



Football Gets Lots of Love: The Colleges: Not So Much.



As fans cheer and bands play and days turn short and crisp, it can be easy to forget that our nation's beloved college football teams have universities attached.

Even as college football [has grown in popularity over time](#), the schools that host them have lost public financial support. Costs steadily rise, but state allocations do not.

According to a [2021 report](#) by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, “General operating appropriations at public institutions (which excludes financial aid, research, and medical appropriations) follow changes in the economic cycle, rising during economic expansions and decreasing at greater rates than other budget categories during recessionary periods.”

Moreover, with each recession since 1980, “declines in state support per student have grown steeper, and recoveries have become slower and less complete,” the report notes. Additionally, “even though general operating support increases during economic expansions, it has not kept pace with enrollment increases and inflation.”

As a result of these declines in taxpayer support, public colleges and universities increasingly rely on tuition to fund their operations. [Between 1990 and 2017](#), the share of university revenue supplied by students and their families via tuition nearly doubled to 46 percent of higher-education funding. Tuition provided an even larger chunk of revenue in more than half the states, including four states (Vermont, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Pennsylva-

nia) where more than 70 percent of higher-education funding is supplied by tuition.

Of course, as tuition has increased so has student debt.

In a recent op-ed in *The Denver Post*, titled, “[CU’s football team has a university that needs our help](#),” NEPC director Kevin Welner urged fans to consider the financial realities at the University of Colorado Boulder, where head football coach Deion Sanders has [breathed new life](#) into a once-ailing program, attracting attention and acclaim: “as we raise our foam fingers in celebration, let’s also raise our awareness of the state’s lack of support for the university itself.”

“[I]t’s alarming,” Welner writes, “that direct state funding now accounts for only 5% of CU Boulder’s total annual budget of \$2.3 billion.” Similar disinvestment plagues public colleges and universities across the country.

College football teams, no matter how successful, are not going to tackle our society’s most pressing issues or educate the next generation of leaders and creators. For that, we’ll have to invest in the teams’ universities.

NEPC Resources on Higher Education

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