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January 1, 2012

Penn State Scandal Encompasses Professors, Too

Faculty members demand greater role in university affairs



Nabil K. Mark for The Chronicle

Debra Hawhee, a professor of English at Penn State, stands in front of the Gary Schultz child-care center on the University Park campus. After revelations of Mr. Schultz's involvement in the scandal, she says she struggled to drop off her 2-year-old daughter at the center.

By Robin Wilson

On game days you won't find Robert C. Marshall at the football stadium with the fans flaunting Pennsylvania State University blue and white. Mr. Marshall, chairman of the university's economics department, doesn't like crowds and prefers to spend his Saturdays playing golf or revising a research paper.

So it was unusual for Mr. Marshall, after the Penn State child-abuse scandal broke last fall, to go out and buy both a Nittany Lion ring and a lapel pin. He also fished around in a closet at home and found his sole piece of Penn State paraphernalia: a blue ball cap.

Now he wears the stuff when he's off the campus. It's part of his attempt to tell people what he thinks the university is really about: a place defined more by top-notch academics than by headline-grabbing athletics. "If people want to ask, 'Why are you wearing that?' I will say: 'We are doing fine academic work at Penn State,'" says Mr. Marshall, who points out that his department produces Ph.D. graduates who go on to be professors at institutions like Harvard, Princeton, and New York University.

While most of the national focus following charges of child sex abuse at Penn State has centered on its coaches and administrators, the scandal has reached deep into the professoriate as well. Responding to constant questions has taken an emotional toll on the university's faculty members, who have been asked by neighbors, friends, and fellow academics to explain how something so heinous could happen there.

Mr. Marshall has fielded phone calls from colleagues

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Nabil K. Mark for The Chronicle

Since the scandal, Robert C. Marshall, chairman of the economics department, tells people that academic programs, not attention-grabbing athletics, are Penn State's real strength.

across the country who want a view of the controversy from Ground Zero. "The horror of reading about what happened is just so chilling that people want to reach out and talk about it," he says. "They think because you're at Penn State you have some inside information, and they want you to walk them through the events and try to explain."

In the wake of the controversy—which led to the ouster of both the university's president and its legendary head football coach and to criminal charges against Jerry Sandusky, a former assistant coach—faculty members are also calling for greater emphasis on

academic matters and more faculty involvement in university affairs.

"One of the weird effects of all of this," says Michael Bérubé, a literature professor, "is that the university, in order to try to recover, has to remind people there's a university here."

Penn State's Faculty Senate, which has long felt unempowered on a campus where professors believe academic concerns are overshadowed by big-time sports, has become reinvigorated, holding spirited meetings and challenging decisions by both administrators and the Board of Trustees. Professors have also begun to put an academic spin on the issues raised by the scandal, creating new classes and special symposia to explore the proper balance between athletics and academic priorities and to ask questions about why people sometimes act unethically.

At the same time, they are hoping to minimize the academic fallout of the crisis. Some job candidates have wondered out loud about whether joining the Penn State faculty now is a good idea. And some graduate students have told professors that they are considering leaving because they worry that a Penn State Ph.D. might be a liability.

Professors are trying to reassure them. "I don't see a retrenchment academically at all," says Michael Kulikowski, chairman of the history department, "although it certainly is not business as usual here."

A 'U. of Chicago Moment'

No one affiliated with the university seems to have escaped the public vitriol directed at the campus in the wake of the child-abuse allegations. Robert E. Burkholder, associate head of the English department, takes literature students on field trips to better understand some of the books he assigns. The week before Thanksgiving, he traveled with 18 students up to Cape Cod in a caravan that included two white vans emblazoned with the university's name and logo.

"The young men driving the vans reported they got the finger a lot from other drivers," says Mr. Burkholder. And when the vans were parked at a rest stop along Interstate 80, someone drove by and yelled: "Stop raping people!"

Debra Hawhee, a professor of English at the university, says that after the scandal broke she couldn't stand the thought of having to drop off her 2-year-old daughter at the campus day-care center. The center, which opened last summer, was named after Gary Schultz, a former senior vice president at Penn State, who has been charged with lying to a grand jury and failing to report the alleged child abuse.

But Ms. Hawhee didn't have to worry for long. "During the riots on the campus, someone went up and destroyed the sign and ripped his name off the building," she explains. Since then university crews have removed all of the lettering and painted over it.

Like other professors, Ms. Hawhee—who was a scholarship basketball player at the University of Tennessee in the late 1980s—has wondered whether the scandal represents an opportunity for professors to brand the university more as an academic powerhouse than as an athletic one. "I



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was playing basketball with my faculty friends after this happened, and someone said: "This should be our University of Chicago moment," recalls Ms. Hawhee—a chance for Penn State to ditch big-time sports and focus on the classroom, as Chicago did when it dropped intercollegiate football in 1939.

"No Big 10 school is going to do that," acknowledges Ms. Hawhee. "But maybe this will allow us to work on the culture here to emphasize all aspects of the university."

Russell Frank, an associate professor in the College of Communications, agrees. "I feel like the faculty are oddly invisible to students," he says. "We have this Penn State sports museum, but where is the Penn State academic hall of fame?"

Mr. Frank says the university "will be a better place" when there are life-size cardboard cutouts of famous professors similar to ones of Joe Paterno, Penn State's famous football coach, who was fired as part of the university's response to the charges of child sex abuse.

Of course, Penn State's academic programs have at times benefited from the strength and celebrity of its athletics programs, and in particular from the financial largess of Mr. Paterno. For example, the former coach established a scholarship fund 15 years ago named for the Latin teacher who had taught him and his brother. It provides scholarships to five undergraduates each year in the department of classics and ancient Mediterranean studies. "This is something I'm proud to tell you about," says Paul B. Harvey, the department head. "The students aren't bothered by it, either."

Another irony of the scandal, people on the campus say, is that Graham B. Spanier, who was fired as president and will probably be remembered for failing to react strongly enough to the child-abuse charges, is responsible for significantly improving the institution's academic profile. During his 16 years on the campus, many professors and higher-education experts say, Penn State rose from a regionally known university to one with several top nationally ranked academic departments.

"The national rankings show a huge leap forward for our departments," says Susan Welch, dean of the College of Liberal Arts. According to the National Research Council rankings, she says, Penn State's anthropology is No. 1, and sociology, political science, English, and communication arts and sciences are all in the top 10. Despite the controversy over the child-abuse scandal, she says, applications for next year from prospective undergraduate and graduate student are up over a year ago.

Wrenching Discussions

In the days after the child-abuse charges became known, Ms. Welch's office undertook the wrenching task of reaching out to 700 alumni by phone and e-mail. "I personally called dozens of them to ask them how we could help them deal with this," she says. "Many of them were in tears—it was such an emotional thing."

Some, she says, told her they hadn't felt that bad since a parent had died. "It wasn't just one thing," says Ms. Welch. "It was a combination of sorrow for the victims, sorrow for the loss of Penn State's reputation for always doing things ethically right—which we almost all identify with—and sorrow over the way the board treated Joe Paterno, seen as a living icon of Penn State, after 62 years of service."

Last month Ms. Welch reinstated regular collegewide faculty meetings, which she says had been eliminated because of poor attendance. She also established a committee to oversee special programs professors want to sponsor. "Even though the scandal had nothing to do with the academic side of the university," she says, "it's time for reflection."

Mr. Bérubé is helping organize a symposium in March on academic freedom, contingent faculty, and shared governance. The symposium was on the books before the scandal, but Mr. Bérubé and Milton W. Cole, a professor of physics at Penn State, now want to use it as a way to pump up professors' oversight role at the university. The sports scandal, they say, has empowered professors to try to be more vigilant when it comes to any kind of wrongdoing on the campus and to take a more active role in university affairs.

"The Faculty Senate here has been pretty impotent, historically," says Mr. Cole. As on many campuses, professors at Penn State feel that administrators have at times run roughshod—

cutting academic programs and appointing new deans, for example, without listening to faculty ideas. It's possible, says Mr. Bérubé, that the resurgent interest in faculty governance at Penn State could also lead to an active chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Right now Penn State has just a couple of dozen members.

Donald E. Heller, a professor of education who left Penn State last month to be dean of the College of Education at Michigan State University, predicts that the athletic scandal will push faculty at Penn State to pay closer attention to athletics in general. "There is no question that the faculty believe that athletics at Penn State had gotten out of hand," he says. "This makes all of us more sensitive to student athletes in the classroom and whether they are fulfilling their requirements."

In an opinion column in *The New York Times*, Mr. Bérubé even suggested that if a faculty committee had been able to hear the accusations against Mr. Sandusky, the university might have dealt with them appropriately back when they first surfaced, several years ago.

"I can't say that a good faculty oversight committee would have blown the whistle," says Mr. Bérubé. "But I do know that it creates the possibility of greater transparency."

The Faculty Senate is expected to vote this month on whether the university's trustees should be removed—a symbolic gesture, since professors have no control over the board. "The idea is that trustees might have failed in their obligation to the extent that they had no adequate systems in place to detect these kinds of things," says Larry Catá Backer, a professor of law and international affairs who will take over as chairman of the Faculty Senate this spring. "Conversely, if they had those systems in place and failed to act, that is also a breach of their responsibilities."

In the meantime, professors continue to cope with the national focus on the scandal. This week the history department will send three of its doctoral students to job interviews at the American Historical Association's annual meeting. History professors typically hold mock interviews with students before the meeting, but this year they had to coach students on something new: how to answer questions about the sports scandal.

"We're telling them how to respond very, very briefly and then move on," says Mr. Kulikowski, the department chairman. "We don't want them to shut it down, but to answer calmly and reasonably and make the transition to talking about their own work."

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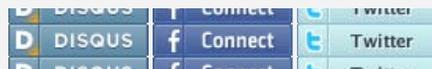
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dsclaussen 1 month ago

Yes, it definitely is Penn State's "U. of Chicago" moment, and it should be the same for all other universities that take academics seriously (which, one would hope, is all of them). Prof. Russell Frank has it exactly right.

16 people liked this. [Like](#)

 **gvyt367850** 1 month ago

"It wasn't just one thing," says Ms. Welch. "It was a combination of sorrow for the victims, sorrow for the loss of Penn State's reputation for always doing things ethically right—which we almost all identify with—and sorrow over the way the board treated Joe Paterno, seen as a living icon of Penn State, after 62 years of service." Sorrow over the way the board treated Paterno?!

20 people liked this. [Like](#)

 **22273509** 1 month ago in reply to gvyt367850

Yea, well, Ms. Welch gets a lot of things wrong and has for some time. One way faculty can re-take their power is to put an end to the practice of the "pocket veto" of tenure has happened to me years ago; what's that you ask? It is where the Dean denies you and doesn't have to send your file forward to the next level. I earned a unanimous positive vote from the department faculty; positive recommendation from the department chair; 6-to-1 positive vote from the College faculty committee; Ms. Welch denied me (after having written a glowing recommendation for a fellowship I richly deserved and was awarded) saying that I "cared too much about [my] students." To get a copy of the denial letter, I had to go to her office and hand copy it. If these aren't AAUP violations, I don't know what is.

As they say, the best revenge is a good life, and mine has improved immensely since leaving Penn State; 17 happy years elsewhere becoming Full Professor and Dean of the largest College and now Provost at a large urban IHE; at both of these institutions, teaching is at the heart and soul of what we do and the way we transform lives is incredible.

There are many good people at Penn State; but too many have cowered in the face of administrators who care only for research \$\$\$ and have basked in the vicarious glory of the athletic programs they now pretend not to like.

19 people liked this. [Like](#)

 **julius97** 1 month ago in reply to gvyt367850

"Penn State's reputation for always doing things ethically right" was open to question during the student protests of 2000-01 that were precipitated by hate mail and death threats sent to students of color. PSU also has a questionable record on the hiring and retention of minority faculty.

The secrecy around the allegations made against Jerry Sandusky has been integral to the management of both sports and academics at PSU. Rene Portland's removal as coach of the female basketball team should have raised questions about the management of PSU several years ago and the problems that result from a lack of transparency within the institution.

Ms. Welch and Mr. Marshall, like Ms. Portland, have laid claims in the article to achieving some national prominence. However, it would be useful for readers to remind themselves that Joe Paterno established similar claims in football - but at what ethical cost to the institution?

While it is understandable that the faculty would like to divorce themselves from the travails of the sports program, it is difficult to believe that the exploitation of a vulnerable population at PSU was restricted to male children.

In effect, what does the Sandusky scandal tell us about the possibility of abuse within the academic programs against women and faculty and students of color?

5 people liked this. [Like](#)

 **elrey97** 1 month ago

Great. This event has brought all the self-important academics out of the closet. A "Professor Hall of

Fame". Suuuure. Get over it folks. It is what it is. Big time athletics help pay for the ridiculous salaries that full-time faculty at a place like PSU make. They allow the school to keep tuition high due to the prominence of the sports programs. Get ready for the enrollment drop-off due to the scandal. When we see faculty hires impacted, we'll get a better idea of the true impact of Sandusky-gate.

8 people liked this. [Like](#)



BemusedObserver2 1 month ago in reply to elrey97

None of that is true, but you're just blowing off steam so everything's fine.

10 people liked this. [Like](#)



elrey97 1 month ago in reply to BemusedObserver2

Looks like it's you blowing off steam. Or maybe it's just a bad case of being in denial. Either way, everything I said is true, and if it's not, prove me wrong.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



sand6432 1 month ago in reply to elrey97

No athletic department money goes to pay for faculty salaries. Indeed, the athletic department is self-supporting, and its budget is controlled separately from the budget for academics.--Sandy Thatcher (former PSU administrator)

13 people liked this. [Like](#)



eugene859 1 month ago in reply to elrey97

Elrey, you claimed that Penn State athletics covers faculty salaries, therefore it is on YOU to back up your assertion. Bet you can't.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



eugene859 1 month ago in reply to elrey97

Wrong, athletic supporter. As others have already pointed out to you, athletics does not cover faculty salaries. In fact, according to NCAA data and many studies, even at most big Division I institutions, college sports programs LOSE money, they operate at a net loss and athletic budgets are in the red. They usually don;t even cover their own expenses, let alone pay for academic salaries. It never ceases to amaze how many believe in the myth of college sports "profits."

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



johnkuhlman 1 month ago

"a chance for Penn State to ditch big-time sports and focus on the classroom,"I will believe it when I see it! The athletic program did not keep the faculty from focussing on research and,maybe, the classroom.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



greeneyeshade 1 month ago

PSU, If the Board needs reform, do it. If Administration needs reform, do that too.

But don't shift administrative responsibilities to the faculty. It's that way in too many places already.

Faculty should teach, research, and advise on administrative matters. Period.

17 people liked this. [Like](#)



gfraenkel 1 month ago

Nowhere in the mission of a university is it said that universities should participate in intercollegiate sports competition. If a university feels it needs athletics for the money then run it as a business divorced from the academic mission. Strictly amateur athletics can remain intramural. Personal athletics has some value. It is healthy. The staff should be paid no more than a PE teacher in an elementary school. For mass entertainment we already have strictly commercial athletics.

8 people liked this. [Like](#)



fayefaye 1 month ago

I wonder how their hiring will go this season. I'm sure they'll be able fill the positions, but any candidate with comparable alternative options may want to side step that maelstrom.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



sand6432 1 month ago

It is a noble ambition for President Erickson to seek some better balance between athletics and academics at Penn State, and I wish him good luck with this endeavor. But it is indicative of the challenge he faces that at the welcome reception for alumni and friends of the university before the TicketCity Bowl, he did not receive a standing ovation after his speech whereas Coach Tom Bradly did. True blue PSU alumni are not about to abandon their support for a strong football program at Penn State.---Sandy Thatcher (Director Emeritus, Penn State University Press)

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



stevec3 1 month ago

Universities in our society operate from a position of moral authority. It gives them license to care for and teach young people. The elevation of the football coach to the literal status of a god and the failure of the administration to respond to this crisis but to cover it up has spent Penn State's moral authority. Old Main is in shambes, bereft.

It is 1855 at Penn State again. Only through returning to their founding mission as a public university can they recover themselves.

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



dheidenreich 1 month ago

The hypocrisy and cynicism that are the essence of big-time intercollegiate sports infect the entire institution. How is it possible that Regents, Trustees, or whatever the governing board is called could allow this fraud to continue? University of Chicago moment, indeed! Where have these people been all these

years?

5 people liked this.

Like



eugene859 1 month ago in reply to dheidenreich

Regents and university administrators believe in the college sports revenue myth, that's why they turn a blind eye. None of them have the guts to abolish the "big" intercollegiate sports like football, thus they continue to throw good money after bad. Meanwhile, tuition goes up & up, way beyond the average rate of inflation, and academic budgets continue to get slashed.

Like



12080243 1 month ago

We're all familiar with the screaming, enthusiastic crowds at Penn State football games, and at our and other universities, too. It's quite empowering. It's quite empowering to Penn State leaders or to our and other university leaders, too. Now, remember the pictures of the screaming, enthusiastic crowds at Hitler rallies. That thought occurs whether we bid for it consciously or not. They're facts. Did the screaming, enthusiastic crowds provide license to Hitler? Do they provide license to other tyrants, or to, by comparison, lesser but disgusting, leaders at Penn State, or amoral leaders at other universities?

How do we control the crowds? How do we control the license they provide to amoral leaders? And the amoral leaders that feed on them? The crowd can't walk away as innocents, can they? The crowd is made up of individuals. Are individuals at Penn State innocents?

The article reports that "Penn State's Faculty Senate, which has long felt unempowered on a campus where professors believe academic concerns are overshadowed by big-time sports, has become reinvigorated, holding spirited meetings and challenging decisions by both administrators and the Board of Trustees...The sports scandal, they say, has empowered professors to try to be more vigilant when it comes to any kind of wrongdoing on the campus and to take a more active role in university affairs."

Over many many years, faculty has witnessed the crowds and "license" they provide to amoral leaders and how they run amuck time and again. And faculty know better. No ifs ands or buts.

We all contribute to the rah-rah PR deceptions our leaders perpetrate on students and the public. We professors know that. None of us is ignorant of this reality. But we let it slip by. We, faculty, allow Penn State type leadership, whether it is at Penn State or my school, the University of Southern Mississippi. My guess is that all individuals at Penn State will, directly or indirectly, pay the price for their participation, however remote, in the child-abuse scandal. Do they deserve censure? Did they participate in, or stand idly by, giving license to miscreant leaders?

My guess is that if Penn State faculty doesn't take this opportunity to get rid of big-money sports, they don't get it. They simply don't get it, yet. And, I don't have to guess about the University of Southern Mississippi. It clearly doesn't get it.

Chauncey M. DePree, Jr., DBA, Professor, School of Accountancy, University of Southern Mississippi and Editor, usmnews

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