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Our University – Athletic Integrity

Walter V. Wandler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wandler@siu.edu

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Our University – Athletic Integrity

Sixth in a series on integrity

Honesty in teaching and research, clarity in the statement of complex ideas and opinions, a desire to know, share, discuss and debate values, and an understanding of the world and how it works are the foundation for integrity at every university.

The exercise of academic work directed to those ends is usually invisible, at times contentious and challenging, but rarely as obvious and problematic as lapses in integrity related to issues of intercollegiate athletics.

Train Wrecks

There was a time, in Dallas, Texas, when violating NCAA rules regarding compensation for student athletes was so rampant at Southern Methodist University that the football team was considered to be the best professional program in town. The Dallas Cowboys were in a slump. The death penalty for SMU's program in 1986 was the result. Both ships righted themselves, but SMU is not the same after the most stringent application of NCAA discipline in the history of college sports.

In another case culminating in December 2003, University of Missouri basketball players came under scrutiny with multiple charges of inappropriate behavior. The president was accused of complicity in the suspected improprieties. The impact on the university was immediate. The university righted itself, but Mizzou is not the same.

Tragic actions at Baylor in 2003 relating to an alleged murder cover-up involving a student athlete brought disgrace to a proud university. Baylor righted itself, but the university is not the same.

The opportunities for demonstrating high octane integrity, the kind associated with intercollegiate athletics, are sometimes frittered away either by omission or commission.

Institutional lapses in integrity can be train wrecks. To be sure, individuals carry out deeds sans integrity, but institutional cultures are the Petri dishes in which infections grow. Irrationality, self-centeredness, and loss of purpose are pernicious seed corn. The cost to universities individually and collectively is real and high.

Universities desire and accept gains from big-league athletics programs. The impact of low-integrity actions, whether by coach, student, or university leadership is a factor in every equation.

Cancer

There are other integrity lapses not as outwardly dramatic as the examples above. They are less like train wrecks and more like cancer for the life-draining impact and slow motion destruction attached to them, but lead to integrity infringement as surely as an alleged murder cover-up.

Some coaches' salaries exceed reason, especially in challenging economic times. Examples abound where university coaches earn salaries inconsistent with the academic values of a good university. One million dollars at one school may be reasonable, while the same sticker price may be completely inappropriate at another. The disease metastasizes when ridiculously high salaries - not justifiable in the first place - infect all aspects of athletics and become a canker on academic priorities of the broader university community.

Coaches' salaries are affected by market forces, just as salaries of engineering and business faculty tend to be higher than faculty in many other disciplines. For athletic programs to remain sustainable, reason must be introduced into setting salaries for coaches relative to academic priorities of the university. Athletic directors frequently bear the brunt of the burden of paying coaches, but often the impetus for the high pay comes from others, on- and off-campus.

Under any circumstances, an athlete's individual action, a coach's false sense of purpose, and/or meddling university leadership can cause integrity loss. At our university and all others, deficiencies in athletic integrity cause tragedy and blight.

For intercollegiate athletics – one of the campfires 'round which the faithful gather - low integrity actions may be the most hurtful to students and staff for the harm inflicted on quality and reputation.