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Unhappy Valley: What This Week Means and Doesn't for Penn State

BY RODNEY HUGHES ON NOVEMBER 8, 2011 AT 1:22 PM

“Well, I bet you're glad to be off the Board of Trustees this week.”

I've heard this sentiment from a number of family members and friends since horrifying news struck Penn State and its community over the



weekend. I have reacted to this sentiment in two ways. First, I feel fortunate that the three years I spent as a member of the Board of Trustees were years I was able to spend thinking about Penn State's mission. Even financial challenges and at times controversy reinforced for me the importance of higher education and the importance of promoting access to education. Second, I find myself unable to take any joy or solace in my distance from what has emerged. I am and have been excited for some time to be able to work with a successor on the board, but my limited voice to speak to what is happening is immediately apparent to me as I process what is going on along with the rest of our community.

This is a time of unprecedented challenge for our institution. From a board perspective, this is difficult for me because I don't identify anything I could've done differently, and I grieve for what has happened. The board, before anyone else, needs to safeguard this institution and those it serves. Members of the Penn State community have reacted to the news in a variety of ways, and the proceedings have many implications for all our university's constituents.

Students, Staff, and Faculty

Thinking about Penn State's mission as a university in service of a public interest, for current students, staff, and faculty members, allegations leveled at our university mean a lot, but not everything. My faculty members and my classmates are not alleged to have done anything wrong. In theory, my day-to-day life as a student could go on unaffected. However, this is not about how we are tangibly affected. The effect is a change in how we think about our university. There might be a name on my exam, but there is no name on my metaphorical jersey. I have always looked to athletes as symbols of goal achievement and a source of motivation, so being student at Penn State made it easier for me to associate my activities inside and outside the classroom with integrity and hard work. Questions cast upon our administration and our athletic department make these ideals no less relevant and can never invalidate these standards for this community, even as we all await the results of scrutiny of their standard bearers and their most prominent symbols. Current students, staff members, and faculty members with pride in these ideals will need to work even harder to prove that these ideals remain true at Penn State.

Student-Athletes

Our current and past athletes were attracted to Penn State by an environment of "Success with Honor" and cannot be symbolized by the things that have transpired. However, our athletes and their successes are very relevant to the interpretation of these events for our community. "Success with Honor" is a very real thing at Penn State, and it would not have become such a part of the culture of our athletic department and our institution without our athletes backing it up with their actions and their performance over a long period of time. We have no reason to relinquish support for our current or past student-athletes, and all the more reason to be thankful to them that we have such a high standard to which we must now hold everyone in our community accountable.

Alumni

For our alumni (myself included), actions unknown at the time do not nullify experiences we had at Penn State, goals we hoped to achieve there, or goals we hoped to see the institution achieve. Honestly, for many alumni, athletics serves as the glue that maintains the connection between individuals and the institution. I would expect that many alumni will be disillusioned with the institution as a result of the recent events. With respect to philanthropy, I believe the title of the ongoing capital campaign, *For the Future: The Campaign for Penn State Students*, offers an important reminder. At a time of financial challenges to access to the institution, giving is still *for students* and their experiences and for our faculty members and their accomplishments and for the academic mission of our institution and the enrichment of our students' lives, and these events do not change any of that. In practice, the resolution of these events will have a large impact on alumni perceptions of the institution. The necessary processes of discernment and reflection on these matters must occur individual by individual.

Administration

Finally, for the administration, for better or for worse, our leaders have done an impeccable job of creating an image of Penn State as an institution with high ethical standards. Many of us liked to think of Penn State as an institution beyond any wrongdoing. Now, to be fair, you can't just say you're a place that has high ethical standards or a place that is beyond wrongdoing and get anyone to believe you. This kind of image needs to be supported by actions, and it has been for a long time. THON, our Renaissance Fund philanthropy to provide financial support to high-achieving students, a financially self-supporting athletic department, and favorable recognition from the *Wall Street Journal* for Penn State's students' contributions to our economy come to mind. Now, we need to wait for the legal process to unfold and evaluate how well the representatives of our institution have held themselves to the ethical, legal, and professional standards they so effectively created.

Ultimately, recent events have not shaken my faith in the values I associate with Penn State: integrity, hard work, service, academic excellence. We will see how well Penn State maintained its association with those values. I shudder at the thought that it might have sanctioned, implicitly or not, and that one might have carried out a violation of these high ethical standards. For the Penn State community at large, we have no reason to abandon the values we hold dear and every reason imaginable to defend them. Whatever happens, there still is something special about the picture of Penn State we revere, and it might take all the effort we can muster to begin to rebuild it.

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