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The Marx Brothers score big in "[Horsefeathers](#)" (1932)

## Capitalizing on the public-private college football plantation

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In U.S. college sports -- as in the nation's broader blend of capitalism and socialism – political leverage can be advantageous. Winning football coaches now sit at the top of the public university food chain. They are emblems of both American economic opportunity and inequality.

In the afterglow of landing the national [college football championship](#), a [university](#) owned and operated by the state of Georgia just awarded football coach Kirby Smart a contract paying him \$10.25 million this year, increasing to \$12.25 million for the 2031 season. The total package is worth \$112.5 million before bonuses.

The coach is by far the highest paid public employee in a state that pays its governor [\\$175,000](#) and part-time legislators about [\\$17,000 a year](#). While the University of Georgia often provides elected officials with [free football tickets](#), Georgia's political establishment has been accused of shortchanging the state's [K-12 education system](#).

According to the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), Georgia recently was rated as one of the worst states for educational attainment and educational quality. It was also ranked in the [bottom](#) 10 states in which to raise a family, based on five categories: family fun, health and safety, education and child care, affordability, and socioeconomics.

Coach Smart, who is living up to his name, has opened a wide lead on [a list](#) of about 10 state employees hauling in more than \$1 million a year. Many are positioned at intersections between state government (and its power to tax and spend) with lucrative markets and professions. The longtime chief investment officer at the Teachers Retirement System, for example, was paid \$1.01 million for managing a lump of capital [topping \\$100 billion](#) in value in 2021.

Other \$1-million non-coaches (Georgia Tech's Geoff Collins made \$3.5 million in 2021) were Augusta University's chief of pediatric and congenital heart surgery (\$1.35 million) and chief of cardiothoracic surgery (\$1.2 million). The university's chairman of neurosurgery pulled in \$985,500. Georgia Tech's president barely missed the mark by making \$975,000.

Facing competition for talent, it's hard to argue that publicly owned Augusta University Medical Center should not spend some of its [\\$3.5 billion in patient revenue](#) to attract and keep top doctors. Likewise, it makes sense to reward coaches of a University of Georgia football program that reportedly brought in \$134.5 million and [netted](#) about \$86 million in 2020 before the team was #1. While a good share of football profits can be said to subsidize other sports programs, about \$20 million goes toward the [salaries](#) of the senior coaching staff.

That being said, the distributional economics of college football revenue might tempt Georgia taxpayers and political leaders to question whether paying that much for coaching talent is the best investment in the state's future. What if the state paid Bulldog football coaches more along the lines of its top doctors and pension managers?

Every \$10 million saved in football management costs could cover in-state tuition for 833 low-income students (at [\\$12,000 a pop](#)) or salaries for 100 young [professors](#). Elite coaches making half as much would still have a higher standard of living than most of Georgia's doctors, lawyers, and business executives – and far higher than software coders, teachers, truck drivers, cooks, and waiters. Median individual income in Georgia is about \$30,000. Georgia's household income [range for the middle class](#) has been estimated at \$23,948 – \$114,234. The state's median family income is the 18th lowest in the country at \$74,833.

According to [one analysis](#), the Peach State has the 7th lowest middle-class share of income in the nation at 45.4%. The richest 5% of residents enjoy a 23.3% income share, ranking Georgia 9th highest in that category.

Providing adequate funds for schools in Georgia, and other states, to build educational stairways for all children, including those born into low-income families, to stable jobs with a living wage, of course, is a problem of much greater magnitude than culling excess profit from college football might solve. But the winner-take-all intersection of publicly funded universities and sports entertainment markets is a primetime example of a star system that showers rewards on the few while [leaving the many behind](#). As Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn conclude in [Tightrope](#), their book exploring the painful decline of the working class, the U.S. sorely needs educational and family policies that help more young people move out of poverty and create economic opportunity.

“Georgia has fallen behind and is one of only six states that does not provide funding for schools to educate students living in poverty,” said Stephen Owens of the [Georgia Budget and Policy Institute](#) in a commentary on the state education budget.

A state educational system that created thousands more skilled workers at the risk of churning out a few less sports millionaires might well result in a more vibrant economy and healthier communities. And arguably a bit less brain damage for its high-priced medical establishment to treat.

Some might decry a shift in state spending from the top of the football heap to the bottom of the economic pyramid as Marxist. Groucho Marx might reply:

[“Horsefeathers!”](#)

Karl Polzer is founder of the [Center on Capital & Social Equity](#), which explores economic inequality and advocates for the 'bottom 50%'.