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NCAA needs more than rules, rewards

RICK BURTON AND JAMES TERBORG

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If you listen to the leaders of college athletics, many will tell you they are standing on the slippery decks of big, slow-moving tankers foundering among towering waves. Their precious cargo of broadcast, ticket and licensing revenue is threatened by the winds of wrongdoing whistling overhead.

If you look back at March's newspaper headlines, some of America's most venerable institutions suffered through an ice storm of juicy accusations.

The University of Georgia ended its basketball season early based on allegations of academic fraud. Fresno State was held out of the WAC basketball tournament for the same reason. St. Bonaventure basketball shut down early because of an ineligible player. Villanova suspended 12 players for unauthorized phone use. Michigan took down championship banners for using players who allegedly received illicit gifts and money from boosters.

The latest explosion from the boiler room was the study that showed 10 of the schools in the men's Sweet 16 had failed to graduate even half of their players in the last six years.

To say the least, March Madness 2003 had new meaning.

The issue here is that the NCAA's long-standing approach to rules compliance fails far too frequently. The punishment system doesn't inhibit cheating and the lack of quantifiable incentives (to do good) doesn't alter athletic department behavior.

What is needed, and what NCAA chief executive Myles Brand must bring to the table for university presidents, is a new set of intercollegiate sport values such as a culture of honesty and a commitment to uphold university academic standards.

If he does, the cost to the college sports industry could reach the billions.

Think about it. What if Brand determines the love of network TV dollars corrupts the mission of intercollegiate sports on college campuses? What if Brand gets some powerful chancellors and presidents to agree integrity and accountability are more important than dollars or prized recruits? What if he thinks the Ivy League's approach to sport (no scholarships) is a better model?

Given previous research in leadership theory, we would predict Brand will immediately want to discuss organizational values and why NCAA violations occur so frequently. He already knows infractions occur with much greater frequency in revenue sports than in non-revenue sports.

The lure of TV and spectator money for football and basketball, often to underwrite the rest of the athletic department's budget, causes many NCAA schools to color outside the lines. When they get caught, they face sanctions and negative press. That media coverage taints all NCAA institutions and eventually starts bothering the tenured faculty.

What can be done to curb the apparent growth in NCAA violations? Management experts suggest there are three approaches to this dilemma.

One is to rely on rules to punish misconduct. The second is to use money and other rewards as incentives for good conduct. The third relies on commitment to values of integrity.

Rules and incentives operate under the assumption people are rational in pursuit of self-interest. Players, coaches, teams and programs will naturally seek ways to get an advantage — to win, generally at all costs.

Myles Brand must come to grips with flurry of violations.

Rules attempt to "level the playing field" by setting boundaries and by imposing fines and punishment for noncompliance. The NCAA has done this for the last 50 years.

Rules are necessary, but a punitive approach has coaches, athletic departments and universities aspiring just to make it through a season without getting caught.

First, a rule-based approach requires monitoring and surveillance. Without sufficient surveillance and a Kenesaw Mountain Landis approach to iron-fisted integrity (and punishment), rules become bendable guidelines.

Second, rules can't be written for every conceivable behavior or situation, which always leads to finding ways around the rules. This ultimately leads to more rules and requires more surveillance.

Third, rules work only if the punishments are strong enough to serve as genuine deterrents. Unfortunately, current offenders are getting off with slaps on the wrist, while fans, faculty and alumni suffer for acts they didn't commit.

On the flip side, incentives and rewards are the "carrot" to the rules "stick." This approach attempts to control misconduct through contracts that reward desired behavior and outcomes. Thus, Coach K gets X dollars for achieving a specific graduation rate, Y dollars for running a "clean" program, and Z dollars for winning.

The downside to this Pollyanna approach: It's like saying we have a problem with employee absenteeism so we will reward people for showing up to work.

The use of incentives can face the same problems as using rules. It requires constant checking. Incentive-based rewards invariably lead to "bonus envy" where coaches and administrators strive only to pad their own pockets.

Rules and incentives work because of compliance, not commitment. For Brand to change the NCAA, he may need the third approach: values of integrity.

This approach attempts to control misconduct through shared assumptions, norms, guiding principles and other social pressures. The value approach doesn't aim for compliance, but for commitment through internalization of values. And the real beauty of the values approach is governance provided by the institutions themselves, which reduces the need for surveillance.

Think of golf. There are rules and penalties for breaking the rules, but a guiding principle in golf is self-governance. The goal is not to complete a round without getting caught cheating. Rather, to paraphrase UCLA's John Wooden, success is the peace of mind knowing you did your best and played by the rules.

Research shows common values are more powerful and effective in controlling misconduct than rules or incentives. But, almost nothing has been said about values as a method for control. Why?

Values are difficult to create and maintain. Strong values require strong leaders personally committed to self-governance and willing to take immediate action. Brand may be that man.

Think of it this way. Southwest Airlines says it can train an employee to do a job but it hires people based on their ability to deliver Southwest's famous "attitude." If you can't deliver, you're gone.

Creating value control is much more than an ethics policy and lip service to the academic mission of the university. Can you then eliminate rules and incentives? In a word, no. There is a need for rules and incentives, but in support of values and guiding principles, not in place of them. Sports rely on rules, rules depend on trust. Like the hull of a good ship, once the seams are breached, trust is never the same.

It's time to patch the NCAA's creaking prow and build a value system based on the best values of college sport: accountability, clean competition and academic integrity.

Brand may be just the man for that task. If he isn't, the coming violations storm may wash a lot of good folks (and sponsorship dollars) overboard.

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