Students’ Reasons for Supporting a Move from FCS to FBS

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On June 10, 2010 the University of Colorado announced its intentions to leave the Big XII Conference and join the Pacific Ten Conference (ESPN.com, 2010). One day later, the University of Nebraska announced it was leaving the Big XII Conference to join the Big Ten Conference (Associated Press, 2010). These moves set off a chain reaction of upper echelon, Football Bowl Series (FBS) schools, jumping from one automatic qualifying (AQ) conference to another. The chain reaction spread throughout Division I creating a land grab in the non-automatic qualifier (non-AQ) FBS conferences. In an effort to stabilize their ranks, non-AQ conferences began raiding the upper tier of the Football Championship Series (FCS) subdivision.

By the 2015 football season, nine schools will have made the jump from FCS to FBS football. Seven of the nine schools asked their students to financially contribute to the move from FCS to FBS football. This study examined why students support or do not support such a move.

The move to FBS football has potential benefits and pitfalls for colleges and universities. Boise State University provides an example of what might happen if a school can successfully transition and win at college football’s most competitive level (Keel, 2013). Many other schools have made the transition to FBS but struggled to win games. In general, schools desiring to move to FBS football present four reasons for the transition to their students, fans, and public. The first reason often cited by university chancellors and presidents is that moving from FCS to FBS football will improve the school’s public profile. Dr. Robert C. Holub, former Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts – Amherst (UMass) stated, “This move advances our aspiration to assume our rightful place in the upper echelon of national public research universities” (UMass Athletics, 2011). Holub’s sentiments have been echoed by the heads of other universities making the move. Dr. Brooks Keel, President of Georgia Southern University, stated the following when announcing his school’s move to FBS, “Our focus on becoming a nationally recognized research institution will be no different. Today Georgia Southern has reached yet another historical milestone on our journey. One that will significantly help move us toward our goal of national recognition” (Georgia Southern University, 2013).

The second reason schools provide for moving to FBS is that the change will help the university attract more highly qualified applicants. A study by the Knight Foundation found that a majority of college presidents believe that athletics success attracts better qualified students (Knight Foundation, 2009). There is evidence to support this contention. Chressanthis and Grimes (1993), Tucker (2004), and McEvoy (2005) all found that football success does positively impact the number of applications a school receives. Each of those studies were conducted at the FBS level. Athletics success attracts both higher performing and lower performing students (Pope & Pope, 2009), allowing schools to be increase enrollment while also becoming more selective. Success in sports other than football does not impact applications (McEvoy, 2005).

The ability to attract a more highly qualified and diverse faculty is the third reason often cited by university administrators wanting to move to FBS football. The University of North Carolina Charlotte (UNCC) Football Feasibility Committee stated, “The addition of football helps provide a traditional or complete college experience that enhances student and faculty recruitment” (UNCC, 2008). Dr. Keel of Georgia Southern University stated, “This move allows us to market the university outside of Statesboro and Bulloch County. That is going to bring greater recognition to the university and that is going to bring greater faculty” (Georgia Southern University, 2013). Fisher (2009) acknowledges the notion that athletics success can aid in the recruitment of faculty but empirical evidence is unavailable.

The final reason that is often given by university administrators is that a move to FBS football will bolster the school’s research profile. Holub stated, “All flagship universities in the prestigious Association of American Universities play FBS football” (UMass Athletics, 2011). Appalachian State University’s feasibility committee, in recommending a transition to FBS stated, “A move to FBS mirrors Appalachian’s strategic vision as a nationally
prominent institution and would enhance the university’s academic mission” (Appalachian State University, 2011). To our knowledge, no studies have examined the impact of football success on the research profiles of higher educational institutions. However, Sweitzer (2007) cites several examples of universities using football success to align the institution with academic peers. Large state supported research universities are indeed more likely to find their peers competing FBS football rather than FCS or Divisions II and III and several FBS conferences support academic cooperatives designed to foster research activities.

The question is, are students’ wanting FBS football for the same reasons as their administrators? On average, student fees increase by $1.2 million when schools jump from FCS to FBS football (Dosh, 2013). Of the nine schools that are or recently transitioned to FBS football, only the UMass and Appalachian State University did not ask for direct student contributions. However, Appalachian State has indicated that student fees will increase in the future (Scott, 2013). And, UMass students pay $401 annually to athletics (Hohler, 2012).

To examine our research question, surveys were distributed online to 3,471 students at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. The university is currently in the process of transitioning from FCS to FBS football. Survey participants were first asked to declare whether they support or do not support the university’s decision to move to FBS. Using a Likert type scale, respondents were then asked to rate how they felt about the potential benefits commonly mentioned by administrators. Additionally, respondents were asked to rate their feelings regarding other potential benefits or drawbacks from the move to FBS football. Potential benefits included; student retention (Tucker, 2004; Wann & Robinson, 2002), level of competition at games, bolstering the local economy, financial rewards for the university, and increased value of their degree. Potential drawbacks included; greater dependence on student funding (Matheson et al., 2011), the amount of money spent on football, reduced emphasis on academics (Lindo et al., 2012), potential for losing seasons, and negative impacts on other sports.

The data will be analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and discriminate analysis to determine which factors affect student attitudes toward the move from FCS to FBS football. Based on the relevant literature, we anticipate that students’ attitudes will be significantly affected by factors other than those championed by their university administrators. The information gleaned from this study will be particularly relevant as conference realignment continues throughout college athletics and more schools contemplate moving to FBS. College administrators will be able to use the information from this study to address student concerns when asking for financial support for athletics. From a scholarly perspective, this study provides insights into student attitudes about realignment. The student population is significantly impacted by changes related to athletics, yet little research has been conducted in this area. Additional avenues for research and implications for college administrators, based in the results of this study, will be discussed during the presentation.