The National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) postseason arrangement utilizes bowl games to provide large payouts to participating institutions for successful regular season accomplishments (i.e., at least six wins against other Division I FBS institutions). The payouts range from $325,000 in minor bowls up to nearly $18 million per institution for any of the five Bowl Championship Series (BCS) games (e.g., Tostitos Fiesta, Discover Orange, Rose presented by Visio, Allstate Sugar, and BCS Championship). Support for the current bowl arrangement is particularly common among original charter-member BCS institutions.¹ Likely, this reason centers on the ability of those BCS-charter schools to historically collect a significantly larger share of the bowl system’s available opportunities and money versus their non-BCS or qualifying peers (e.g., Conference-USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, Sun Belt Conference, Western Athletic Conference, U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Military Academy).²

Information presented at recent congressional hearings (2003–2009) supports this statement.³ As an example, according to the 2009–2010 NCAA Postseason Football Finances Report (2010) and the subsection on the Summary of Revenue and Expense by Conference, roughly $237 million in bowl revenue was produced during the 2009–2010 bowl season. The BCS-charter institutions secured approximately $198 million of that figure (i.e., 83.6%) to share while all non-BCS charter institutions collected the remaining $39 million. Additional data presented in the subsection on BCS Revenue Distribution also provided information on recent bowl seasons. Specifically, between the 2005/2006 and 2009/2010 bowl seasons, NCAA Division I (FBS) institutions earned a total of $717,639,147 from the 24 BCS bowl games for an average of $143,527,829 per season. BCS-charter institutions
obtained $621,675,447 (i.e., 86.6%) of that total for an average of $124,335,089 per season. Non-BCS (Division I-FBS) schools accumulated $86,963,700 (i.e., 12.1%) of the total for an average of $17,392,740 per season. The chasm between BCS and non-BCS institutions exists despite the fact that a few non-BCS football programs (e.g., Utah 2005 and 2009, Boise State, 2006 and 2010, Hawaii 2008, and Texas Christian 2010 and 2011) received an opportunity to play in BCS bowl games recently.4

Despite the achievement by non-BCS programs, a distinctive payment structure for those non-BCS schools going to BCS games also contributes to the divide. For example, although Texas Christian (Mountain West Conference [MWC]) and Boise State (Western Athletic Conference [WAC]) both received bids to participate in the 2010 Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, each school was rewarded with much smaller payouts of $9.8 million and $7.8 million respectively versus their BCS peers. To contrast, the Big Ten and the Southeastern Conference (SEC) each hauled in over $22 million whereas the remaining four BCS-charter conferences were individually awarded $17.7 million for their BCS bowl game appearances.5 This difference resulted from non-BCS conferences agreeing to such conditions in order to receive the opportunity to qualify and participate in BCS games.6 Without agreeing, non-BCS institutions would receive no money and little opportunity to participate in the most prestigious of all bowl games (i.e., BCS). Overall, some suggested this real gap in payouts and stigma as a nonautomatic qualifying institution prevents non-BCS schools from upgrading their athletic facilities, meeting Title IX requirements, providing competitive coaching salaries, recruiting highly rated student athletes, and improving student-athlete academic services along with the general academic facilities and programs.7

There is no doubt the popularity of Division I (FBS) football has grown tremendously and the financial success of the bowl system for some is clearly evident. The high demand for college football across the country has also presented an opportunity to expand the number of bowl games to 35 since the humble beginnings with the 1902 postseason Tournament of Roses event (the precursor to the Rose Bowl). Thus, more than half of the 120 Division I (FBS) teams can participate in a bowl game. On the surface, one might conclude that producing more bowl games is great because it provides fans and players the chance to enjoy one more football game. However, as Senator Orrin Hatch (Republican–Utah) indicated, the evolving bowl arrangement created a scenario where Division I (FBS) institutions have now been separated into two distinct classes despite the level of achievement, investment, or success obtained by non-BCS schools.8 Furthermore, because the NCAA only required bowl games to provide payouts that are “equal to or greater than . . . all the reasonable contractual travel obligations and participation expenses,” there is no guarantee any school will actually make a profit on attending a bowl game.9

As an example, at least 13 schools lost over a combined $3.8 million in the 2009 bowl season.10 The figures and information presented above generate several important questions regarding the differences between BCS and non-BCS charter institutions over the history of the collective bowl system (1902 to 2010). First, does the current bowl situation and BCS provide better bowl game opportunities, revenue, and improve conditions for non-BCS schools as its advocates claim or is the current bowl arrangement a new coat of paint on an old problem?11 Second, what conditions