have been developed to determine the best statistical method for crowning the top teams in the CFP if it were to expand. But what may not have been studied is the economic impact of CFP expansion. If the current structure for revenue distribution is maintained for a possible multiplication of revenue from an expansion of the CFP, the economic aspects would continue to draw the attention of political economic scholars using audience commodity theory as well as Marx's commodification theory to examine the even larger amounts of surplus value, which would likely continue to be unfairly distributed among Division I universities and conferences.

Limitations of this study and future studies

This study is from a Marxist political economic point of view but doesn't represent the entirety of critical political economic analysis. Future studies could seek to situate this topic of the CFP and sports media within a more cultural framework, including mythmaking. This study sought the perspectives of the broadcasters, but they declined to participate. Another study may

be more successful in reaching out to ESPN or Fox Sports on the national level, or a conference network or broadcast partner at a more regional level, for their perspectives on the political economy and cultural impact of the CFP and college football within the sport media environment. The study was also unable to reach many student-athletes who participated in the CFP and media members who have covered the CFP. Future studies may confirm or dispute the findings in this study if there are able to obtain more interview participants. A focus group of student-athletes could be more accessible to future studies because of issues of access to student-athletes. Working with athletic programs to seek permission to have a small group of student-athletes, researchers could get more insight into current labor conditions for student-athletes who are currently laboring on behalf of the university. Another factor for greater student-athlete participation is working with the NCAA in the study, as the NCAA often surveys student-athletes for their own research purposes, especially in the areas of mental and physical health (Burnsed, 2014).

One of the research questions addressed the CFP audience and any resistance to the CFP. This was not directly addressed in the method, and a document analysis of broadcast viewership ratings provided the only evidence to answer the question. A future study could make greater use of college football fans as an entry point into studying the CFP and its place in college football and broadcasting. The question of audience as a point of resistance can also be further explored by understanding better the desires of the audience in terms of wanting expansion of the CFP or whether student-athlete concerns would trump the audience desire for greater inventory of games.

This study touched on the rising influence of web streaming and OTT streaming of games, which seems to be the future of college football broadcast. Exploring the influence of

new technologies further could also help give a more complete view of the future of college football and CFP broadcasting. College football is likely to remain popular because sport is one of the few “live” experiences in media and, unlike most “reality” TV, is unscripted. The increased reach of college football along a number of different mediums would seem to at least maintain current audience levels and perhaps increase them over time. However, with the uncertainty of NIL rules, COVID effects, and conference realignment, the audience may not evolve with the college football environment. Indeed, as super conferences may form in the near future, fans may instead yearn for the regional rivalries of the past instead of a more nationalized college football experience.

COVID-19 and an uncertain economic future

The uncertain economic future is another aspect that future studies can address. Broadcast revenue is the largest source of revenue for athletic departments, and the CFP and the Men’s Basketball Tournament are the largest sources of revenue in collegiate athletics. There is no guarantee that the current levels of revenue growth will continue when the contracts come up for bidding because of an uncertain U.S. economy. An economic downturn from high inflation or another societal disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, not only could reduce the amount of revenue from ticket sales but also could put the economy in a recession or depression. The television audience shrunk in terms of viewers during the COVID pandemic (Strauss, 2020). Television revenue depends on a number of factors, including the ability to sell advertising. If an economic downturn depresses the amount of advertising revenue, the amount of money broadcasters bid for contracts to broadcast the CFP could also be reduced. This reduces the money coming into athletic departments, many of which are expanding or building new athletic facilities. As one person I spoke to said, the current broadcasting contracts could represent a

bubble, with new contracts reducing the revenue, and exposing the athletic departments to revenue losses. The collegiate athletic system seems to be tenuous at the current time, despite billions of dollars in revenues at the Division I level. That matters to the other sports in an athletic department, which are funded primarily by football revenue.

These are but a few of the theoretical or methodological ways this topic can be studied in the future to give a more complete picture of the state of the CFP, college football, and the broadcast media environment.

Praxis and remedies

Marx's notion of praxis may suggest to researchers that, upon finding inequalities within the mode of production, they should work to eliminate those inequalities and change the mode of production to a more equitable system. To that end, this study serves as a reminder of the condition of inequality and exploitation within the sport. Despite strides to better distribute revenue among all Division I football programs, it remains, at its core, a system that cannot equally involve all programs in the CFP or equally distribute the revenue being generated. A number of solutions to the inequality of the CFP and college football along with the exploitation of student-athletes have been suggested.

Name, Image, and Likeness

In recent years, student-athletes have sought to benefit from college football broadcasting via payment for their labor, not only a direct payment from the schools and the bowls, but it has also been suggested that the networks could pay athletes directly. The so-called Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) laws that have been enacted by the NCAA and on a state-by-state basis seek to rectify the injustice of *Board of Regents vs NCAA*.

Looking to the NFL as a guide, players receive up to 48.8% of all revenues (Florio,

2020). However, in college athletics, only two sports are considered consistent revenue generators, football and men's basketball, with all other sports receiving funding from those two, among other sources. The ability for a non-revenue student-athlete to generate income is questionable. Would revenue sports continue to pay for non-revenue sports? And as the NIL laws allow a player to benefit singularly, again, few student-athletes outside of the revenue sports may see the benefits of allowing student-athletes to be paid. With the players receiving a cut of the revenues, there may be less money to go around to the other sports. The CFP broadcasting contract with ESPN expires in 2026, and the new contract will most likely be only more lucrative for the universities and conferences. Add to that the NCAA's broadcasting contract for the Men's Basketball Tournament, which will most likely be larger than the nearly \$1 billion annually it is now (Flint, 2016), and there may be enough money for the student-athletes after all.

Student-athletes as full beneficiaries of CFP revenues

Direct governmental regulation of certain aspects of the existing system, namely regarding the use of student-athletes as labor, could be a solution for the lack of direct payment for their labor, especially for participating in the CFP or any other bowl games that pay the universities to play. The regulation of direct student-athlete payment is in addition to the NIL laws, which are a state-by-state proposition. Some states have different levels of compensating student-athletes. The NCAA has called for federal legislation to iron out the patchwork of state laws (Giambalvo, 2020). A federal approach to ensure a uniform solution is currently being considered. A Senate bipartisan working group, including Sens. Chris Murphy (D) of Connecticut and Mitt Romney (R) of Utah, is looking to regulate college athletics, especially when it comes to the players. The senators could also consider regulating the networks and their purchasing of broadcasting rights to give student-athletes direct payment, because, as one former

student-athlete said, to receive a check from ESPN would go a long way toward moving the revenues toward those who labor. In these days of expanding audiences and revenues, giving student-athletes a direct payment for their labor may not shrink the surplus value as much as some might think. And, perhaps, the networks can be proactive in paying players that it broadcasts directly. Because the NCAA doesn't allow players to be classified as employees of the university, this could, as some point out, run afoul of legal issues.

An influx of government support into athletic programs could have a direct influence. The smaller the athletic revenue, the more the program is dependent on institution funds, student fees, and government support. There are certain cases where athletic departments receive government support, such as in the state of Oregon, where most university athletic departments have received payment from lottery funds. Applying state and federal funds to athletic departments in state universities can help even the playing field in terms of revenue.

Perhaps the best solution in relation to the CFP and student-athlete payment is to pay those student-athletes who participate in the CFP. Paying student-athletes who participate in the CFP would mean the NCAA would have to raise the \$550 benefit cap for bowl game participation. But raising or eliminating the cap can be either legislated by the NCAA or implemented by fiat by the Power 5/autonomous conferences who manage and own the CFP.

Payment could be implemented similar to what the NFL does with player bonuses for making the playoffs and advancing in the playoffs. The NFL playoffs begin with a "wild card" round. This first round of playoffs has the lowest amount of bonus money. Players in the 2021-22 playoffs earned either \$37,500 each or \$42,500 each, with the higher amount going to division champions and the lesser amount going to teams that make the playoffs but aren't division champions (Ginnitti, 2022). In each successive round of the NFL playoffs, players

earned more than the amount of the previous round, capped off by the Super Bowl winners who earned \$150,000 per player. The Super Bowl losers received \$75,000 that year. The CFP could implement such a system. With only four teams at present and two rounds of playoffs, the cost would be a fraction of the total payout of the CFP.

With 85 players on full scholarship per team, these players would receive the full amount of playoff money, perhaps \$50,000 each. College football teams also have a large number of “walk-on” players, who participate in practices but do not have a full scholarship to play football. There are generally 33 walk-on players per team at the FBS level (RecruitRef, n.d.). These walk-on players could also receive money but perhaps at a prorated amount, such as \$25,000 each. The total for four teams would be \$20,300,000 in player payouts – \$17,000,000 for scholarship student-athletes and \$3,300,000 for the walk-on student-athletes in the first round of the CFP. The teams that make the championship game could follow the NFL model and double their payment for winning the championship (\$100,000 per scholarship student-athlete and \$50,000 for walk-on players for the winning team) and half that amount for losing the championship game. Total player payments for the championship game would be an additional \$15,225,000 – \$10,150,000 for the winning team and \$5,075,000 for the runners up. The total potential player payments would be \$35,525,000. The total payout from the CFP was \$465,065,074 in 2017-18, making student-athlete payments 7.6% of that total. As theorized in a new model of the CFP sport media environment, student-athletes are a key stakeholder who directly generate content but receive no actual monetary remuneration. This proposal suggests paying players but has minimal impact on the total payout of the CFP. Considering the most recent payout document was in 2018, the payouts are most likely higher at the time of this writing. Paying players directly for their contribution to the CFP can help the CFP be more

competitive by directly incentivizing student-athletes to receive the “ESPN check” a former CFP student-athlete felt was owed to those who help create the CFP’s valuable content.

Expanding the CFP

Another issue that has been raised is the lack of a level playing field among teams competing for a spot in the CFP. Expanding the CFP could be a market solution to make the CFP more egalitarian as it would, in theory, offer more teams the chance to compete for the CFP title “on the field.” As noted in Chapter 6, expansion of the CFP has called for anywhere from six to 24 teams and everywhere in between. The CFP replaced previous methods of crowning the national champion and doubled the size of the tournament from two to four teams. Expanding the CFP likely would also again increase revenues because there would possibly be a greater inventory of games. More games means more revenue from television broadcasts, advertising, ticket sales, merchandise, etc. As documented in Chapter 4, the CFP has created much greater revenues and audiences than either the BCS, Bowl Coalition, or Bowl Alliance. There is speculation that the CFP may expand when the broadcast contract expires in 2026, but that may not expand the inventory of games, as the New Years Six bowl games could be used as CFP tournament games.

More broadcast contracts with Group of 5

The inequality among universities and conferences is widened by broadcast contracts. Networks could look at Group of 5 conferences in much the same light as the Power 5 in terms of potential audience. College football is the No. 2 sport in America, and its audience is right behind the NFL. Having more inventory reach a larger audience, even with Group of 5 teams, has shown to be effective as even lesser bowl games have a relatively large audience. Using this as a reference point, giving the Group of 5 conferences bigger contracts as Division I football

teams could empower the Group of 5 conferences to not only have the revenue to compete with the Power 5 schools but could also provide the psychological impetus to reach for a higher competition. This is a market solution.

The CFP contributes to the bottom line of smaller conferences in Division I, including the FCS. Each conference, from the Power 5 to the Group of 5 to each conference in the FCS, received a sum. The amounts, however, represent a small fraction of the total amount of money distributed to the conferences by the CFP. In the 2017-18 distribution, the Power 5 conferences and Notre Dame received 79.9% of all revenue from the CFP. Those conferences represent only 19.9% of all the universities in Division I athletics. A more equitable payment schedule from the CFP can help the other conferences, especially the Group of 5, to be more likely to fulfil the marketing campaign cited in the introduction to this study, which asked “Who’s in?,” implying that each FBS university had a legitimate shot at the CFP. The Group of 5 conferences received slightly more than \$18 million apiece from the 2017-18 CFP payments. Increasing their amounts would also help create more parity by better funding those programs. As was clear from what Dr. Bennett said, the Group of 5 are fully invested in the CFP as managers. Their reward can and should be greater. The payments to the Group of 5 conferences could start at 30% of revenues and grow over time to help college football have a more level playing field. As the CFP also pays money to the FCS conferences, it would also be beneficial to more conferences and college football in general to be more equitable by increasing those payments. As each payment to those conferences was only \$281,216 each, simply doubling the amount would be a good start.

Concluding summary

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the CFP and its media presence through a political economic lens. For the political economic scholar, the CFP as an entry point into

studying media and sport is a natural one. The foundations of the current culture of the broadcast of college football, including the CFP, is based on the Supreme Court's 1984 ruling in the case of *NCAA vs Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, which enabled universities and conferences to negotiate their own contracts with broadcast networks. The data show the CFP is emblematic of the superstructure built on an economic base seeking greater surplus value by commodifying college football and exploiting the student-athlete laborers within the sport media complex. This study suggested a new sport media complex model for the CFP better theorizes the unpaid contributions of student-athletes as media content producers. This study suggests the CFP may be one of the most egregious examples of worker exploitation and economic inequality in all of sport.

Revenues in college football have steadily risen, with the primary driver being revenue from broadcast contracts. But it has led to economic inequalities between the top universities and conferences participating consistently in the CFP and those that have not. Division I non-Power 5 universities and conferences are being left behind the Power 5 in terms of revenue and participation. However, all three types of Division I conferences with football, Power 5 conferences (called Autonomous Conferences by the NCAA), Group of 5 (non-autonomous) conferences, and FCS, have seen revenues and expenses grow consistently since 2005. The CFP has also directly contributed revenue to all three types of conferences, with the Power 5 conferences receiving far more than the other two. The Power 5 conferences, which represent 20% of universities in Division I athletics, were paid 80% of the revenue from the CFP. If viewership numbers are any measure, audiences seem to be happy with the CFP, which has grown in viewership since the BCS. Some administrators of the CFP believe that the CFP is on the right track because of viewership and steady revenue. Data indicate the greater inventory of

games in the CFP and New Years Six bowls has led to greater revenues for a greater number of universities and conferences. One of the sportswriters I interviewed said the CFP is a step in the right direction. “It's not a perfect system, but I would agree that it's definitely a better system than what we had before.” But uncertainty in college football—i.e. COVID effects, realignment, and changing NIL rules—could lead to some viewer erosion.

But change to the game of college football comes slowly. The data in this study suggest that those who hold power in college football, the universities and conferences, in conjunction with the broadcasters, do not make large changes to the college football postseason but instead focus on making incremental changes. In the case of the CFP, the gap between the formation of the Bowl Alliance, which was implemented in 1995, to the formation of the CFP took nearly 20 years. The CFP may be expanded beyond its current 4-team format, but those interviewed suggest it will be at the further expense of the student-athletes, who already consider playing college football a full-time job. These decisions would be made by the CFP Board of Managers, a group of university presidents and chancellors, who hold the administrative power in the CFP. Data suggest media do not have any real power to enact administrative change within the CFP, even though ESPN paid \$7.3 billion for the rights to broadcast the CFP and New Years Six bowl games. Media do have power over broadcast times of games and can be an influence over participants, including the student-athletes.

A possible expansion of the CFP is also consistent with the quest for seeking greater profits through exploitation of more student-athletes who participate in the CFP while not being directly compensated for their labor. Because the CFP has only had participation from a handful of universities, expanding the CFP would allow for a wider field of university participation, including those not in Power 5 conferences.

In conclusion, though the CFP has helped lead to a widening of the gap between the larger and more powerful universities and conferences and those that are not, even the smallest of Division I conferences have received money directly from the CFP. As a natural outgrowth of the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling, the CFP has provided a remedy to the universities, the broadcasters, and the fans for greater amounts of college football. The data suggest, however, that the student-athletes and most Division I conferences, especially the Group of 5 conferences that have ownership in the CFP, have been left behind in the economics of college football and especially the CFP. This study suggests compensating student-athletes who participate in the CFP as content producers, similar to how NFL players are compensated for participating in the NFL playoffs. It also suggests leveling the playing field between conferences through a more egalitarian payment of the hundreds of millions of dollars that the CFP pays to conferences every year. These changes are more likely to keep or increase competitiveness in college football, and therefore more likely to stay the No. 2 sport in the U.S. as fans are more invested in the outcomes of their teams.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AP poll: The Associated Press poll of college football sportswriters. The AP poll was historically one of the ways a national champion was selected in college football until the advent of the Bowl Coalition in 1992.

Athletic conferences: In college athletics in the U.S., institutions combine into groups for athletic competition and bargaining rights, sometimes in geographic alignment.

Amateur sport: Any sport where the participants do not play for money.

Bowl games: End of season game for college football teams, meant as a reward for having a certain number of wins.

BCS: The Bowl Championship Series replaced the Bowl Coalition and included all major conferences and bowls, including the Big Ten and Pac-10 conferences and the Rose Bowl. It was designed to guarantee the top two teams in the college football regular season played each other in the National Championship game. It lasted from 1998-2013.

Bowl Alliance: The Bowl Coalition fell apart after two participating conferences dissolved. After the formation of the Big-12 Conferences from two defunct conferences, the Bowl Alliance was formed. Like the Bowl Coalition, it did not include the Rose Bowl or the Big Ten and Pac-10 conferences. It existed from 1995-1997.

Bowl Coalition: The first efforts of conferences and bowls to create a system to crown a champion by having the top two teams at the end of the regular season to play for the college football national championship. Many of the conferences and top bowl games agreed to this coalition, excluding the Big Ten, the Pac-10 and the Rose Bowl. It existed from 1992-1994.

CAFI: The College Athletics Financial Information (CAFI) database, run by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

CFA: The College Football Association (CFA) was begun in 1977 by individual universities and colleges that wanted to negotiate their own television broadcast contracts for football games, bypassing the NCAA. This led to the 1984 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of *NCAA v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma*, which allowed institutions and conferences to negotiate their own television deals.

CFP: The College Football Playoff (CFP) is the current method of crowning a national champion in college football. It replaced the BCS starting in 2014-15. It is designed to match up the top four teams in the college football regular season in the playoff. The four teams are seeded numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4, where the numbers 1 and 4 play and the numbers 2 and 3 play. The winners of those two games move on to the national championship game.

Divisions I, II, and III sports: Within the NCAA, institutions are divided by the size of their athletic departments, generally determined by their revenue. Division I is the highest, followed by Division II and Division III. Both Division I and II allow sports teams and athletic departments to offer sports scholarships. Division III institutions do not have athletic scholarships.

ESPN: Began in 1979, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network was the first all-sports cable and satellite broadcast network in the U.S. The self-proclaimed “Worldwide Leader in Sports” broadcasts the CFP, among many other broadcast contracts and rights.

Fanbase: People who are dedicated to and cheer for a team, either professionally or collegiate. The fanbase for collegiate sports consists of alumni, people in the state or community, or, if the program has national exposure, nationwide. They may also support the team financially, either through ticket sales, donations to the athletic department, or through merchandise sales.

Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS): In the Division I of the NCAA, there are two levels, with the FBS being the higher of the two as determined by athletic department revenue and conference affiliation. FBS teams are eligible to compete in postseason bowl games, including in the CFP, if they reach a certain number of wins. Generally half of the 110 teams in the FBS classification reach bowl eligibility.

Football Championship Subdivision (FCS): In the Division I of the NCAA, there are two levels, with the FCS being the lower of the two levels, as determined by athletic department revenue. Instead of bowls, the FCS postseason is one 16-team tournament to determine the FCS national champion. There are no other postseason games other than the 16-team tournament.

Game day: Saturday is generally the day when games are played in college football, with many institutions ritualizing pre- and in-game ceremonies or fan experiences.

Group of 5 conferences: Within the FBS, there are 10 conferences, five of which are lower-tier conferences based on athletic department revenue. The Group of 5 conferences have one guaranteed team in the New Year’s Six bowl games.

Independent: Within the FBS, there are several institutions that are not affiliated with a conference. The most famous of which is Notre Dame, which is part of the CFP in its management along with the 10 FBS conferences.

NCAA: The National Collegiate Athletic Association is the largest collegiate athletics governing body and has the most revenue. It was formed in 1906 and is headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana. It does not receive or distribute any revenue for Division I college football since the 1984 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of *NCAA v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma*, which allowed institutions and conferences to negotiate their own television deals. NCAA revenue is primarily from the Men’s College Basketball Tournament television rights deal.

New Year’s Six: The top six bowl games in college football are all part of the CFP. Two of the bowls are CFP semifinal games. The CFP semifinals rotate among the those six bowls. The participants in the other four bowl games are all the champions of the Power 5 conferences that are not playing in the CFP, plus the highest ranked Group of 5 teams. All other opponents are chosen at large.

Power 5 conferences: Within the FBS, there are 10 conferences, five of which are upper-tier conferences based on athletic department revenue. The Power 5 conferences all have their champions guaranteed to play in the New Year’s Six bowl games. The NCAA has also designated the Power 5 conferences as “Autonomous,” in that they have some latitude when it comes to creating and following rules within the NCAA.

Regular season and postseason: The regular season are any regularly scheduled games during a season of play. These include playing teams within and outside of their athletic conference. For Division I football teams, a regular season can consist of up to 11 games. Many FBS conferences have a championship game between two division winners within the conference. The conference championship game and any bowl game, including the CFP, are all considered to be postseason games.

Student-athlete: Any enrolled student of an institution that participates in an intercollegiate sport is considered a student-athlete. These athletes may or may not have an athletic scholarship. They are not paid for their performance on the field, but recent NCAA governing regulators have begun to allow student-athletes to benefit financially from any third-party endorsements, beginning in 2021. Any payment may not come from the institution.

Winning on the field: Historically, there have been times when the top two highest-ranked teams were not allowed to play for the national championship in Division I FBS college football. This led to calls to settle the national championship with a playoff, thus winning the national championship on the field, rather than in a poll.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Questions for semi-structured interview for Administrators

Could you please state your name, age, and current city of residence?

Can you tell me about your experience with the College Football Playoff (CFP)?

- Thinking about that experience, would you consider your opinion of the CFP as positive or negative and why?
- Is there a particular experience during your time at the CFP (or not at the CFP) that would typify your opinion of the CFP?

How do you think the CFP compares with historic ways of crowning a national champion before the CFP, i.e. the Bowl alliance, BCS, AP poll, etc.?

- Would you consider those previous efforts at crowning a national champion fair or equitable to all eligible universities? Why or why not?
- What do you consider to be the largest drivers of the evolution of crowning a national champion?

What's your opinion of the structure and the governance of college football and the CFP?

- There are a lot of committees when it comes to college football governance, from the NCAA to the CFP such as Football Oversight Committee, Division I Council, NCAA Board of Directors, Postseason Football Bowl Games Ad Hoc Working Group, College Football Playoff Board of Managers, the CFP Management Committee, the Football Bowl Association and the CFP Selection Committee, plus the Power 5 have their own autonomy. Can you explain which ones truly have the greatest influence on college football and the postseason?
- What are your thoughts on the NCAA's role in Division I college football governance?
- If you could, how would you change the structure or the governance of the CFP?
- Should the Group of 5 administrators and presidents push for more inclusion of Group of 5 teams?
- Would having a second-tier tournament involving bowl games and Group of 5 teams ever be enacted? Why?
- How fair and equitable a system is the CFP for crowning a national champion? Why?
- What do you think are the largest obstacles preventing participation in the CFP for non-Power 5 schools (and most Power 5 schools for that matter)?
- Is college football fundamentally better with the CFP? Why?
- If you could look into the future, how would you describe the CFP in 20 years? Why?

With the CFP in place, are there now too many games in a college football season? Should there be more games? Fewer games? Why?

- If you had to guess what student-athletes prefer when it comes to the length of the season, what would they say about the number of games in the college football season?

What are your thoughts on college football being the biggest driver of revenue for athletic programs,

- The CFP is bringing in larger revenues every year for Division I institutions. Do you think revenues are increasing at a desirable pace, or is there money left on the table?
- Do you think there's too much money in the CFP and in college football overall?
- What is your opinion on paying players beyond the stipend in college football?
- Do you think it makes a difference in recruiting because larger schools are able to pay a larger stipend? Why?
- Along those lines, what are your thoughts on college football being a minor league for the NFL?

The media seem to have a lot of power when it comes to logistics of the week-to-week and game-to-game scheduling, and even conference championships. Do you think that media that way has undue influence on college football?

- What do you think of ESPN (the broadcaster) and the media's involvement in the CFP?
- Do you think ESPN paid too much for the CFP, not enough, or is it about right? Why?
- Do you think the media has any power to enact change within the CFP?
- Do you think ESPN should act as an agent of change with the CFP?
- Among all the committees and boards, excluding the CFP selection committee, there was only one person who was not tied directly to either a university or the bowl games, and it was a VP at ESPN. Do you think there should be more direct media involvement on boards and committees, or no direct involvement, or fine the way it is? Why?

Regarding college football fans, how do you think they have accepted the CFP?

- What kind of feedback have you seen or heard of from fans on the CFP?
- Do you think fans have any power to change the CFP? Why?
- How do you think fans feel about the NCAA and other governing committees and boards?

What do you think of the notion of college sports being the front porch of a university?

- What do you think the purpose of collegiate sports is?
- Do you think collegiate sports should be used as a tool to drive greater numbers of students applying, funding, research, academic ranking, etc.? Why?
- If I told you that there may be a link between football success and higher academic ranking of universities, what would your reaction be?

Do you have any other thoughts regarding the CFP, college football, fans or the media that you would like to add?

Who do you think would be interested in discussing the CFP and answering these questions and who is affiliated in some way with the CFP?

Questions for semi-structured interview for media members

Could you please state your name, age, and current city of residence?

Can you tell me about your experience with the College Football Playoff (CFP)?

- Thinking about that experience, would you consider your opinion of the CFP as positive or negative and why?
- Is there a particular experience during your time at the CFP (or not at the CFP) that would typify your opinion of the CFP?

How do you think the CFP compares with historic ways of crowning a national champion before the CFP, i.e. the Bowl alliance, BCS, AP poll, etc.?

- Would you consider those previous efforts at crowning a national champion fair or equitable to all eligible universities? Why or why not?
- What do you consider to be the largest drivers of the evolution of crowning a national champion?

The media seem to have a lot of power when it comes to logistics of the week-to-week and game-to-game scheduling, and even conference championships. What do you think of the media's influence on that part of college football?

- What do you think of ESPN (the broadcaster) and the media's involvement in the CFP?
- Has ESPN gotten its money's worth with the CFP deal? Why?
- Do you think ESPN paid too much for the CFP, not enough, or is it about right? Why?
- Do you think the broadcast media has any power to enact change within the CFP?
- Do you think print or radio media members have any power to enact change within the CFP?
- If ESPN wants to make any changes to the CFP, could it have any influence as it broadcasting partner?
- Do you think ESPN will renew its contract with the CFP or do you think another broadcast entity, including OTT or on-demand like Amazon Prime, could try to bid for the broadcast rights? Why?
- Among all the committees and boards, excluding the CFP selection committee, there was only one person who was not tied directly to either a university or the bowl games, and it was a VP at ESPN. Do you think there should be more direct media involvement on boards and committees, or no direct involvement, or fine the way it is? Why?

What's your opinion of the structure and the governance of college football and the CFP?

- There are a lot of committees when it comes to college football governance, from the NCAA to the CFP such as Football Oversight Committee, Division I Council, NCAA Board of Directors, Postseason Football Bowl Games Ad Hoc Working Group, College Football Playoff Board of Managers, the CFP Management Committee, the Football Bowl Association and the CFP Selection Committee, plus the Power 5 have their own autonomy. Do members of the media know enough about the inner workings of Division I college football and how does this affect reporting and covering Division I college football?
- What are your thoughts on the NCAA's role in Division I college football governance?
- If you could, how would you change the structure or the governance of the CFP?
- Should the Group of 5 administrators and presidents push for more inclusion of Group of 5 teams?
- Would having a second-tier tournament involving bowl games and Group of 5 teams ever be enacted? Why?
- How fair and equitable a system is the CFP for crowning a national champion? Why?
- What do you think are the largest obstacles preventing participation in the CFP for non-Power 5 schools (and most Power 5 schools for that matter)?
- Is college football fundamentally better with the CFP? Why?
- If you could look into the future, how would you describe the CFP in 20 years? Why?

With the CFP in place, are there now too many games in a college football season? Should there be more games? Fewer games? Why?

- If you had to guess what student-athletes prefer when it comes to the length of the season, what would they say about the number of games in the college football season?

What are your thoughts on college football being the biggest driver of revenue for athletic programs,

- The CFP is bringing in larger revenues every year for Division I institutions. Do you think revenues are increasing at a desirable pace, or is there money left on the table?
- Do you think there's too much money in the CFP and in college football overall?
- What is your opinion on paying players beyond the stipend in college football?
- Do you think it makes a difference in recruiting because larger schools are able to pay a larger stipend? Why?
- Along those lines, what are your thoughts on college football being a minor league for the NFL?

Regarding college football fans, how do you think they have accepted the CFP?

- What kind of feedback have you seen or heard of from fans on the CFP?
- Do you think fans have any power to change the CFP? Why?

- How do you think fans feel about the NCAA and other governing committees and boards?

What do you think of the notion of college sports being the front porch of a university?

- What do you think the purpose of collegiate sports is?
- Do you think collegiate sports should be used as a tool to drive greater numbers of students applying, funding, research, academic ranking, etc.? Why?
- If I told you that there may be a link between football success and higher academic ranking of universities, what would your reaction be?

Do you have any other thoughts regarding the CFP, college football, fans or the media that you would like to add?

Who do you think would be interested in discussing the CFP and answering these questions and who is affiliated in some way with the CFP?

Questions for semi-structured interview for former student-athletes

Could you please state your name, age, and current city of residence?

Can you tell me about your experience with the College Football Playoff (CFP)?

- Thinking about that experience, would you consider your opinion of the CFP as positive or negative and why?
- Is there a particular experience during your time at the CFP (or not at the CFP) that would typify your opinion of the CFP?

How do you think the CFP compares with historic ways of crowning a national champion before the CFP, i.e. the Bowl alliance, BCS, AP poll, etc.?

- Would you consider those previous efforts at crowning a national champion fair or equitable to all eligible universities? Why or why not?
- What do you consider to be the largest drivers of the evolution of crowning a national champion?

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- Do you think there's too much money in the CFP and in college football overall?
- What is your opinion on paying players beyond the stipend in college football?
- What do you think about increasing player stipends?
- Do you think it makes a difference in recruiting because larger schools are able to pay a larger stipend? Why?
- Along those lines, what are your thoughts on college football being a minor league for the NFL?

What's your opinion of the structure and the governance of college football and the CFP?

- There are a lot of committees when it comes to college football governance, from the NCAA to the CFP such as Football Oversight Committee, Division I Council, NCAA Board of Directors, Postseason Football Bowl Games Ad Hoc Working Group, College Football Playoff Board of Managers, the CFP Management Committee, the Football Bowl Association and the CFP Selection Committee, plus the Power 5 have their own autonomy. What do you think players know about this governing structure?
- What are your thoughts on the NCAA's role in Division I college football governance?
- If you could, how would you change the structure or the governance of the CFP?
- Should the Group of 5 administrators and presidents push for more inclusion of Group of 5 teams?
- Would having a second-tier tournament involving bowl games and Group of 5 teams ever be enacted? Why?
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The media seem to have a lot of power when it comes to logistics of the week-to-week and game-to-game scheduling, and even conference championships. Do you think that media that way has undue influence on college football?

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Regarding college football fans, how do you think they have accepted the CFP?

- What kind of feedback have you seen or heard of from fans on the CFP?
- Do you think fans have any power to change the CFP? Why?

- How do you think fans feel about the NCAA and other governing committees and boards?

What do you think of the notion of college sports being the front porch of a university?

- What do you think the purpose of collegiate sports is?
- Do you think collegiate sports should be used as a tool to drive greater numbers of students applying, funding, research, academic ranking, etc.? Why?
- If I told you that there may be a link between football success and higher academic ranking of universities, what would your reaction be?

Do you have any other thoughts regarding the CFP, college football, fans or the media that you would like to add?

Who do you think would be interested in discussing the CFP and answering these questions and who is affiliated in some way with the CFP?

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