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***Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Student-athlete perceptions on their NCAA postseason arrangement: A forced-choice certainty method survey approach***

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**Abstract**

The Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) continues to grow in popularity. However, the current system of selecting teams to play for the national championship remains a much-debated and controversial issue. The thoughts of university presidents, athletic directors, football coaches, and even United States congressmen regarding the current Bowl Championship Series (BCS) system are numerous and well-documented. However, the opinion of the actual participating student-athlete is generally absent within the popular and scholarly discussion. The purpose of this study was to investigate the views of active Division I FBS student-athletes regarding the BCS and post-season play through a forced-choice certainty survey. Specifically, a forced-choice certainty method survey approach was used to explore both the directional and certainty judgment of 79 football student-athletes in order to compare points of interest (i.e., BCS v. Playoff Alternatives). Statistical results from the study showed participants questioned the fundamental fairness of the current BCS system and generally would prefer a playoff system because the current BCS system does not produce a “true” champion in their opinion. Finally, this study importantly offers a serious attempt to begin collecting information on this topic from an understudied group important in college football.

The changing nature of the selection process and criteria of the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) has produced a variety of heated debates concerning the merits and fairness of the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) postseason arrangement. As an example, Seifried and Smith's (2011) investigation of U.S. Congressional hearings conducted between 2003 and 2009, Seifried's (2011, 2012) review of media literature pre-BCS (i.e., 1960-1999), and Southall, Southall, and Dwyer's (2009) examination of BCS broadcasts all discovered several consistent arguments and contrasting claims involving important stakeholders (e.g., athletic directors, conference commissioners, university presidents/chancellors, bowl representatives, and head coaches) associated with the operation and management of college football. Similarly, Oriard (2009), Sandbrook (2004), and Smith (2001) also criticized the operation of the Division I FBS postseason. Collectively, these works highlighted disagreements regarding the: a) logistical possibility of alternative postseason formats and their impact on student-athlete welfare; b) the financial discrepancy between BCS and non-BCS institutions under the BCS system versus alternative postseason arrangements; and c) the alleged bias and barriers the BCS selection process employed related to institutional missions.

Non-BCS schools (e.g., Mid-American Conference, Sun Belt, Western Athletic Conference, Mountain West Conference, and Conference-USA, along with Army and Navy) and their representatives (i.e., commissioners) expressed great dissatisfaction with their lack of a realistic opportunity to compete for a national title and the barriers they faced obtaining entry or invitation to one of the five BCS bowl games (Seifried & Smith, 2011; Seifried, 2011). BCS bowl games include the Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Orange Bowl, Fiesta Bowl, and the BCS National Championship Game. Non-BCS schools also criticized the payouts they received for BCS contests because they were significantly less than that provided to their BCS-charter member peers (e.g., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 12, Southeastern Conference, Big Ten, Pac-10, Big East, and Notre Dame) for participation in the same contest. As an example, Texas

Christian University (Mountain West) and Boise State University (Western Athletic) received bids to participate in 2010 Fiesta Bowl yet they were only paid \$9.8 million and \$7.8 million respectively for participation. BCS-charter conferences each secured over \$17.7 million for their participation in a single BCS game (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2010).

BCS representatives generally sympathized, entertained, and presumed the bowl tradition would be significantly injured or cease to exist if an alternative postseason format was implemented. They also noted a lack of bowl games or reduced interest in them would negatively impact host communities and the various charitable causes they serve. BCS supporters further challenged the notion that an alternative postseason arrangement would be better for the academic welfare of the student-athletes and promoted the possible logistical difficulties which might face members of their respective fan nations to attend contests under alternative postseason formats as entirely legitimate (Oriard, 2009; Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011).

To further illustrate the nature of this debate, the subjective ratings (i.e., Coaches and Harris Poll) and mathematical formulas (i.e., computer polls) utilized by the BCS also inflamed the various discussions (Buchman & Kadane, 2008; Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011; Stern, 2004). As the main sources of material to determine automatic and at-large selections available for any one of the five BCS bowl games, the BCS selection process provided only the University of Oregon (12-0) and Auburn University (13-0) the opportunity to play for the 2010 BCS national title, while another undefeated team (Texas Christian University 12-0) watched from afar. Previous years produced similar protests from enraged fans of both BCS and non-BCS schools not selected for the national title game and other BCS games. For instance, just one year before, the University of Alabama (13-0) met the University of Texas at Austin (13-0) for the 2009 BCS national title despite the fact several others (Boise State, 12-0, Texas Christian 12-0, and Cincinnati 12-0) produced similar undefeated records and deserved consideration. In 2008, both Boise State (12-0) and Texas Tech (11

1) also completed outstanding regular seasons but due to BCS rules and a perceived lack of marquee appeal both were left out of the BCS. Again, this episode seems to repeat annually.

Almost the entire debate concerning the Division I FBS postseason arrangement has emerged from *administrators and coaches* who compared the prospective benefits and negative consequences offered by various postseason formats against those provided by the unique bowl game experience. A collection of *student-athlete* opinions and their preferences is woefully absent and underdeveloped from previous discussions and studies (Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011). It should be noted that the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) did establish some committees to view the idea of a national tournament from the perspective of student-athletes during the past couple decades. For instance, in 1993 a group to study the feasibility of a Division I-A [FBS] Football Championship was established which surveyed ten student-athletes representing Division I-A [FBS] institutions (“Committee opposes football,” 1993).

Another attempt in March of 1994 surveyed 12 different student-athletes who also indicated they believed a national championship should be determined on the field. Then Executive Director of the NCAA Cedric W. Dempsey argued “In general, they [i.e., student-athletes] were positive about a national championship concept... to find out who’s the best” (“Student-athletes voice,” 1994, p. 1). In 2010, ESPN surveyed another 135 student-athletes from Division I FBS but that effort was hardly academic and asked just three basic questions which provided few comprehensible answers (“College football playoff confidential,” 2010). In the end, these investigations failed to provide an adequate supply of player opinions and structured/valid surveys to confidently report the collective view of the playoff topic from the student-athlete perspective.

Football student-athletes are an important group to survey due to their direct involvement in the core production of the BCS and any potential alternative postseason formats. They are also, as noted above, offered up as a group to protect academically and

physically from winning-centered coaches, administrators, donors, and alumni looking to possibly expose their talents for their own personal gain (Oriard, 2009; Seifried, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011). Recent dialogue created within the BCS showed a playoff may be in their future plans, with the most notable proposal supporting a four-team tournament (“BCS takes big step,” 2012).

The purpose of this paper serves to formally report valuable exploratory information from an important stakeholder group (i.e., FBS student-athletes) about the current Division I FBS postseason arrangement and possible alternatives (i.e., playoff). Specifically, active student-athletes were surveyed to capture their level of agreement with the BCS bowl system and the various potential alternative postseason formats from a logistical, financial, physical, and academic perspective. To begin the process of identifying the potential thoughts of all Division I FBS football student-athletes, the researchers chose a convenience sampling method and utilized a forced-choice certainty survey device to obtain important data which could be used to help begin the resolution of certain points regarding the BCS and playoff dilemma. As recent discussions show, the playoff may be in the near future of the BCS

### **Additional Literature Review**

In *Bowled over: Big-time college football from the sixties to the BCS era*, Michael Oriard (2009) wrote about his perspective as a former student-athlete at Notre Dame and the various reform movements supported within the NCAAs since the 1960s. Those reform items included discussions about freshman eligibility standards, institution admission baselines, separation of the NCAA into separate divisions (i.e., I FBS, I FCS, II, and III), and the implementation of the one-year renewable scholarship. Oriard’s book traced those watershed moments and their impact on the growth of Division I FBS football as a commercial product while simultaneously recognizing student-athletes as the core commodity used to generate revenue for institutions. Oriard fascinatingly argued that Division I FBS bowls games since the 1960s were also a product of this commercial environment and ultimately served to undermine

institutional academic missions through the support of entitlement and exploitation initiatives. In the end, Oriard suggested more work needs to be protect student-athletes and that their feedback needed to be included in the decision-making process regarding future change initiatives.

Ronald Smith (2001) in *Play-by-play: Radio, television and big-time college sport* famously reviewed college football media coverage and specifically the interaction between the NCAA and multiple television and radio broadcasting organizations. From this review, Smith argued a separation between Division I institutions of higher education within the NCAA (i.e., BCS and non-BCS institutions) resulted from television revenue. Furthermore, television dollars prompted the various reform movements mentioned above by Oriard and the exploration of bowl games and alternative postseason formats as comparable commercial products. Smith also focused much of his work on the perspectives of NCAA administrators and university leaders (e.g., chancellors and presidents) through their efforts to review the playoff idea but little comment was generated from the student-athlete perspective; they were only recognized as a group to protect within Smith's work.

Seifried and Smith's (2011) content analysis of U.S. Congressional hearings from 2003 to 2009 reviewed the perspectives of Congress and the Division I FBS administrators regarding the BCS and the prospective legitimacy of various postseason tournament formats. By focusing on the academic and physical welfare of student-athletes, logistical difficulties of various playoff scenarios, and the speculative damage to bowl communities, BCS administrators were positioned against the playoff idea. Non-BCS administrators differed from these thoughts by suggesting there were possible antitrust violations associated with the current BCS arrangement. An increasing financial gap was also proposed as occurring between FBS institutions along with recognition that the BCS selection process was fundamentally unfair and against the mission of the NCAA. Finally, non-BCS administrators argued the growth of technology and sport infrastructure would adequately serve to reduce any logistical or academic concerns regarding the

management of the playoff. Again, this document supported a new initiative to compare the competitive and anti-competitive aspects of each position. Furthermore, it highlighted the need to gather the opinion of the student-athlete because the voice of only one former student-athlete (i.e., Steve Young) was heard.

Other works by Seifried (2011, 2012) reviewed national media publications (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, etc.) and the *NCAA News* to communicate important information to justify the purpose and significance of this work. Specifically, Seifried showed the public record of 260 articles historically suggested athletic directors, school presidents, and coaches regularly favored the implementation of a playoff since the 1960s but they regularly disagreed about which arrangement would be best. The range of preferences offered by those groups varied from the small (i.e., four-team) to the very large (i.e., 32) with the four, eight, and sixteen team tournament emerging as the most popular. Student-athletes were noticeably missing as only seven articles recorded their opinions from 1960 to 1998 (Seifried, 2011, 2012).

Finally, John Sandbrook's (2004) *Division I-A postseason football history and status*, produced for the Knight Commission, provided an excellent historical review of the growth of bowl games while simultaneously providing important data to support those who favored a playoff. For example, Sandbrook promoted the bowl games and their host communities as creating a partnership with college institutions through focusing on the guaranteed payouts provided by those events. Next, Sandbrook presented information related to administrator perspectives on denying the playoff over the years such as that offered above. A variety of financial, television, sponsorship, scheduling, and academic data was used to support the traditional pro-bowl tradition perspective. However, new ideas which focused on the growth of technology and support services offered by academic institutions were also included to help pro-playoff supporters. This ultimately prompted Sandbrook to suggest that there is a need to review the potential of a playoff from the core stakeholder (i.e., student-athlete and coaches) perspective in order to

manage future challenges regarding the NCAA Division I FBS postseason arrangement.

### **Method**

Koriat, Nussinson, Bless, and Shaked (2008) noted researchers should expect controversial questions which prompt different comparative considerations to demonstrate the most diverse results with regard to certainty. Moreover, if individuals express their opinion truthfully, it should be expected that traditional likert-based rating systems may not accurately summarize collective opinions of a greater group (Bargagliotti & Li, 2009). Smyth, Smyth, Dillman, Christian, & Stern (2006) and Sudman, Bradburn, & Schwarz (1996) suggested opinion-based questions, such as those based on this topic, required more consideration by respondents before they make a decision or judgment. McCarty and Shrum (2000) discovered when values “are not contrasted and psychological anchors are not encouraged... respondents show less discrimination among values” (p. 294-295).

Several other scholars similarly identified a lack of forced differentiation through the opportunity to use personal anchor points of information diminishes the usefulness of some instruments to study important research questions (Greenleaf, Bickart, & Yorkston, 1999; Rossiter, 2002; Sharma & Weathers, 2003; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008; Weijters, Cabooter, & Schillewaert, 2010). McCarty and Shrum (2000) and Bargagliotti and Li (2009) suggested the measurement of ratings scales thus could be improved and that researchers should search to achieve this task. Smyth, et al. (2006) and Dillman, Smyth, Christian, & Stern (2003) offered forced-choice method formats, such as the one used in this study, as one preferred option. Specifically, Warren, Klonglan, & Sabri (1969) and Smyth et al. (2006) argued for the forced-choice methods because it requires respondents to consider questions individually through the options provided; thus, the forced-choice certainty method encourages greater cognitive attention and discourages satisficing. Studying the confidence or certainty in people’s beliefs through their personal anchor points is also important because it also



shows the likelihood of whether or not beliefs will be converted into behavior (Gill, Swann, & Silvera, 1998; Goldsmith & Koriat, 2008; Hall, Ariss, & Todorov, 2007). Surveying Division I FBS student-athletes is one valuable activity because they are part of the core product (i.e., postseason football contests) and they can provide great insight about barriers to an alternative postseason format centered on their academic and physical well-being and the possible logistical concerns regarding participation.

To complete this study, student-athletes from a charter-member BCS conference or program (e.g., Big Ten, SEC, ACC, Big East, Big 12, or Pac-10) were selected and surveyed to capture their level of agreement along with the strength of their conviction on the fairness, commercialization, academic/physical welfare, and format preference of the BCS and other postseason formats. Participation in this survey was promoted to the Division I FBS student-athletes as a desire to learn more about the issue from their perspective to help the decision-makers of college football regarding this topic of public debate. The future of the playoff alternative is best served if the perspective of the student-athlete is taken into consideration. Again, as noted above, little to no formal work or public record exists regarding the collective thoughts of this special group.

The investigators provided the survey instrument along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the research to football student-athletes at a large Division I FBS program following full approval from the institution's human subjects review board during their annual spring football team meeting. The final instrument contained statements to collect insight about their expectations, motivations, and satisfaction regarding the current BCS arrangement and/or potential alternative postseason formats. Of the original 85 student-athletes attending the meeting, the researchers were able to successfully recruit 79 to complete the whole survey. This number represents a 92.9% response rate and was considered satisfactory for the exploratory nature of this study. Only the fifth year seniors participating in this survey played in a bowl game that was not one of the five BCS contests. All other survey respondents played only in BCS contests. The number of BCS bowl game opportunities enjoyed

by these individuals hypothetically presented this group as possibly the most favorable toward the current BCS and bowl postseason arrangement. Final analyses were also conducted to determine if there were differences in opinions based on academic rank and racial background.

A researcher-designed instrument was employed in data collection and based off of previous work initially designed by Cieslak (2009) during his review of Division I FBS coaches opinions. The modified player-focused instrument included 33 items and was reviewed for content validity by two experts noted for their interest in Division I FBS postseason activities. Each statement was carefully edited in an attempt to assure for correct meaning. The number of response categories chosen for the level of certainty scale included five because it was identified as one of the most popular formats (Weijters, et al., 2010). The instrument followed the Maxim of Quantity Method which “directs those communicating to provide all relevant information but to avoid redundancy” and to provide no more/less information than needed (Dillman et al., 2003, p.5). The researchers recognized the respondents as individuals with sufficient background information about each of the questions and the main topic of the study. Thus, as recommended by Smyth, et al. (2006) and Weijters, et al. (2010), this work used both positive and negative statements in the questionnaire to prevent a failure to read each item.

The forced-choice certainty method prompted the respondent to choose an option among alternatives and assign a value to that response (i.e., 1-5). The number assigned to the provided stimuli does not assume an equal difference between response values. In essence, the forced-choice certainty method provided opportunities to respondents to agree/disagree and to express their opinion toward the middle or end of a continuum. Thus, those with polarized disagreements can express this more readily and intensely than typical Likert scale formats. The availability of an extra response category allowed respondents in this survey instrument to differentiate their responses from others through the expression of agreement/disagreement and level of certainty. It honors the call of Weijters, et al. (2010) who suggested researchers need to allow

respondents the opportunity to provide variation without damaging the *valences* of success and failure. Thus, those agreeing with statements will vary on their certainty, but not toward their decision to agree. Interestingly, this set-up also allowed the use of standard deviations, chi-squares, and p-values to report statistical information. Chi-squares were included in this evaluation because they provide an association between proportions and p-values were used to show the difference between extreme responses.

The forced-choice certainty method further served to eliminate potential bias that might occur with simple forced-choice instruments because it did not guide respondents to a specific answer to which they may or may not be committed (Benzing & Christ, 1997). In this study, each individual used the response scale with some sort of frame of reference or anchor point (i.e., personally or situationally determined). Also in this case, the response set demonstrated the individuals' response variability on the issue of the BCS arrangement and potential postseason alternatives. Koriat (2008) argued forced-choice questions are mediated by familiarity to the item in question and that familiarity and accessibility to items typically yield high correlations and confidence to selections.

Finally, we chose a non-probability convenience sample of student-athletes at the institution in spring 2009 because it acted as a powerful method to gather important information from a specific and generally difficult to recruit population (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Gratton and Jones (2010) pointed out non-probability convenience samples appear suitable for exploratory research, which aims to generate new thoughts and perspectives on a phenomenon. Trochim and Donnelly (2007) and others also promoted the efficiency of non-probability sampling through a convenience sample when the proportionality of a population is not a major concern and there is evident homogeneity within the group (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Salant & Dillman, 1994). Although generalization to all Division I FBS members is not likely permitted here, the high interconnectedness of many programs (e.g., coaches and players working/playing for or with other coaches and players) and strength of the football culture suggests many Division I FBS participants

will similarly view this topic and thus the outcome presents a good base for future research endeavors on this topic.

## **Results**

### *Respondents*

Of the 79 football student-athlete respondents, 40 were juniors ( $n = 20$ ) or seniors ( $n = 20$ ), while 11 were freshman and 13 were sophomores (1 was a graduate student and 15 did not report their academic rank). The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 26, with a mean of 20.5 ( $SD=1.41$ ). The vast majority of the respondents were Caucasian ( $n = 38$ ; 48.1%) and Black ( $n = 20$ ; 25.3%). Fifteen did not report their ethnicity.

### *Findings*

The survey instrument was broken into two sections. In the first section, respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with a series of statements on BCS issues, including items on fairness, commercialization, academic/physical welfare, and format preference (see Table 1).

Table 1: Agreement/Disagreement and Certainty on Fairness, Commercialization, Academics, and Format Preference

	Agree	Certainty	Disagree	Certainty	Significance
<b>Fairness</b>					
There is a problem with the BCS selection process utilized by Division I (FBS) football to determine a national champion.	54 (69.2%)	3.80 (1.17)	24 (30.8%)	3.33 (1.20)	.114
The current BCS system produces a "true" undisputed national champion.	18 (22.8%)	3.41 (1.00)	61 (77.2%)	3.72 (1.21)	.339
The BCS selection process is equally fair to the 11 Division I (FBS) football conferences.	24 (30.4%)	3.30 (1.11)	55 (69.6%)	3.78 (1.03)	.072
Charter BCS institutions/conferences (i.e., ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, SEC, Pac-10) enjoy a favorable position on obtaining a BCS game versus other institutions/conferences (i.e., non-charter BCS like WAC, MAC, MWC, C-USA, and Sun Belt).	68 (86.1%)	3.78 (1.26)	11 (13.9%)	3.27 (.79)	.200
Pre season and early season polls/rankings <b>do not</b> bias the non-charter conferences (WAC, Mountain West, Sun Belt, Conference USA, MAC) from equally obtaining/securing the opportunity to earn a position in the BCS.	38 (48.1%)	3.39 (1.13)	41 (51.9%)	3.56 (1.14)	.517
All 120 Division I (FBS) football teams <b>do not</b> enjoy a "real" chance to secure a BCS National Title Game opportunity.	57 (72.2%)	4.02 (1.18)	22 (27.8%)	3.14 (.73)	.002**
The traditional BCS schools <b>are not</b> more likely to obtain most of the financial rewards associated with BCS bowl participation.	27 (34.2%)	3.44 (1.40)	52 (65.8%)	3.34 (1.12)	.721
Less controversy would exist if the selection procedures used to choose the BCS participants were similar to the NCAA men's basketball selection process.	57 (72.2%)	3.42 (1.21)	22 (27.8%)	3.68 (1.21)	.393

## Seifried and Turner

<b>Commercialization</b>					
The current BCS system does <b>not</b> produce important, intriguing, and quality match-ups.	13 (16.5%)	3.62 (1.39)	66 (83.5%)	3.65 (1.10)	.918
I see great commercial appeal/possibilities associated with an NCAA Division I (FBS) football tournament.	65 (82.3%)	3.65 (1.19)	14 (17.7%)	3.43 (1.34)	.546
I believe our school would enjoy an advantage hosting a playoff game at our home site.	66 (84.6%)	4.03 (1.15)	12 (15.4%)	3.58 (.90)	.206
I <b>do not</b> believe fans of my school/team would travel to an away site multiple weeks to follow our team in a playoff format.	16 (20.3%)	3.38 (1.26)	63 (79.7%)	4.17 (.99)	.008**
I favor using current existing bowl sites for the postseason playoff tournament.	51 (64.6%)	3.55 (1.21)	28 (35.4%)	3.50 (1.29)	.867
Currently, there are 34-bowl games following the conclusion of the football season. In addition to a playoff/tournament, I believe most of these bowl games could occur as scheduled.	55 (69.6%)	3.29 (1.27)	24 (30.4%)	3.38 (1.31)	.790
<b>Academic</b>					
As a student-athlete, I would worry about missing class to participate in a playoff.	27 (34.2%)	3.44 (1.34)	52 (65.8%)	4.02 (1.21)	.058
As a student-athlete, I would worry about taking finals during the week of a playoff.	39 (49.4%)	3.59 (1.21)	40 (50.6%)	4.08 (1.12)	.068
As a student-athlete, I could perform well in the classroom and on finals during participation in a playoff.	52 (65.8%)	3.50 (1.31)	27 (34.2%)	3.81 (1.20)	.317
Regular season competition should revert back to an 11-game season.	49 (62.0%)	3.49 (1.33)	30 (38.0%)	3.20 (1.03)	.310

## FBS Student-athlete perspective

<b>Format Preference</b>					
The NCAA should organize the Division I (FBS) national championship over a BCS title game.	54 (68.4%)	3.70 (1.18)	25 (31.6%)	3.28 (1.37)	.162
Division I (FBS) football could utilize a playoff system/structure similar to high school, intercollegiate (Division I (FCS), II and III) and professional football.	61 (77.2%)	3.98 (1.22)	18 (22.8%)	3.39 (1.15)	.069
I prefer a football playoff in addition to the current/established minor bowl games and as a replacement for the 10-team BCS bowl arrangement.	52 (65.8%)	3.73 (1.22)	27 (34.2%)	3.22 (1.31)	.091
I prefer a playoff in addition to the current minor bowl structure and the four BCS Bowl games (i.e., Pasadena-Rose Bowl, Miami-Orange Bowl, Glendale- Fiesta Bowl, and New Orleans- Sugar Bowl).	48 (60.8%)	3.60 (1.16)	31 (39.2%)	3.00 (1.39)	.040*
Home field advantage should be awarded to the higher seeded (ranked) team throughout the playoffs; then, the national title game played at a neutral site? Similar to Division I (FCS), II and III playoff systems.	58 (73.4%)	3.67 (1.24)	21 (26.6%)	3.29 (1.10)	.221
I prefer to host a playoff game as the higher seeded team during the initial round(s) as a reward for my team's regular season performance.	64 (81.0%)	3.70 (1.18)	15 (19.0%)	3.60 (1.18)	.761
I would play in a bowl game following a 1 <sup>st</sup> round loss in any playoff format, if that was available.	59 (75.6%)	3.57 (1.33)	19 (24.4%)	3.47 (.96)	.774

Note: Significance denotes the difference in certainty between those who agree and those who disagree with each statement.

The second section included multiple choice items about specific preferences for post-season play in football (see Table 2).

Table 2: Specific Preferences for Post-season Play

	Choice	Certainty	Significance
I prefer the following type of playoff system/structure:			
a. No playoff	16 (20.5%)	3.47 (1.25)	.397
b. 4-team	1 (1.3%)	3.00 (.00)	
c. 8-team	14 (17.9%)	4.29 (1.14)	
d. 12-team	15 (19.2%)	3.80 (.68)	
e. 16-team	32 (41.0%)	3.88 (1.31)	
Who should be responsible for organizing the postseason tournament/playoff?			
a. NCAA	40 (50.6%)	3.73 (1.20)	.426
b. BCS	26 (32.9%)	3.28 (1.10)	
c. Outside/Independent Selection Committee	6 (7.6%)	3.67 (.52)	
d. None of the above	6 (7.6%)	3.17 (1.84)	
Who should be responsible for selecting teams in a playoff?			
a. NCAA	42 (53.2%)	3.49 (1.12)	.427
b. BCS	25 (31.6%)	3.28 (1.31)	
c. Outside/Independent Selection Committee	5 (6.3%)	4.20 (.84)	
d. Fans/Spectators of College Football	1 (1.3%)	2.00 (.00)	
e. None of the above	5 (6.3%)	3.4 (1.67)	
Teams that qualify for the playoffs should be selected and seeded (especially the "at-large" teams) for the tournament by _____.			
a. NCAA Selection Committee	42 (54.5%)	3.59 (1.16)	.976
b. BCS Criteria/Finish	35 (45.5%)	3.59 (1.16)	
I prefer to play in:			
a. BCS bowl game (non-title)	33 (42.9%)	3.63 (1.16)	.872
b. Playoff game	44 (57.1%)	3.67 (1.05)	
I prefer to play in:			
a. NCAA Organized/Sponsored National Championship	34 (44.7%)	4.09 (1.13)	.122
b. BCS Title Game	42 (55.3%)	3.66 (1.18)	

Note: Significance denotes the difference in certainty between each group.

For both sections, respondents were also asked to indicate their level of certainty. The following information will unveil and explore the results for each area.

*Fairness.* Overall, football student-athletes in this study questioned the fairness of the current BCS system. Specifically, a majority agreed that: 1) Charter BCS institutions/ conferences (e.g., ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, SEC, Pac-10) enjoy a favorable position on obtaining a BCS game versus other institutions/conferences (86.1%); 2) All 120 Division I (FBS) football teams do not enjoy a "real" chance to secure a BCS National Title Game opportunity (72.2%); 3) Less controversy would exist if the selection procedures used to choose the BCS participants were similar to the NCAA men's basketball selection process (72.2%);



and 4) There is a problem with the BCS selection process utilized by Division I FBS football to determine a national champion (69.2%). Next, respondents disagreed with the statements: 1) The current BCS system produces a "true" undisputed national champion (77.2%); 2) The BCS selection process is equally fair to the 11 Division I FBS football conferences (69.6%); and 3) The traditional BCS schools are not more likely to obtain most of the financial rewards associated with BCS bowl participation (65.8%). Finally, responses were mixed for the statement "Preseason and early season polls/rankings do not bias the non-charter conferences (Western Athletic, Mountain West, Sun Belt, Conference USA, Mid-American) from equally obtaining/securing the opportunity to earn a position in the BCS", with 48.1% ( $n = 38$ ) agreeing and 51.9% ( $n = 41$ ) disagreeing. Only one item ("All 120 Division I (FBS) football teams do not enjoy a "real" chance to secure a BCS National Title Game opportunity") produced a significant difference in certainty between those who agreed ( $M = 4.02$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ) and those who disagreed ( $M = 3.14$ ;  $SD = .73$ ),  $t(75) = -3.17$ ,  $p = .002$ .

*Commercialization.* Six items were included to assess the respondent's feelings on commercialization. A majority of them agreed with the following statements: 1) I believe our school would enjoy an advantage hosting a playoff game at our home site (84.6%); 2) I see great commercial appeal/possibilities associated with an NCAA Division I (FBS) football tournament (82.3%); 3) Currently, there are 34-bowl games following the conclusion of the football season. In addition to a playoff/tournament, I believe most of these bowl games could occur as scheduled (69.6%); and 4) I favor using current existing bowl sites for the postseason playoff/tournament (64.6%). Similarly, they disagreed with the following two negatively-worded statements: 1) The current BCS system does not produce important, intriguing, and quality match-ups (83.5%); and 2) I do not believe fans of my school/team would travel to an away site multiple weeks to follow our team in a playoff format (79.7%).

That last statement was the only one that produced a significant difference in level of certainty between those who agreed

( $M = 3.38$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ) and those who disagreed ( $M = 4.17$ ;  $SD = .99$ ),  $t(77) = 2.72$ ,  $p = .008$ .

*Academics/Physical Welfare.* A majority of football student-athletes (62%) in this study would like to see the regular season reduced back to 11 games. There were mixed opinions on taking final exams during the week if a playoff system was created, with 40 respondents (50.6%) saying they would worry about their exams and 39 (49.4%) saying they would not worry about them. However, 52 respondents (65.8%) felt they could still perform well in the classroom and on finals during participation in a playoff. Finally, only 27 respondents (34.2%) would worry about missing class to participate in a playoff. There were no significant differences in level of certainty between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the academic items.

*Format Preference.* In general, respondents would like to see a playoff in Division I FBS. Specifically, they agreed with the following statements: 1) Division I (FBS) football could utilize a playoff system/structure similar to high school, intercollegiate (Division I (FCS), II and III) and professional football (77.2%); 2) The NCAA should organize the Division I (FBS) national championship over a BCS title game (68.4%); 3) I prefer a football playoff in addition to the current/established minor bowl games and as a replacement for the 10-team BCS bowl arrangement (65.8%); and 4) I prefer a playoff in addition to the current minor bowl structure and the four BCS Bowl games (60.8%). Respondents also strongly agreed with two items regarding home field advantage in the playoffs: 1) I prefer to host a playoff game as the higher seeded team during the initial round(s) as a reward for my team's regular season performance (81%); and 2) Home field advantage should be awarded to the higher seeded (ranked) team throughout the playoffs; then, the national title game played at a neutral site (73.4%). Interestingly, 59 respondents (75.6%) said they would play in a bowl game following a 1st round loss in a playoff format (if that was available). Respondents who agreed ( $M = 3.60$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ) with the statement "I prefer a playoff in addition to the current minor bowl

structure and the four BCS Bowl games” were significantly more certain than those who disagreed ( $M = 3.00$ ;  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $t(77) = -2.01$ ,  $p = .04$ .

*Specific Preferences for Post-Season Play.* Only 16 (20.5%) of the respondents did not support a playoff system for Division I FBS football. Of the remaining 62 respondents, 32 of them preferred a 16-team playoff. Interestingly, only one respondent preferred a four team playoff, a system that many stakeholder groups proposed throughout the history of this debate and has been recently promoted within the BCS (“BCS takes big step,” 2012; Seifried, 2011, 2012). Additionally, 44 respondents (57.1%) preferred playing in a playoff game (as opposed to a non-title BCS game). However, when given the choice of playing in an NCAA organized/sponsored National Championship playoff or the BCS National Championship Game, a slight majority ( $n = 42$ ; 55.3%) chose the latter. Finally, while the NCAA is not currently involved with post-season play at the FBS level, nor part of the BCS proposal, just over half of the respondents ( $n = 40$ ; 50.6%) felt they should be responsible for organizing the post-season tournament/playoff and 42 (53.2%) felt they should be responsible for selecting the participating teams.

*Differences by Academic Rank and Race.* Those reporting their academic rank included 11 freshmen, seven sophomores, 20 juniors, and 20 seniors. Because there was only one graduate student, responses from this respondent were dropped from these analyses. Regarding race, since 60.3% ( $n = 38$ ) of the 63 respondents who reported their ethnicity were Caucasian, 31.7% ( $n = 20$ ) were Black, and only 7.9% ( $n = 5$ ) were Asian-American, Hispanic, Native-American, or other, it was decided to dichotomize this variable (i.e., White/non-White).

There were three items where respondents differed significantly with regard to academic rank. The largest difference based on rank was the item “I believe our school would enjoy an advantage hosting a playoff game at our home site”,  $\chi^2(4) = 12.10$ ,  $p$

= .017. All 20 seniors agreed with this statement, while only 63.6% ( $n = 7$ ) of the freshmen agreed. Similarly, 63.6% ( $n = 7$ ) of the freshmen and 69.2% ( $n = 9$ ) of the sophomores disagreed with the statement “I do not believe fans of my school/team would travel to an away site multiple weeks to follow our team in a playoff format”, while 95% ( $n = 19$ ) of the seniors and 90% ( $n = 18$ ) of the juniors disagreed,  $\chi^2(4) = 11.43$ ,  $p = .022$ . Finally, there was a significant difference in the preference for playing in a non-title BCS bowl game or a playoff game,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.11$ ,  $p = .039$ . Eighty-five percent ( $n = 17$ ) of the seniors preferred playing in a playoff game, while freshmen ( $n = 6$ ; 54.5%), sophomores ( $n = 7$ ; 58.3%), and juniors ( $n = 11$ ; 55%) all preferred playing in a non-title BCS bowl game.

White and non-White football student-athlete respondents differed on four items in the study. The largest difference was in the item “I do not believe fans of my school/team would travel to an away site multiple weeks to follow our team in a playoff format”,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.89$ ,  $p = .002$ . All but 2 of the White respondents ( $n = 36$ ; 94.7%) disagreed with the statement, while 64% ( $n = 16$ ) of the Non-Whites disagreed. There was also a significant disagreement for the item “The BCS selection process is equally fair to the 11 Division I (FBS) football conferences”,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.83$ ,  $p = .028$ . Both groups disagreed with the statement, but a significantly higher percentage of White respondents ( $n = 31$ ; 81.6%) disagreed than non-Whites ( $n = 14$ ; 56%). Additionally, a significantly higher percentage of White respondents ( $n = 35$ ; 92.1%) agreed with the statement “I believe our school would enjoy an advantage hosting a playoff game at our home site” than non-White respondents ( $n = 18$ ; 72%),  $\chi^2(1) = 4.57$ ,  $p = .033$ . Finally, there was a significant difference for the item “The current BCS system does not produce important, intriguing, and quality match-ups”,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.51$ ,  $p = .034$ . Again, both groups disagreed with this statement, but non-White respondents ( $n = 17$ ; 68%) did so at a significantly lower rate than White respondents ( $n = 34$ ; 89.5%).

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

This forced-choice certainty method research endeavor uniquely investigated the perspectives of Division I FBS student-athletes related to the BCS and playoff debate currently raging. The four main components of this effort focused on fairness, commercialization, academic/physical welfare, and format preference as they were generally the most recognized issues in previous debates held by other important stakeholder groups of college football (Oriard, 2009; Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011). First, the football student-athletes surveyed generally questioned the fundamental fairness of the current BCS system with a high level of certainty. This follows similar results produced by Seifried and Smith (2011) and Seifried (2011, 2012) who demonstrated that many congressional leaders, coaches, administrators, and fan nations also questioned the legitimacy of the current BCS agreement versus other alternative postseason formats. As an example, Senators and Representatives expressed their concern with the current postseason arrangement by acknowledging a better way to establish a National Champion and to ensure equality and/or equity (i.e., fundamental fairness) for all Division I FBS participants must exist. Specifically, Senators Joe Biden (Democrat-Delaware) and Orrin Hatch (Republican- Utah) noted the “principle of fairness” was violated because non-BCS schools, in particular, did not enjoy a realistic shot to play for the national championship (“BCS or Bust,” 2003, p. 3). They also expressed non-BCS schools experienced tremendous difficulty just getting a bid to BCS contests that their BCS-charter peers did not have to endure.

Representative Cliff Stearns (Republican- Florida) identified the computer rankings, coaches polls, and conference schedules as part of a “fuzzy” calculation system, which regularly eliminated deserving BCS and non-BCS schools from the title game and BCS contests (“Determining a champion,” 2005, p.2). Craig Thompson (Commissioner- Mountain West Conference) offered similar criticism regarding the BCS ranking system and the selection criteria/process all schools must endure to secure a BCS bid (“Hearings on BCS,” 2009). Questions about the reputational

legitimacy of the BCS as the best method to discover a national champion also emerged previously from Sandbrook (2004). Overall, six computer rankings, the *USA Today*/ESPN coaches' poll, and Harris poll each represent one-third of the collective BCS ranking system.

Again, in this study, a vast majority of the participating student-athletes strongly suggested the current BCS model did not produce a "true" undisputed champion, provided a favorable position to BCS-charter members to secure financial rewards and postseason opportunities, and believed that less controversy would exist under a different selection process. Procedures similar to those used by the NCAA men's basketball selection process were accepted by the survey participants as one method to produce less controversy. Craig Thompson agreed with this notion at a 2009 Congressional hearing by arguing for a national tournament that used performance-based standards to select and seed teams ("Hearing on BCS," 2009). Thompson, former chair of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee in 1999, positioned the football selection committee for Division I FBS, like the NCAA uses for the basketball tournament, as possible and necessary to help identify a champion based on results. Thompson suggested the NCAA selection committee idea presented the Division I FBS with a good model because it assured representation in the tournament would be based on merit, not popularity which the BCS bowls admittedly used to offer many of their bids ("BCS Media Guide," 2011).

It should be noted that currently the NCAA does not manage the Division I bowl system but simply certifies their location to host ("BCS Media Guide," 2011). The BCS was created through an alliance between bowl game organizers/committees, automatic qualifying institutions, and television networks to form the premier bowl event which also includes a national championship contest ("BCS Media Guide," 2011). However, the NCAA sponsors and manages several other football championship events at the Division I FCS, II, and III levels which utilize similar selection processes to the basketball tournament. Thus, the idea that the NCAA could create a playoff bracket and manage that event is not incredible or

logistically impossible as some opponents of a national tournament suggested.

With great certainty, survey respondents overwhelmingly supported a playoff over the BCS and that the NCAA could utilize a format similar to high school, intercollegiate (Division I FCS, II and III) and professional football organizations to produce a national tournament. The 8, 12, and 16-team formats were all preferred over the 4-team format with the 16-team emerging as the most preferred by participants. The mean score of all playoff preferences also received significant certainty from respondents. Again, previous literature showed similar results. For instance, Seifried's (2011, 2012) historical analysis of administrative stakeholder perspectives (e.g., presidents, commissioners, athletic directors) and coaches on alternative postseason formats from the 1960s through the 1990s showed the 4, 8, and 16-team playoff as the most commonly supported. Seifried and Smith's (2011) content analysis on congressional hearing transcripts also demonstrated that multiple game formats such as the 8 and 16-team playoff gained significant support. As an example, the 8-team playoff format generated significant debate after Craig Thompson pitched the idea in April 2009.

Interestingly, the survey respondents preferred playing in a playoff to a non-title BCS game, thus supporting earlier indications that they would rather settle claims for number one on the field. The participants also indicated they would enjoy and accept the opportunity to go to a bowl game and participate in those traditions if they got eliminated from a playoff. This, along with their strong belief that most bowl game traditions could survive the introduction of a playoff, suggests to administrators that their worries related to missed fundraising opportunities, commonly associated bowl participation, could be reduced because those bowl games would still be glorified exhibition events like they are today (Seifried, 2011, 2012). The interest that student-athletes demonstrated in preserving the bowl system along with their confidence in the bowls and playoff coexisting matches the thoughts of other important stakeholders who also argued that the bowls may need to adapt to future conditions to

survive (Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011). As an example, John Junker (Former Chief Executive Officer and President- Fiesta Bowl) stated during a 2005 congressional hearing that he felt his business (i.e., bowls) would need to respond to

market preferences of the college football fan nation to continue survival (“Determining a champion,” 2005). Specifically, Junker acknowledged the bowls may not be the best postseason arrangement to service fan preferences or maximize commercial outcomes.

The student-athletes also presented stimulating results on the logistical arrangement of the playoff. For example, Schwenk’s (2000) axioms of delayed confrontation and sincerity rewarded are respected by survey participants through their strong preference for home field advantage being awarded to the higher seeded teams as a reward for regular season performance. Seniors and juniors more frequently and confidently agreed this arrangement would provide their team with an advantage than freshman and sophomores. This difference may be due to the fact that freshman and sophomores are generally lower on the depth chart and thus likely do not play as much as seniors and juniors. The lack of playing time could lead them to be less influenced by the crowd and home field conditions than their peers.

Another rather interesting result from this study discovered, despite their preferences for a playoff, a slight majority of student-athletes would prefer playing in a BCS National Championship Game over a NCAA organized/sponsored national tournament and seniors differed greatly from all others in the acceptance of a playoff game over a non-title BCS game appearance. There could be several reasons for these findings. For example, student-athletes are typically rewarded with a ‘swag’ bag which includes a variety of unique gifts for their bowl participation. The NCAA allows student-athletes to receive gifts up to \$500 from the various bowl games in addition to another \$350 worth of items from their home conferences for bowl participation. Thus, it is possible that student-athletes prefer the BCS National Title Game simply because they want these items and know



they would not receive such items for participation in an NCAA managed event. Non-seniors would likely prefer the non-BCS bowl bid simply to acquire stuff rather than mark out their legacy. Seniors from the participating institution also enjoyed involvement in BCS games for a majority of their career, thus they may have acquired many of the items typically offered by those bowl brands.

Non-seniors may also differ from seniors for academic and physical reasons. For instance, as they approach the end of their academic career, seniors generally take courses more applicable to their career interests; furthermore they learned the skills necessary for them to complete courses and better manage their classes. They also likely developed better study, eating, and workout habits than their underclass counterparts through the help of student-athlete academic services, athletic training, and strength and conditioning coaches. Thus, seniors should be less hesitant about participating in a playoff simply because they are better prepared to succeed in the classroom and understand how to maintain their physical health. Seniors may be less vulnerable to outside distractions that may affect their commitment to college and the attention their body requires. Again, although roughly half of the participants indicated they would worry about taking final exams in a playoff system, almost two-thirds of the total respondents suggested they felt like they would perform well in the classroom during the stretch run of a semester/quarter and pass their final exams. This information suggests that seniors significantly impacted the outcome of this question and further suggests student-athlete academic services departments will be critical to help student-athletes survive and flourish in a national tournament.

Academically, missing class did not emerge as a major concern for most respondents but the physical impact of that possible event was noted. We suspect this response likely surfaced because football players generally miss the least amount of playing time already among NCAA sports and any acceptable playoff scenario would probably take place during weekend days and during the holiday season when classes do not meet. Overall, the academic welfare component of many anti-playoff arguments may be defeated

through this work. For further information on student-athlete academic services effectiveness we recommend Adler (2008), Martin, Harrison, Stone, and Lawrence (2010), and Steiner (2010).

Besides academic and physical confidence, the survey respondents also finally indicated they felt confident in the great commercial appeal/possibilities that would be produced and associated with the establishment of an NCAA Division I FBS football tournament. This notion that the playoff would be respected and popular among the various college football fan nations can also be seen through the comments of John Sandbrook and Representative Lee Terry who suggested that the BCS system left out deserving teams who could play well in front of a national audience (“Determining a champion,” 2005; Sandbrook, 2004).

Student-athletes in this survey overwhelmingly acknowledged the BCS produced intriguing and quality match-ups with great confidence, but again the sum of this work demonstrated they also believe a national tournament would create a greater spectacle which they anticipate would be greatly consumed by the various college football fan nations. Respondents supported this position by strongly indicating that they believe their fans would travel to away sites over multiple weeks to follow their team. The strength of the belief should be taken seriously because football student-athletes are frequently privy to the pulse of their fan nation and understand the strength of their commitment.

James Duderstadt (President of the University of Michigan from 1987 to 1996) also indicated a possible 16-team playoff could easily produce an estimated \$3 to \$4 billion over several years to support the idea that a playoff would be a commercial success and that fans would travel under a multiple-game format (Duderstadt, 2003). Jim Delany (Commissioner- Big Ten Conference) and John Swofford (Commissioner- ACC) also accepted that point on several occasions (“Competition in college,” 2003; “Determining a champion,” 2005; “Bowl Championship Series,” 2009). Several others also argued for this point because the BCS bowl games increasing produced lower television ratings in recent years

(Seifried, 2011, 2012; Seifried & Smith, 2011). In essence, they, like student-athletes, recognized college football consumers desire more.

Finally, this work supported the forced-choice certainty method as a survey device to obtain the true perspective of individuals on an issue of public debate. For example, as a group generally ignored by the producers of college sport, speculation regarding the possible negative academic and physical impact of an alternative postseason format has been regularly supported by BCS advocates. This study indicated student-athletes feel confident they would perform well under a multi-game playoff format during finals and the stretch run of their academic quarter/semester. Preference for a larger playoff format (i.e., greater than 4) emerged to support this position and that student-athletes, like the general population, want to settle who is best on the field through an arrangement which included all qualified institutions, not just a privileged few. Student-athletes also importantly communicated that they felt their fans would enjoy a multi-game playoff format. Furthermore, they believed their fans would travel under to watch them play. This indicates consumer confidence in a playoff, from their perspective, is strong and that a playoff would be commercially attractive at the gate as well as with television. This study also communicated that respect for the bowl system is still strong but this may be due more to the gifts provided than concerns for physical or academic well-being. Overall, the forced-choice certain method appeared to encourage cognitive attention to questions and thus appeared to reduce confirmation bias because deeper consideration on every item discouraged satisficing. Furthermore, we advocate it as a method researchers should use to further explore the collective opinions on the topic by student-athletes of Division IFBS and other research questions which present comparative considerations.

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