

Worth Every Penny? A Comparison of University Presidents' and Football Coaches' Compensation

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For many years, universities have attempted to balance competing demands from a variety of constituents. “Students are enrolling in record numbers, legislators and employers are demanding greater skill levels from graduates, and higher education is increasingly being called on to do the work of economic development; at the same time, the share of institutional funding provided by state and federal governments continues to decline” (AAUP, 2008). Given these competing pressures, financial decision-making has become a matter of determining priorities. Ostensibly, the first priority of universities is higher education. Thus, reasonable persons might call into question the apparent priorities demonstrated by the trend in spending on salaries for football and basketball coaches, in comparison to the compensation afforded university chief administrators.

In an article published three days prior to the 2010 Bowl Championship Series title game, Alabama’s academic and athletic leadership contested a 2009 NCAA report that “money, for the most part, couldn’t buy happiness on the athletic field or court” (Wieberg, 2010, p. 1A). The article stated that football coach Nick Saban was, when hired three years ago, worth “every penny” of his \$4 million annual salary. While Saban is one of the top five highest compensated coaches, most football coaches at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions are well compensated. On average, the head coach has received a 46% increase in pay between 2006 and 2009, and the average earnings of football coaches have reached \$1.36 million per annum (Upton, Gillum & Berkowitz, 2010). Eight coaches currently exceed the \$3 million mark; led by the University of Texas coach Mac Brown’s recently approved \$5.1 million annual salary (Berkowitz, 2009). One prevalent argument for paying high salaries to FBS head coaches is that the programs generate profits that are shared with other university departments, including academic programs. However, in any given year fewer than ten athletic departments out of more than 1,000 NCAA colleges and universities (120 of which are FBS member institutions) generate a true surplus (Upton et al., 2010; Zimbalist, 2007).

This study focused on a comparison of the total compensation for university presidents and football coaches at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions. The results of this examination will provide a critical analysis of institutional priorities relating to coaching salaries versus academic leadership.