



Feb. 1 [Reality Check](#)

The Benefit of Many Winners

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

Now that the college football season is finally past, the headlines have abated, and all eyes are on the professional extravaganza of the Super Bowl, we might take a look at that hardy perennial argument: college football bowl games vs. a possible national championship tournament. Those of us who find ourselves in the college football environment often discover that our friends and relatives, colleagues and students, eagerly engage this question.

Triggered in part by the endless controversy over the [Bowl Championship Series](#) (BCS) selection process and nurtured by the extravaganza of the NCAA's Division I college basketball tournament, many observers champion a revision of big time college football's bowl system to construct a championship process for the teams in Division I-A, following the model of the [NCAA Division I-AA tournament](#). (I know the official NCAA designations are Bowl Division and Championship Division but old habits die hard.)

The drama turns on that desperate American need to establish who is Number *One* in everything every year. Whether best dressed, best movie, best college, best hot dog, or best college football team, Americans cannot abide the possibility that Number *One* is an irrelevancy among high quality products, and that the difference between any Number *One* and the Numbers *Two* through *Five* or more is likely to be minuscule and accidental. Still, we love our Number *One*.

So the first knock against the bowl games is that they do not produce a real champion but a constructed champion. For those who do not follow these things, the current system uses a variety of rankings by computers, by coaches, and by sports writers to determine which two teams play for the title of National Champion in a bowl game. The rest of the teams, in more or less descending order by the ranking system, get bids to participate in less significant bowl games. All the bowl games are played after the regular season ends beginning in early December and continuing until early January, with the title bowl game played at the end of the sequence, this year on January 8.

Many people are not aware that the college football bowl games do not belong to the NCAA but rather are commercial enterprises of the bowl venues (the stadiums and communities that house them) that negotiate with the football conferences. The current bowl championship system emerged as the premier football conferences and the major bowl venues developed a system to permit a final game between the two highest ranked teams in the nation in a format that would generate the most interest and money. By every measure of interest, participation, ticket sales, advertising, and television revenue, the current big-time bowl system is a huge success.

However, because the top level of competition is structured by rankings derived from computer and expert polls, many object that the top two ranked teams may not be the best because the rankings are

mathematical or opinion based and may not actually pit the very best contenders against each other as might happen to some extent in a tournament format. Hence, the Number *One* crowd argues for a Division I-A football tournament.

In contrast, Division I-AA, which is made up of conferences and institutions that support football at a somewhat reduced scale and with significantly reduced expenses, concludes its season with a football tournament that pits teams selected by conference and by various other criteria against each other to produce a final game between presumably the two best teams in Division I-AA in America. This activity is controlled by the NCAA on behalf of the conferences and institutions in this division.

So which is best? A reasonable academic response might be: Who cares? But as many pure academics have discovered, many people really care. So let me offer a perspective on these competitions.

The money is important, but truth be told, the money is really significant mainly for the top bowls. Even then, while [these bowls pay out a good sum](#), the money almost always goes to the conference, not the institution, and the conference shares the revenue among its 10 to 12 members. Twenty-two bowls pay between \$750,000 and \$1.65 million; five pay between \$2 million and \$6 million, and the five BCS bowls pay out at \$14 million to \$17 million. Although the payday is important for the top bowls, only the top 10 meet or exceed the likely cost of participation. The rest of the Division I-A teams participate for the value of the experience because the money does not fully compensate for the cost of competing in the bowl game.

The impartiality of a tournament for establishing the best of the best among football teams is not quite as effective as we might imagine. In the case of Division I-AA, of the 16 participants in that football tournament, 8 participants are selected as a result of winning their conference. The remaining eight participants are chosen by a committee from the remaining members of those conferences and from among 49 other teams in Division I-AA. While the committee is surely wise in its choices, it is no more wise than the people and computers who select the participants in the Division I-A bowl games, and the Division I-AA tournament may or may not include the truly best teams competing for the position of Number *One*.

Another perspective on these end-of-season events evaluates the odds of participating. Division I-AA has 106 football teams that compete in their conferences with the hope of participating in the tournament. The tournament field, however, has space for only 16 teams, which means only 15 percent of the eligible football teams have a shot at a postseason experience. As a result of the tournament format, only two teams can participate in the championship final game, and of course, only one emerges as a winner. When it is all over, in Division I-AA, only one football team and its fans can celebrate a victorious end of season achievement. We have one winner to be sure, but we have 105 losers.

Division I-A, however, has 119 teams eligible for a postseason bowl game. This past season, 32 bowl games provided opportunities for 64 teams to have an end of season competition on national television. Over half of the NCAA Division I-A football teams had a shot at winning a postseason final game. At the close of the bowl games, 32 teams, or 26 percent of Division I-A, returned to their campuses winners with a trophy from a postseason bowl game. Clearly the college teams in Division I-A have a much better chance of participating in a postseason event and securing a triumphant return than do the teams in Division I-AA who are stuck with a tournament.

Postseason football is also significantly about the event, the engagement of alumni, friends, donors, legislators, trustees, students and fans in an extravaganza of enthusiasm and good cheer about the campus's team. It should be a fine party. The postseason event offers the possibility of a televised

activity highlighting the university campus, its spirit, its enthusiasm, and of course its ability to be a winner. This potent form of advertising helps universities seeking the visibility that translates into high rankings in popular opinion polls and the value of these celebratory moments are significant in recruiting students and obviously student-athletes.

When we have a bowl game to look forward to, we can plan and organize around the event for maximum alumni, student, fan and donor impact. We can establish the transportation and housing packages, we can create appropriate pre- and postgame events, and we can produce effective publicity. The better the bowl game, usually, the longer time we have between the receipt of a bowl bid and the actual game, but in any case, we can focus all our postseason activity around this final event and make sure everyone has a fine time.

In Division I-AA however, with the disadvantage of a tournament format, the postseason event is exceptionally difficult to organize. Even if we defy the odds and become one of the 16 tournament schools, we do not know how to focus our event planning. If we focus on the first game of the tournament, the only one we can be sure we will play, we can have a good time but everyone will know it is not the main event, which is the final game. They will wonder if they should save their trip time and money for the next game in the tournament, assuming we win the first one, or take the even longer odds bet on our getting into the final game.

For those who last to the final game of the tournament (two teams) their athletes and all the accompanying student support people will have had a very long football season with four postseason contests. While this is a lot of extra games, it only affects 16 teams at the beginning and two at the end. In the bowl scenarios, the postseason is indeed extended chronologically into early January, but only for one extra game (the bowl), even though 64 teams will have a one-game postseason appearance.

If they bet on our getting into the final game, but we do not make it, then those fans, friends, donors and students who waited will not have any post-game event, even though we made it to the semifinals. If we do get into the final game, we have only a limited time to organize and deliver a significant event, and the attendance is often severely limited because people have not anticipated this highly unlikely result. Worse yet, among all those 106 Division I-AA teams, only one goes home a winner and only two can claim to have participated in a real, end of season, event.

The Division I-AA tournament also costs the institutions money and the more successful the team, the more money it costs. While the NCAA allocates funds for the team and various other expenses, they do not pay for the band, they pay only for a few VIPs, and they do not pay for the parties. As a result, if we go all the way, and if we support each game as if it might be the last one we play, we accumulate financial losses as we succeed in the tournament. In Division I-A, in the top 10 bowls or so, the teams and conferences make money by attending the bowl.

The rest of the bowls pay a reasonable amount, but not enough to cover the cost of participation, so the teams in these bowl games lose money — but then again, they only lose on one game and they get an event worth having for the expenditure. They get a party, they get to mobilize their fans, and they have a 50 percent chance of ending the season as a winner. They will be on television, their potential recruits for next and subsequent years and high school students considering applying to the campus will see the event and the campus highlighted.

With all that, I tell our athletics director we should try to invent and participate in a Division I-AA bowl game. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen. The NCAA likes the I-AA tournament because it controls the tournament. The football winner-take-all crowd likes the tournament because in spite of its

selection defects, it appears to create a Number *One*. The possible venues for Division I-AA bowl games are more likely to bid on yet another Division I-A bowl rather than take on the regulatory and revenue risk of trying to create a high quality Division I-AA bowl property.

So the reality check here is that we are not likely to get any improvement in the end of season activities for our division for quite some time. The moral of the story is that Division I-A should continue to develop, refine, defend, and market their terrifically successful and institutionally rewarding bowl games.

John V. Lombardi, chancellor and a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, writes *Reality Check* occasionally.

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