

**Midwest Metropolitan University Memorandum**

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HIED 842: Administrative Leadership in Higher Education

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**MEMORANDUM**

To: Office of the President  
From: MMU Presidential Advisor to the University  
Re: Discontinuation of Sports Programs

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In response to your request, the following is an in-depth analysis of the University of Alabama – Birmingham (UAB) which is a similarly structured university that briefly discontinued multiple sports programs due to budgetary constraints. Through the evaluation of formal structures of leadership and corresponding theoretical frameworks coupled with explicit and implicit power dynamics, I aim to share my thoughts on Midwest Metropolitan University's (MMU) possible discontinuation of sports programs and lessons to be learned from UAB.

MMU's historical commitment to shared governance demonstrates an organizational structure where decisions must be made in collaboration with members of executive governance as well as faculty and staff. In other words, the structure is "value based, in which the entire community shares agreed upon understandings of the mission, vision, and priorities of the organization" because shared governance is the practice of valuing the opinions of faculty as greater than or equal to the opinions of administrators throughout a decision-making process, (Penn State World Campus, n.d.a., p. 11). Despite the benefits of shared governance, when making decisions of great importance to the institutional constituents, the model is susceptible to delays and inefficiency.

However, MMU's recent shift to resembling a corporate governance structure is a seemingly convenient choice as it is designed to balance "the interests of a company's many

stakeholders, such as shareholders, senior management executives, customers, suppliers, financiers, the government, and the community" (Chen, 2020). Corporate governance is focused on attaining goals and attributes final decision-making power to the executive leadership of an institution. This allows decisions to be made quickly whereas shared governance is reliant on satisfying many faculty opinions.

UAB's president, Ray L. Watts, embraced the tempting convenience and efficiency that is indicative to corporate governance decision-making by unilaterally deciding to discontinue the university's football, rifle, and bowling teams stating that, "it would have been 'disruptive' to lay out the financial challenge for a public discussion and ... unfair to put prospective players and coaches and their families ' in limbo for six to 12 months while we tried to figure this out"(Gardner, 2015, para. 6). Tragically, President Watts neglected to utilize Bolman and Deal's (1991) four frames either politically by involving key stakeholders in the decision or structurally by engaging formally "among both internal and external" institutional leaders (Penn State World Campus, n.d.a, p. 9). This exclusion left President Watts isolated in assuming public responsibility for the decision to downsize the UAB athletics program.

This perceived egregious abandonment of shared governance in the name of temporary budget alleviation and timeliness pushed the UAB Faculty Senate to respond publically. They passed two resolutions of no confidence in President Watts stating, "he has failed to apply principles of shared governance to selection of university administrative officers, disbanding of the athletic programs, changes in academic operations and changes in faculty benefits" (Stein, 2019, para. 5). Soon after, the Undergraduate and Graduate Student Governments passed their votes of no confidence in Watts showing "courage" and solidarity in their frustration in the violation of governance structure (Stein, 2019, para. 28).

This outrage did not end with faculty and students but rippled through all university stakeholders including alumni, local politicians, and community members (Wright, 2019). Ultimately, constituencies requested three things, "to commission an independent study of the athletics program's economics...[the chance] to try to raise enough money to cover the projected budgetary shortfalls...and have a voice in whatever decision about the program might arise after the study was finished" (Gardner, 2015, para. 10). These requests are logical, although surely time-consuming, and likely would have been addressed if President Watts did not violate UAB's commitment to a shared governance decision-making and communication process.

MMU should be careful when making decisions that violate shared governance even if they are made in the interest of saving the university time and money because, as UAB has shown, shared governance is an institutional power that demands to be respected, either before the decision in a constructive way or after a decision in a destructive way. It is possible to keep a majority of the decision-making power in the executive leadership by allowing faculty to express governance in a consultive or distributive way rather than being fully collaborative (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Either of these less involved models, or a hybrid of the two, would allow faculty to be involved without sacrificing time and efficiency.

Additionally, MMU should be conscious to strategically frame their decisions both structurally by acknowledging environmental and influential actors within the institution and politically by positioning stakeholders to persuade or coerce constituents when needed (Penn State World Campus, n.d.b.). Although these two of Bolman and Deal's (1991) four frames are contradictory in structure, using them simultaneously is beneficial. In the case of UAB, members of the faculty council were not considered as influential actors within the institution, and

members of the Birmingham community were not seen as invested in the football team or needing coercion.

One way UAB could have coerced the members of the community, alumni, athletic boosters, and other constituents to be open to ending the program is to approach the problem through communication and propose a long-term solution. For example, President Watts could have made the financial state of the athletics program public and set clear financial goals that the program needed to meet within four years, so current student athletes will have time to graduate or transfer programs, to avoid terminating various programs. This way, the athletic boosters would still need to rally financially but also have time to accept the possibility that the program should be terminated. Ultimately, President Watts was forced to accept the external environment and its community's impact on the organization and assume an open perspective while implementing this political framing (Penn State World Campus, n.d.b.).

Structurally, the role of the president of an institution is the leader of the executive governance and must keep the institutional mission as a priority. Although President Watts made many mistakes, ultimately, he made the autonomous decision to implement changes that he believed were mission-oriented fiscal decisions. "He refused to take even more of the university's money away from its academic and health-care missions to support the football program" (Gardner, 2015, para. 5); (Penn State, World Campus, n.d.d). President Watts operated within the Rational Perspective in supporting UAB's clearly defined roles through using his executive influence to support the institution's long-term strategic plan which emphasizes academics, research and innovation, community engagement, and patient care (UAB strategic plan). MMU should acknowledge the strength in choosing to make a controversial decision that will ultimately support the institution's mission while also contemplating the organization in the

natural and open perspectives so explicit and implicit contributing factors as well as external environment influence the execution of the decision made (Penn State World Campus, n.d.a).

UAB, like MMU, is an existing part of a multi-campus, public institutional system that is governed by a Common Statewide Governing Board of Trustees (Penn State World Campus, n.d.a). Also, like MMU, the University of Alabama System (UA) includes a nationally recognized football team on another campus. As a result, the UA board of trustees has traditionally “opposed UAB football” and has acted on this bias by once denying a UAB request to build a new facility due to financial constraints yet approving a large salary contract for the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa football coach the next year (Varner & Marley, n.d.; Archibald, 2019, para. 18). This campus favoritism from the board of trustees is coupled with internal corruption. Trustees are tightly connected by marriage or family ties to the executive leadership of Bryant Bank which could pose implicit pressure for institutions to act in the best interest of the Bank rather than with a trustee mentality that prioritizes the success of the institution (Archibald, 2019). Although UA is a public institution, Archibald (2019) argues that the UA board of trustees is a self-perpetuating body who “trades unfairly on Alabama loyalty” and “acts like a family business, interrelated and dependent, compromised and compromising” (para. 26; para. 15). This corruption within the UA board of trustees should serve as a warning to MMU to evaluate the informal structures of influence within the executive leadership.

MMU would be wise to gauge public interest and intangible benefits of football and other athletic programs before eliminating them. At UAB, the alumni association and booster club caused an uproar among informal university constituents reflecting the cultural importance college football has specifically in the South. Despite UAB being the least successful football team in the UA system as well as several recent mediocre seasons and consistent low attendance

to home games, UAB alumni and football fans raised nearly \$6 million in pledges to cover expenses related to reinstating UAB's football program (Talty, 2019). This unexpected financial support reflects another instance of implicit influence on university decisions. Various benefits also accompany collegiate football including name recognition, camaraderie, and even financial contracts from broadcasting companies (New, 2015).

In going forward with the choice to eliminate or maintain the football program at MMU, I advise keeping budgetary constraints in mind but not positioning them as the only variable. MMU should acknowledge the benefits of transparent communication with not only executive leadership, but also faculty, staff, and other constituents who are implicitly involved in university decisions. Most important is maintaining MMU's existing shared governance structure to make collaborative and informed decisions.

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