Published on Sports Management Resources

Checks and Balances v. Radical...

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In a March 10, 2008 *Sports Business Journal* article, “No One Laughs At Vandy Now”, Michael Smith examined the state of Vanderbilt University athletics five years after then President Gordon Gee did the unheard of – eliminated the position of athletics director. Was there another option? In place of the traditional athletics structure and for the purpose of integrating athletics with the rest of the university, the athletics department was placed under the Department of Student Life and University Affairs, led by a law professor/Vice Chancellor. David Williams, the ‘lucky’ Vice Chancellor, now has four “directors of operations” running daily affairs (think ‘assistant athletics directors’) and says he spends 70-80% of this time on athletics programs duties. In addition, he oversees an eleven member General Counsel Office, the Office of Risk Management, the University’s Compliance and Conflict of Interest functions and the operations of the University’s Board of Trust. Considering the fact that athletics is a $35 million program that has ambitions to grow to $45 million or $50 million in short order, all I can say is kudos to Superman Williams and four hard-working assistant ADs! You would think there would be a better and less radical solution.

What is sad is that a university president (Dr. Gordon Gee made the move but is now at Ohio State)

rejected the possibility that an athletics director could also be an educator charged with making sure athletes were treated like other students and had the skills to manage the full integration of athletics into university life. Firing the previous athletics director, making sure a new athletics director received firm marching orders AND putting athletics under the Student Life structure could have been an alternative approach that sent the same message to an isolated program running a multimillion dollar deficit.

Putting athletics within a division of student life isn't all that unusual. Even when the athletics director says he/she reports to the president or chancellor, the fact of the matter is that every day affairs are handled by a Vice President/Vice Chancellor for Administration or Student Affairs at most Division I universities. It is a practical impossibility for any university department to directly report to the CEO of the institution. What is unusual, is to not have a top manager running athletics 150% time...because that is usually what it takes.

So, if a sound educational sport program is desired, where athletes and athletics are fully integrated within the university (as opposed to athletics being a feudal empire doing its own thing), how do you build in the checks and balances to ensure such an outcome? The answer is both structural and policy-making. Structurally, the closer you bring athletics into student affairs and the farther from development and administration, the stronger the message that the experience of the student-athlete is more important than the value of athletics program success to alumni relations or fundraising. Structurally, the adoption of a 'strong' faculty athletics council model to oversee the program, rather than a faculty/alumni 'rubber stamp' group, makes it more likely that the university's conscience will be a positive influence on athletics program operations.

Athletics at any competitive level is a high risk program. At a very basic risk level, injury and liability concerns mandate strong policies and procedures governing the use and maintenance of facilities and the conduct of events. On a more sophisticated level, risk extends to the credibility of the institution when it comes to issues of rules compliance, academic integrity and the ethical and other behaviors of coaches and athletes. Thus, the more competitive and revenue-producing the athletics program, the greater the need for multiple senior administrator officer involvement and oversight AND a strong educational sport manager. The Vice President for Finance or the university accounting office should oversee the development of policies and procedures related to handling money. All contracts and licensing agreements should require the involvement of the general counsel's office. The design and operation of student-athlete tutoring and academic support programs should involve the Provost's office. Rules compliance requires close relationships with the admissions and academic affairs offices to ensure disinterested party verification of eligibility.

In addition, the administrative officer responsible for athletics on a daily basis must pay attention and practice sound managerial oversight by insisting on such 'checks' as faculty athletics council review and regular reporting on student-athlete normal academic progress, GPAs, academic credentials of incoming recruits, graduation rates, etc. The more athletics is left alone to deal with all of these issues, the greater the likelihood for trouble.

Most important, the more insistent the university is in hiring an athletics director who is more of an educator and professional educational sport manager than a marketer, fundraiser or business person,

the more likely it is that athletes and athletics will be fully integrated into the university. The athletics director can always hire a top notch development and promotional staff! If all of these checks and balances were in place and the program still wasn't meeting expectations, Vandy should have been able to simply make one personnel change (the athletics director) and get the desired result.

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