

Written Testimony of Gordon Gee

Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Hearing on Protecting College Sports: Supporting Student Athletes, Restoring Fair Competition, and Saving the Games Fans Love

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Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you in support of the Protect College Sports Act. I do so out of genuine concern for America's university system, intercollegiate athletics, and student athletes. I retired from presidential service just last July. I was a university president for 45 years serving at five universities: two different terms at West Virginia University separated by nearly 40 years, two seven-year terms at The Ohio State University, and tenures at Vanderbilt University, Brown University, and the University of Colorado. It has been an honor to have led these great universities, serving their faculty, staff, alumni, and the people of the states in which they reside. Of greatest importance are the students who are the future of our democracy and who brought me so much joy and fulfillment. I am honored to have my name on nearly 500,000 diplomas.

During my service over 45 years, I have been honored to have significant engagement in the role athletics plays within the university setting. Over those years, college sports has changed dramatically. I have had the opportunity to serve as the chairman of NCAA committees as well as chairman of the Big Ten, SEC, Big XII, and Ivy League conferences. I have also been closely involved with the College Football Playoff as a member of its board of directors. Without a doubt, college athletics has played an important role at the institutions I have served. And I am dedicated to that continuing and thriving. Unfortunately, I do believe we face an existential crisis in college athletics. Presidents and Chancellors are not free from blame for this crisis. We agreed to outrageous salary contracts, reduced the academic mission at the core of being a student athlete, and abrogated too much power to athletic directors and conference commissioners. The end result is that we now have an unsustainable system which will destroy American college athletics, unless we take bold steps. The NCAA and the conferences lost in the courts because we failed to allow student athletes to function as true students with great talents, who earned the right to monetize their talents.

Saying that, I can now hear the chorus of observers saying I am a seasoned, fuzzy-headed academic failing to understand the realities of the athletic environment. I plead not guilty. I fully understand the power of college athletics and its impact on a university. I have yet to be able to persuade 110,000 people to show up to a chemistry lecture. Athletics plays an incredibly important part in the culture and spirit of the American university. It is a critical way to tell our story. There is immense pride in winning from rivalries to championships, and I have even seen states go into mourning when their hometown heroes lose. It is preserving

this spirit of competition and pride that I believe is what is one the key attributes that differentiates American universities from those in other countries. And that is the reason I am so grateful to this committee and our government for stepping up.

With this legislation, we will be able to bring a level of common sense and discipline to the college athletic enterprise. We can restore basic rules to govern the system while continuing to allow student athletes to earn their fair share of the revenue they help create. Further, this legislation will go a long way to making certain that there are sufficient resources available to support women's sports and Olympic sports at the same time.

I fully support this bill because it comprehensively solves both the governance and financial crises threatening college sports. We have been operating over the past few years with virtually no rules. This bill changes all of that with thoughtful, fair rules, developed by consensus within the system, to bring stability to college sports in a way that respects student athletes' rights to earn compensation and an incredible education at the same time. The bill replaces perpetual free agency with sensible transfer regulations. The bill replaces wide open eligibility with a five-year standard already supported by the system. The bill replaces an uncapped Wild West of pay-to-play with fair revenue share caps and logical NIL regulation. The bill does this and so much more to bring fairness and stability to college sports.

The bill also solves the financial crisis which for far too long has been overlooked by me and my peers causing deficits to balloon to unsustainable levels. College sports will lose over \$5 billion this year alone. Many schools are hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in debt. The only way to solve this is to capture the many billions of dollars of media revenue that college sports leaves on the table each year.

College football is America's second most popular sport, but it ranks fifth in terms of revenue. College football already has twice the viewership of the NBA but earns just half the media revenue that the NBA does. The reason it under-earns so substantially is the inefficient way we sell our media rights in college sports, and I know this firsthand given my leadership roles at the Big Ten, SEC, Big XII, and CFP. All we must do to fix this is sell our rights the way the pro leagues do: on a unified basis. Pooling the sale of the rights increases our bargaining power over the media companies and results in much more money for our schools and student athletes. This bill allows us to pool our rights and does so thoughtfully and respectfully by making it optional, where the conferences and schools themselves will decide whether to sell their rights together and how to divide the revenue.

To be clear, this will not break the conferences or our traditions; it will preserve and strengthen them. I believe that the option to unify the media rights is not only something all schools should applaud for being in this bill, but they should urgently and aggressively pursue it. I have met with experts and believe that many billions of dollars of incremental revenue will be generated and believe that this much bigger pie should be divided based on relative value. This means that the SEC and Big Ten deserve more of more, and when the pie

grows this much, the SEC and Big Ten will make far more than they ever could, and there is still enough for all other FBS conferences and schools to make more money. This is a win-win, and I commend this Committee for the foresight to include it in this legislation.

Today, in America, we seem to agree on so little, but I am inspired that like so many Americans, both political parties here, have come together recognizing how sacred college sports and our student athletes are to our university system and our country.