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Not ready for the big time

UIS stumbles into the NCAA

BY RACHEL WELLS



As the University of Illinois Springfield in October 2008 made another move toward full membership in the National Collegiate Athletic Association, then-Chancellor Richard Ringeisen said the eventual achievement could only mean good things for the school's future.

He said he was excited because joining the Great Lakes Valley Conference, an academically high-achieving NCAA Division II organization, meant competing against highly respected, better-known schools. "They're all the kind of universities we don't mind seeing our name in the paper with," Ringeisen said during the press conference.

To be sure, since that day, the newspapers have more than once mentioned UIS' athletics department in the same breath as a number of fine institutions with which it's competed. But the papers also continue to feature UIS athletics in a negative light, time and time again, as the school struggles through scandals that just won't die.

The most publicized scandal has been the alleged sexual assault of softball players by one of their coaches while in Florida for a spring break tournament in 2009. The following fall, headlines turned heads as the papers detailed the arrest of three soccer players in connection to an alleged hate crime. Beyond those

highly visible incidents, UIS' athletics program also has been plagued by low fan turnout, a budget that lacks stability and an internal struggle on the part of faculty for more information, involvement and control than administrators have allowed. While university administrators and athletic department leaders say the problems are merely growing pains, others say they're more like shin splints, the pain of which is eased only by encouraging discussion beyond the immediate borders of the athletics program.

With the spring break incident serving as a tipping point, faculty sought to meet that end by creating an investigative committee. Headed by Dr. Barbara Hayler, professor emeritus, the committee at the beginning of this year issued a report with 31 different recommendations that centered on academic integrity and quality, student-athlete welfare, campus governance of athletics and fiscal responsibility. Many of the recommendations were repeats from two earlier reports, one developed in 2008 as UIS prepared to enter NCAA and one created in 2004 by a task force formed in response to, among other things, a star basketball player's drug arrest.

While Hayler still is not satisfied with the university's progress, others say they are pleased with what the university has accomplished so far and are optimistic work toward improving UIS' athletics program will continue.

Faculty v. Ringeisen

For years, faculty, through the campus senate's Intercollegiate Athletics Committee, sought more involvement with and information about the continued development of the athletic department. Despite a request by the 2004 IAC task force for more direct interaction with Ringeisen, the now-retired chancellor never once met with the committee over the course of about five years, according to 2009 campus senate documents calling for the latest investigation.

"At the time, there was a sense that the athletics program was beset with so many problems," says Dr. Tih-Fen Ting, professor of environmental science and the current chair of the campus senate. "There was a sense that those reports were not being closely followed up, or there was no sense of where we were."

After Ringeisen made his first official announcement in 2007 regarding the school's now-completed quest for NCAA Division II membership, both faculty and students officially expressed support – the move was expected to improve campus life, a continuing struggle for the university that not long ago served only upperclassmen. Still, some professors felt they had little say in the matter.



"We did make a recommendation that there were a lot of potential benefits for the university to make this move," says Dr. Ryan Williams, a criminal justice professor and former chair of the faculty-led Intercollegiate Athletics Committee, the advisory group that ordered the investigative report of UIS athletics after the spring break incident. But he adds: "In a sense, the decision had already been made to move to the NCAA. It was a done deal."

Hayler echoes Williams' sentiments. She says there hasn't been much faculty input or opportunity for faculty members to offer advice since the administration decided to enter the NCAA. "It's been that way since 2007 when the chancellor held a press conference and announced we were going to apply for membership in the NCAA without having ever talked to the campus senate or any of the governance bodies on campus. ... That just kind of set the tone for what's been going on the last three or four years."

That trend continued as news broke of the spring break incident. Williams, then head of the IAC, says administrators only kept him apprised of the subsequent personnel shifts. He learned of all the other details through the daily newspaper.

Discontent with the administration grew louder and a closed faculty meeting in April 2009 resulted in an overwhelming vote of no confidence in Ringeisen and athletic director Rodger Jehlicka. According to the student newspaper, *The Journal*, faculty members found that Ringeisen and Jehlicka had neither the will nor the competence to make necessary changes within and around the athletics department to ensure it plays an appropriate role within the educational institution. The resolution also raised the issue of whether an individual department could reliably evaluate its own actions without oversight from a more detached body, such as the IAC.

Days later, the campus senate approved a resolution creating Hayler's investigative committee. In the resolution, faculty stated that Ringeisen had "engaged in a lengthy pattern of

unilateral actions in aggrandizing the role of intercollegiate athletics at UIS without consulting the various stakeholders in the UIS community.”

Despite UIS’ continued silence, the nearly two-year-old spring break scandal reemerged this month in the State Journal-Register as it reported on a \$200,000 settlement to students for alleged sexual assault by a softball coach. The university’s secrecy over the softball coaches’ resignations caused the school to become the first entity subpoenaed by the attorney general under a one-year-old Freedom of Information Act law.

UIS junior Kelli Kubal, a goalie on the women’s soccer team and a student member of the IAC, agrees with the administration that keeping details of the spring break incident to a minimum was the best route. But she adds that the disagreement between faculty and administrators over who should know what only contributed to the athletic program’s sense of isolation from the rest of campus – something student-athletes are trying to overcome. “The two groups are miscommunicating or not communicating at all, and it feels like it’s the athletes who bear the burden of it.”

Coach v. athlete

Hayler wrote in her report that it’s important for UIS “to develop and enforce its own policies, beyond those required by the NCAA” in order to ensure UIS’ main priority continues to be academics, not athletics. It’s an issue she feels is at the center of the non-renewal of several student-athlete scholarships by a visiting coach. The university hires coaches and faculty on a “visiting” basis when there’s not enough time to complete a full new-hire search, which was the case after Roy Gilmore and Joe Fisher, the softball coaches involved in the spring break scandals, were forced to resign. Coaches can hold a visiting appointment for up to three years.

Gilmore and Fisher had been head coaches for a total of three different teams, including the women’s basketball team, to which UIS appointed Marne Fauser as a visiting coach. Fauser worked with the existing team for one season before, in February 2010, informing six of nine players that they no longer would receive student-athlete scholarship assistance.



While the players were allowed to appeal the decision, the review was merely procedural, and dismissed basketball player Kelly Thompson, now a junior at UIS, says she still hasn’t received a satisfactory explanation as to how she failed to live up to expectations. The team owned a lousy wins record by the end of the 2010 season, but it isn’t doing much better this year, Thompson says. She alludes to UIS’ recent loss against Truman State, where former UIS player Erin Glogovsky transferred after Fauser revoked her scholarship. During the game, Glogovsky took 10 rebounds within her 16 minutes of playing time.

Citing NCAA rules that explicitly state that athletes’ scholarships are guaranteed for one year only, the university administration stands behind Fauser’s decision. Interim chancellor Harry Berman says the position of a visiting coach is much like his position as interim chancellor – just because it is temporary doesn’t mean it doesn’t have all the same responsibilities of a permanent position. A visiting professor, for instance, is required to design his or her own course and award grades to students, Berman says.

Williams, too, draws on the faculty analogy but comes to the opposite conclusion. “In my classroom, if a student is not performing ... I do not have the ability to throw them out of my

class and tell them they can’t come back. I have to work with them. I have to teach them. At UIS, I have to do it in an excellent fashion. I think that’s part of what I do as a teacher.” He says the same should be true of a coach and his or her team members.

Hayler agrees, asking which should come first, the coach's desire to develop a winning team or the well-being of the student. She adds that few, if any, of UIS' athletes will or expect to go on to play professional ball – academics are their first priority.

While Thompson says she was told she didn't "have enough heart," the university itself refuses to state specifically why the women lost their scholarships, something with which Williams takes issue. At other schools, he says, coaches explain why a student is no longer on a team. "At the U of I, if the starting center is not playing a game, you would know why. They would tell you. It might be a vague explanation, but you would know why."

Hayler admits that other schools surely choose not to renew scholarships on a regular basis, but questions whether any school has ever revoked scholarships for two-thirds of a team.

When the administration cites NCAA rules that say scholarships can only be issued for one-year terms, alarms should be sounding, Williams says. "I like to think that institutions are not run on what the NCAA says is proper, but what we, as an institution, say is proper."

Both Hayler and Williams say the coach shouldn't necessarily be the focus of the discussion – Fauser's February 2010 decision was supported by both the athletic director and the chancellor.

The administration did, however, offer non-athletic scholarships to Thompson and her fellow former teammates. "I think it [the alternative scholarships] says that they know they made a mistake," says Thompson, who accepted the offer. "It looks like an act of kindness to where it's like, 'Well, you know, our athletics program screwed you over, so we're going to help you out' – which shouldn't happen."



Though the administration says the scholarship revocations were justified, vice chancellor for student affairs Tim Barnett says the conversation isn't necessarily over. "In the future, if we have an issue that comes up similar to this last time, when more than one athlete may not have the scholarship renewed, we'll probably have a broader discussion about that," he says, adding that if a similar situation occurs again the university would likely "look at rationale and the reasons why that decision was important to be made."

Goals v. reality

Former Chancellor Ringeisen, who oversaw the initiation of UIS' move to NCAA, saw building a thriving athletics program as a way to attract more students to UIS. The name NCAA itself and the stepped-up competition would provide a more enriching experience for students on campus.

Interim Chancellor Berman has a similar vision. "We have a challenge here at UIS. We have 1,100 students living here on campus, we're away from downtown, and we see athletics as a big part of what we can do to build a sense of community right here on campus."

That goal for a campus community rallied around athletics has yet to be achieved, though students both on and off campus continue to provide the majority of funding for the program. In FY09, the student athletic fee alone accounted for 58 percent of the final budget for athletics. From FY07 to FY10, full-time student athletics fees, with the blessing of the student body, rose by 38 percent from \$96 to \$132. The athletics programs are

also supported by parts of other fees, including a special fee for the Recreation and Athletics Center (TRAC), the home-away-from-home for student athletes.

Even with student fees, UIS athletics isn't breaking even. In FY09, athletics ended the fiscal year with a \$267,000 deficit, spending a total of \$1.46 million, a few hundred thousand dollars more than the \$1.16 million expected to be spent that year when administrators developed a five-year plan in 2007.

Though the move to NCAA has come at a financial cost – and a greater one than originally expected, Berman says it's worth it. "It's an investment and whenever you get into building something, starting something new, you have to put money in up front, before the thing straightens itself out financially."

To help stabilize the athletics budget and reduce its reliance on student fees, UIS is working toward a reinforced fundraising strategy, says Scott Reed, assistant director for athletics communications.

To help integrate the athletics department with the rest of campus, student-athletes and faculty are working on several initiatives, says Dr. Marcel Yoder, faculty athletics representative and professor of psychology. "The participation in any co-curricular activity ... is an important part of these students' lives and that importance needs to be recognized," he says. To meet that end, he's working to partner faculty members with athletic teams in a sort of mentor program, in which faculty members attend practices and games to see what it's like to be a student athlete. "Faculty will get an idea of what student-athletes' lives are like, of the pressure on coaches. ... It also will give student-athletes and coaches a broader perspective of how faculty thinks about academic performance and athletics."

Yoder hopes the general student and student-athlete populations can be brought together through initiatives including game-night recognition of academically high-achieving students and the practice of professors, before beginning instruction, allowing students in any activity to announce upcoming events.



"There are a lot of great things that our student-athletes do," Yoder says. "We have tended to get tied up into what staff and administrators have done and we've kind of lost track of the good things students are doing." He lists student-athletes' collective GPA (higher than that of the overall student population) and volunteer activities, as parts of UIS athletics that many don't realize. Of UIS' recent troubles, most of it has not been about the student-athletes themselves doing wrong, Yoder adds.

Working it out

Kubal says tension between faculty and the administration seems to have eased some since Ringeisen's October retirement. Formerly UIS' provost, interim chancellor Harry Berman took over for Ringeisen this past fall, but the new chancellorship is just the latest in a string of shifting positions related to athletics occurring over the past few years. The department now deals with a new administrative liaison and a new IAC chair, among other recently shuffled positions.

New IAC chair Dr. Lynn Fisher, a professor of sociology and anthropology, says that the new personalities are working well together but adds that the last batch of personalities was probably not the heart of the problem. The more influential factor was likely

the disagreement over the role of the IAC and how much information it should get and when. In most academic concerns, faculty decisions aren't merely advisory – they have a more direct impact on the direction of the university; however, in other aspects of the university, faculty members play more of an advisory role, she explains.

In the fall of 2009, the IAC changed its bylaws in an attempt to clarify the matter, but whether debate will continue on the role of the IAC remains to be seen. At the very least, communication is improving among the athletic department, administration and faculty. Faculty leaders are now invited to regular lunches with coaches, have been involved with athletic department hiring and are receiving regular reports on student-athlete discipline and athletics' fiscal condition.

"So much depends on a mutual sense of trust that I think we have developed now on the basis of the administration having really been forthcoming with communication with its leaders. ... That takes you a long way," Berman says. "Whatever was, was. What about right now?"

Asked if UIS was ready to move to NCAA when it did, considering the issues that have since arisen, Berman says, 'yes.' "We did the best planning we could, but there also is that reality you face when your dream comes true and then it's sort of like be careful what you wish for. You can't possible anticipate all of the reality."

Thompson says UIS' readiness to enter NCAA Division II was affected most by the turnover in coaches that resulted from the spring break incident, as well as other personnel changes. "The fact that we had to get, like, four new coaches really didn't help a lot," she says. "When you get new coaches coming in ... it's more pressure versus motivation."

Fisher points to change in general as a difficult force with which to deal, especially for a school of UIS' size. "I don't know what it would mean to be ready. It sounds like making the transition before you make the transition," she says. "I feel as if we've had a lot of new things to contend with. ... This campus changes with energy and excitement, and that's one of the things I love about it. I also know that change can be very demanding for the people who work here because, unlike a bigger university, often it's just one person who's in charge of something that's handled by a big office full of people at another institution."

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