



Published on Sports Management Resources

[Presidential Oversight of Athletics](#)

While the NCAA rules clearly place the responsibility for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics on the desk of the institution's president, there are no clear guidelines that define an optimum chain of command. The appointed leader of the educational institution determines whether the athletics director reports directly to him or her or through another senior but lower officer. In cases where the athletics program is a politically sensitive program of highest interest to trustees and alumni, the athletics director may report directly to the president or principal. At larger institutions, the athletics director may report to a vice president for student life or student affairs or a vice president for administration which often represents a preferable reporting line. The simple fact is that presidents do not have the time to provide the adequate daily oversight required to support the athletics program.

While the athletic director must have direct access to the president because of the political importance of the athletics program, access on a situational 'as needed' or regularized reporting and discussion basis is different than "reporting to" the president as a supervisor. The athletic director should have a reporting relationship to a senior officer who is not the president who is always available and who remains highly educated about the ongoing affairs of the athletics department. From a president's perspective, this attentive daily overseer should be the vice president who is best at handling the most difficult situations. The higher the risk and sensitivity, the more important it is for athletics to report to the president's very best senior administrator, usually a vice president for administration who handles all the toughest areas of campus – not to a provost or student affairs vice president.

When the athletics director reports to a senior officer, he/she should always have the option to meet with the president on important matters and that senior officer and the athletic director should attend such meetings together. Similarly, the athletic director should not serve as a member of the president's cabinet. Seldom is any cabinet official directly responsible for the actual conduct of a program and without administrative oversight.

There are times when the athletics program is in crisis, which requires the hypercritical attention of the president. For example, consider the 2013 Rutgers University debacle where a men's head basketball coach was captured on video throwing basketballs at heads of players and using homophobic and misogynistic insults and the video made its way to the press. The institution's legal counsel and athletic director recommended and the president a three-game suspension and \$50,000 fine as a penalty but

never viewed the offensive video. When the president finally did, he instructed that the coach be fired immediately, which occurred except that the termination was “without cause” requiring a \$1 million payout. The Rutgers athletic director resigned two days later, receiving \$1.25 million as part of settlement agreement. Senior counsel resigned. A new head men’s basketball coach with an erroneous resume and without an undergraduate degree was hired. Despite the existence of a search committee and hiring an executive search firm, a new athletic director was hired who allegedly abused her players as a volleyball coach and was involved in a decision in a \$150,000 lawsuit for termination based on pregnancy and another sex discrimination lawsuit. All of these occurrences raised questions about presidential leadership.

When faced with a media crisis like Rutgers, the president cannot afford to allow others to make decisions without his or her intense and direct involvement. When the proverbial buck stops on the desk of the president, a senior administrative team must be assembled, the president must ask the right questions and demand the right actions throughout the process:

- Has an experienced search firm been hired?
- Have we mandated in the executive search firm’s contract that they will execute a comprehensive professional and criminal background check for athletic director and top head coach positions?
- Have we mandated a written comparative report on all candidates that is fully aligned with the job description?
- Were comprehensive instructions given to the search committee?
- Have they received written instructions on processes and recording of search committee participation and votes?
- Does the search committee understand that they are advisory to the President and does the president want at least three candidates rank-ordered?
- Does the search committee understand that underrepresented minorities must be in the finalist pool?
- Will the executive search firm specifically confront finalist candidates and instruct them that given the sensitive circumstances the institution is facing, they have an extraordinary obligation to disclose the accuracy of their credentials and any past behaviors that might raise questions (e.g., instances of professional discipline, any questions of past misconduct, history of NCAA rules violations, or involvement in lawsuits) and that if such disclosures aren't made, it may be cause for immediate termination?
- Have we hired a communications firm that can advise us on handling the media?
- Does the institution have specialist legal counsel available to deal with termination for cause?
- Does the athletics department have clear policies on coach conduct that will prevent this situation from occurring again?
- Will the president be kept abreast of these issues on a daily basis?
- Is it clear to all concerned that no decision is to be made without the president's full briefing and direct involvement?

And after the dust has settled, the college president has to ask the larger and more important question: What am I doing to advance the reform of intercollegiate athletics to reduce these excessive pressures demanding more winning and more revenues, obnoxious salaries for athletics coaches, special admissions for academically unqualified students and the loss of our higher education moral compass when it comes to sport?

Excerpted from: Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2014) The Athletics Director's Desk Reference. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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