**What Can Colleges Learn From Penn State?**

Presidents and boards should be asking the question — and looking for answers

By Stephen Joel Trachtenberg and Gerald B. Kauvar March 26, 2017

If not a sparrow falls without God knowing, is it the case that the leader of a college or university is responsible for knowing about every fallen sparrow on campus? If so, does having that responsibility include caring about each sparrow or being held accountable for its fall?

Captains of U.S. Navy vessels are held responsible for each and every event aboard ship. If a ship runs aground, it is the captain’s responsibility. In the U.S. Army, commanders are held responsible for everything the unit does or fails to do — though without the drastic consequences to careers the Navy imposes. Is either standard the right one for leaders of institutions in higher education? The just-concluded [trial of Graham Spanier,](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Guilty-Verdict-Puts-a-Dark/239600) former president of Pennsylvania State University, offers an opportunity to consider the nature of presidential responsibility and accountability in colleges, particularly as they pertain to intercollegiate athletics.

Each president can learn from her or his own mistakes, and others can learn from them as well.

Presidents, like commanders, have enterprise­wide responsibilities and are usually the final arbiter among competing priorities. The words of presidents, as well as their actions, shape the culture of the institution. This includes its commitment to integrity and, by extension, the integrity of employees, who sign up to the values and responsibilities stated in university documents.

But should a leader be held accountable for each and every action of a subordinate?

Gen. Creighton Abrams, when chief of staff of the U.S. Army, was said to have told a Congressman who was berating him about a minor transgression of a subordinate, that at any given time 2 percent of the people in the Army were doing something he wished they weren’t. It was always, he said, a different 2 percent and different transgressions. And there was nothing either the Congress or he could so about it.

Simply relying on delegating responsibility and authority may be an insufficient defense if the culture is tolerant of misbehavior or the leader incurious when possible transgressions are brought to his or her desk. The Penn State scandal is a higher-education issue, of course, but it is far more than that. It is a leadership issue — an accountability issue — for industry, commerce, government, military, and all walks of communal enterprise. It has to do with criminal activity and with the cover-up — which may in its own way be worse.

Intercollegiate athletics is rife with examples of colleges covering up or providing protection for misbehaving athletes, coaches, and athletic directors — so long as the team is winning and the alumni are donating. The presence of smoke may not indicate a fire, but it is always worth figuring out whether fire is the cause. A conspiracy of silence — either by trying to establish plausible deniability or by simply looking the other way — demeans the core values of an academic enterprise.

Did the president and board [at Baylor](http://www.chronicle.com/article/At-Baylor-a-Scandal-s/239451) learn nothing from the Penn State debacle? Did Penn State learn nothing from [Southern Methodist University?](http://time.com/3720498/ncaa-smu-death-penalty/) Have colleges learned nothing [from Florida State,](http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/florida-state-u-accepts-ncaa-penalties-in-wide-ranging-cheating-scandal/21135) the [Naval Academy,](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-sex-misconduct-case-exposes-flaws-in-how-the-naval-academy-scrutinizes-instructors/2016/06/25/e70a1d22-3241-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7a0_story.html?utm_term=.b1db8d310941) the Universities of [Southern California](http://www.espn.com/los-angeles/ncf/news/story?id=5272615), [Miami,](http://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/6866006/ponzi-schemer-nevin-shapiro-says-provided-benefits-miami-athletes) and [North Carolina](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Widespread-Nature-of-Chapel/149603/)?

How do we make presidents and boards more alert to the temptations to cover up malfeasance or criminality? How do we ensure that any transgressions are reported and acted on promptly and fairly? No one wants to run constant investigations where there’s no indication of impropriety, but no board or president wants to be caught short, either.

How do we make students, faculty, and staff feel responsible for their colleagues’ welfare? What oversight should the faculty exercise over the athletic enterprises of the institution?

Boards and presidents have to find ways to encourage whistle-blowing, despite all the attendant problems of (sometimes deliberately) false reporting. Where can they find best practices to follow? How do they avoid being overly trusting? "Trust but verify?" Again, where might one find best practices to adopt?

These and like questions should be raised and debated on every campus; the solutions and best practices should be codified and publicized.

And what about those fallen sparrows? Presidents are not gods; they’ll make mistakes, errors in judgment about people and events, and occasionally behave badly. Some mistakes are whoppers — others not. Each president can learn from her or his own mistakes, and others can learn from them as well. Its hard to imagine a campus where presidents are not working on statements about the importance of freedom of speech and civil dissent.

Presidents and boards should be asking, "What can we learn from Penn State?" If they don’t have the answers already, they should darn well start looking for them.

Here’s one way to get started. Create a task force to develop a guide to institutional governance of athletic programs in colleges. We would suggest that the task force be formed by the leaders of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, the American Council on Education, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and the National Association of College and University Attorneys. The guidelines, when published, would be used by institutions to develop their own policies and procedures.

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