

The Penn State Scandal: The Cover-Up and Fall-Out

Katie Wood

December 1, 2015

Introduction and Formative Research Phase

Introduction

Jerry Sandusky, former assistant football coach at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State or PSU), was convicted of numerous child molestation crimes in 2012 (Reuters, 2012). The charges resulted from a string of horrifying incidents of sexual abuse that occurred over a fifteen-year period (Reuters, 2012). The case received extensive national media coverage and Penn State received criticism due to allegations that officials at Penn State were aware of the abuse but did not do enough to stop it (Associated Press, 2011b).

Legendary football coach Joe Paterno, who Sandusky worked under, was fired after 46 years as head coach at the school (Associated Press, 2011b; Reuters, 2012). Paterno had been a member of the Penn State staff for over six decades and led the football team to win two national college football championships during his time as coach (Associated Press, 2011b). University President Graham Spanier was also fired (Reuters, 2012). Athletic Director Tim Curley and Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz stepped down from their positions after charges were brought against them for failing to report abuse (CNN Library, 2015).

The Penn State scandal was selected for the case analysis because of the amount of media coverage the scandal received and its relevancy in the public relations field. Four years later, the scandal still receives media coverage. Since a scandal of this nature was very damaging to the reputation of the university, it was necessary for officials at Penn State to release statements regarding how they were planning to move forward (Associated Press, 2011a; Spanier, 2011). The release of statements is an important tool in public relations and is especially important in situations involving a scandal.

The Penn State scandal relates to two areas of public relations. The scandal relates to crisis management because the scandal affected the reputation of the university, due to the belief that certain members of the Penn State staff were aware of the sexual abuse and did not do enough to stop it (Associated Press, 2011b). The case relates to community relations because the university's president and the university's board of trustees had to release statements about the scandal to the public, which included alumni, prospective students, current students and Penn State football fans (Associated Press, 2011a; Spanier, 2011).

Formative Research Phase

The scandal at Penn State deals with the issue of the covering up of child abuse. Sandusky was accused of molesting ten boys over a fifteen-year period, most notably in the football locker room showers on the Penn State campus (Reuters, 2012).

In 1998, Sandusky acted inappropriately toward an 11-year-old boy during an incident in a shower (Reuters, 2012). The boy told his mother about the incident (Reuters, 2012). The boy's mother reported the incident to the university (Reuters, 2012). The university police investigated the incident and no charges were filed (Reuters, 2012). When university police interviewed Sandusky, he admitted to showering with the boy (Reuters, 2012). The university police told Sandusky to never shower with children again (Reuters, 2012). Sandusky retired as defensive coordinator in 1999, but still had access to Penn State athletic facilities (Reuters, 2012).

In 2002, Mike McQueary, who was a graduate assistant at the time, witnessed inappropriate behavior from Sandusky toward a boy (Associated Press, 2011b). McQueary reported the incident to Paterno the following day (Associated Press, 2011b). Paterno notified Curley and Schultz, who then notified Spanier (Associated Press, 2011b).

State law in Pennsylvania requires abuse of this nature to be reported (Associated Press, 2011b). Curley and Schultz were charged with failure to report the incident to authorities (Associated Press, 2011b). Curley and Schultz were also charged with perjury (Associated Press, 2011b). Paterno, Curley and Schultz testified that they were notified of the 2002 incident in which Sandusky behaved inappropriately, but that they did not know the graphic details of the incident that were stated in the testimony by McQueary to a state grand jury (Associated

Press, 2011b). Paterno released a statement which said he was told by McQueary in 2002 about the inappropriate incident in the shower, but that "he (McQueary) at no time related to me the very specific actions contained in the grand jury report (Reuters, 2012)."

It appears that officials at Penn State covered up the abuse perpetrated by Sandusky. Officials at Penn State should have followed the state law and reported the abuse (Associated Press, 2011b). When Sandusky was questioned by university police in 1999 and admitted showering with an 11-year-old boy, he should have had his keys to athletic facilities taken away and been banned from campus. Instead, all they did was give him a warning, which was never to shower with children again (Reuters, 2012). Regarding the 2002 incident, the state police commissioner reprimanded Paterno and other Penn State officials for not acting in a way that would stop the suspected abuse (Associated Press, 2011b).

The main publics affected by the Penn State scandal were the Penn State football fans, students and alumni. The Penn State community, from students to alumni, continues to be divided by arguments over whether Paterno should have been fired (Wolper, 2015). Penn State football fans are one of the main publics involved because the central figures of the scandal were involved in the football program. Paterno was the winningest coach in Division I and had been head coach at Penn State for 46 years (Associated Press, 2011b). A group of alumni is seeking to restore Paterno's legacy (Maher, 2015). The group wants the statue of Paterno that was removed from campus to be restored (Maher, 2015). The group has sued to get details of source material from a report coordinated by former FBI director Louis Freeh that accused Paterno and three former university administrators of conspiring to conceal Sandusky's behavior (Maher, 2015).

Some alumni have struggled to move past the scandal and cannot focus on current issues affecting the Penn State community (Wolper, 2015). Anthony Lubrano and Al Lord are members of the Penn State Board of Trustees who represent a segment of alumni who believe that the reputations of former University President Graham Spanier, former Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz and former Athletic Director Tim Curley and the Paterno legacy were unfairly damaged by the scandal (Thompson, 2015). Lubrano and Lord were present at oral arguments for Spanier, Schultz and Curley before a Pennsylvania Superior Court in August 2015 (Thompson, 2015).

References

Associated Press. (2011a, November 09). Penn State Board of Trustees Statement on Jerry Sandusky Scandal. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved November 28, 2015 from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/09/penn-state-board-of-trustees-statement-scandal_n_1083303.html

Associated Press. (2011b, November 09). Penn State trustees launch sex scandal probe. *CBSNEWS*. Retrieved November 15, 2015 from: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/penn-state-trustees-launch-sex-scandal-probe/>

CNN Library. (2015, January 26). Penn State Scandal Fast Facts. *CNN*. Retrieved November 29, 2015 from: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/28/us/penn-state-scandal-fast-facts/>

Maher, K. (2015 September 18). Football Fans Press Penn State To Restore Joe Paterno's Legacy. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved November 29, 2015 from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/football-fans-press-penn-state-to-restore-joe-paternos-legacy-1442606493>

Reuters. (2012 October 09). TIMELINE: Jerry Sandusky sex abuse case. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved November 15, 2015 from: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-10-09/business/sns-rt-usa-pennstate-timeline-update-111e8199cm-20121009_1_coaches-association-names-sandusky-university-police-interview-sandusky-jerry-sandusky

Spanier, G. (2011, November 05). Statement from President Spanier. *Penn State News*. Retrieved November 28, 2015 from: <http://news.psu.edu/story/153819/2011/11/05/statement-president-spanier>

Thompson, C. (2015, August 11). Former Penn State administrators press case for dismissal of Sandusky cover-up charges before a Pa. appeals court. *PennLive*. Retrieved November 29, 2015 from: http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2015/08/former_penn_state_administrato_10.html

Wolper, C. (2015, November 9) Sandusky sex abuse case continues to have impact on Penn State community four years later [Editorial]. *Daily Collegian*. Retrieved on November 29, 2015 from: http://www.collegian.psu.edu/opinion/editorials/article_1454abbc-8667-11e5-817a-d7327b5d6e0f.html