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What Happened at Rutgers and W...

Donna A. Lopiano, Ph.D

President

Recent events at Rutgers have made it clear that the management of Division I athletics programs is a high risk environment that can diminish the reputation of the larger university. College presidents and athletic directors must learn from these occurrences, insist on model policies and procedures, and commit to regular oversight. But more important, every college president and members of boards of trustees must address the larger and more important question: What am I doing to advance the reform of intercollegiate athletics to reduce these excesses of power and money?

It is time to address the pressures that demand more winning, more revenues and a powerful athletics culture that is not held to the same standards and values as the larger university. It is time to challenge the obnoxious salaries of head basketball and football coaches and athletic directors, admissions exemptions for academically unqualified but athletically talented students and other questionable practices that clearly reveal higher education's broken moral compass when it comes to sport. Rutgers is not an anomaly.

No matter what happens, how many presidents, trustees, donors or athletics directors across the

country, embarrassed by the Sandusky/Penn State and Rice/Rutgers debacles, will admit that enough is enough? How many will publicly say that the time for major reform is past due and they will be a part of the solution? To date, the silence among college presidents, athletics directors, trustees and donors has been deafening.

Over the past year, the following situations have occurred related to the Rutgers athletics program:

- The misconduct of the Rutgers head men's basketball coach – throwing basketballs at heads of players, using homophobic and misogynistic insults – was captured on videotape. A "whistleblower" assistant coach provided the athletic director with videotape.
- The assistant coach was fired, allegedly for unrelated reasons, but subsequently sued the institution for retaliation/wrongful termination. He is also, reportedly, being investigated by the FBI for extortion.
- The head basketball coach was initially punished for his misconduct with a three-game suspension and a $50,000 fine. The Rutgers president was told about the coach misconduct, but never viewed the videotape, and approved the penalty based on legal counsel and athletic director recommendations. A university investigation revealed that the basketball coach's behavior was not an isolated occurrence but concluded his conduct did not rise to the level of abuse.
- The shocking videotape was released to the media by the whistleblower. Following media and public furor, the president viewed the videotape and mandated that the head basketball coach be fired.
- The head basketball coach was terminated "without cause", requiring a $1 million payout, despite having a contract that may have allowed a "for cause" termination and no payout.
- The Rutgers athletic director resigned two days after firing the head basketball coach, receiving $1.25 million as part of a settlement agreement.
- The interim Vice President/senior counsel during this period resigned.
- Rutgers hired a new head men's basketball coach whose resume stated he was a Rutgers graduate. The Rutgers Registrar's Office later confirmed that the new basketball coach did not earn a degree, but also stated that a degree was not required for the position.
- A large and diverse search committee was appointed and an executive search firm hired to assist in the hiring of the new athletic director. The new athletic director was hired by the president, with several members of the search committee claiming after the fact, that the search was rushed and most members were not involved.
- The media subsequently revealed that new athletic director had the following background
    - Allegedly abused her players as a head volleyball coach in 1991; based on a letter signed by 15 players but it is unclear whether the letter was seen or received by either the coach or the athletic director at that time.
    - Her assistant coach's wedding videotape from 19 years ago revealed the head volleyball coach (now athletic administrator) commenting that her assistant should not get pregnant. The assistant coach was later terminated from employment in 1997 and won a $150,000 lawsuit for unlawful termination based on pregnancy. The new athletic director denied the existence of such a videotape in response to media query.
    - While executive senior associate athletic director supervising a track and field program at a previous institution in 2008, an assistant track coach successfully filed a sex discrimination lawsuit following termination of employment, a decision made by the executive senior associate athletic director, claiming a hostile environment created by the

head track coach, with a court award exceeding $500,000. This court determination was subsequently overturned on appeal, with that decision to overturn now being appealed.

- While the six-person executive group of the larger search committee was aware of the two lawsuits, they were not aware of the player abuse allegations. The larger search group was not aware of the alleged player abuse or the lawsuits.

These events should ignite five major questions deserving of extensive analysis that might help prevent these occurrences at other universities (links provide further comment on these issues):

1. What level of presidential oversight over the athletics program or any program with high alumni and media interest is necessary and how should that oversight be structured?
2. What administrative policies and at what level of detail are required to specifically address the type of potential misconduct that can occur in athletics programs? (Note: general higher education professional conduct standards do not typically address the use of physical punishment, physical touching, what constitutes verbal, emotional and other forms of abuse in athletics settings, decisions related to return to play after injury and other behaviors atypical for classroom teachers.)
3. What specific written policies and procedures should guide the operation of campus search committees convened to engage in search and hiring processes?
4. When campus positions are of such importance that executive search firms are hired to assist the institution in the hiring process, what should be the specific responsibilities and expectations detailed by the university with regard to preparation of comparative assessments and depth of background checks?
5. What is a candidate's obligation to disclose when applying and interviewing for highly sensitive campus positions in athletics?

The proverbial "buck" stops on the desk of the Rutgers president, who admits to failures of process. The future of the president will be determined by the Board of Trustees. The retention of the newly hired basketball coach and athletic director, which appears safe at the time of this writing, may very well be affected if the media furor does not diminish.

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