

## The Unbearable Truth: A Case Study Evaluation of Baylor's Rape Scandal

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In most public relations case studies, one can easily pinpoint the specific area of public relations it relates to. Is it a crisis situation? Is it an issue of employee or community relations? Public relations professionals can easily organize cases into these categories. But in the recent case of Baylor University's series of scandals, the details are much murkier.

After a football player was convicted of sexually assaulting a fellow athlete in 2015, Baylor University hired two attorneys from Pepper Hamilton to investigate the university's handling of sexual assault accusations (Timeline, Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017). The attorneys found that Baylor's responses to allegations of sexual violence were slow, unacceptable, and unsupportive of the victims. (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017).

Furthermore, the investigators discovered that "university administrators [had] directly discouraged complainants from reporting or participating in student conduct processes, or ... contributed to or accommodated a hostile environment. In one instance, those actions constituted retaliation against a complainant for reporting sexual assault..." They also recommended that Baylor take certain steps to correct these issues. (Baylor University, 2016).

In the two years after the report's release, allegations arose of more than 50 acts of rape by 31 football players, although Baylor's board of regents only acknowledges 19 players that were involved (Mervosh, 2017). The university's head football coach Art Briles was fired, as

was the school's athletic director; Ken Starr, Baylor's president, was demoted to chancellor (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017).

Pepper Hamilton's investigation sparked a smoldering crisis for Baylor, and they have spent the past two years attempting to manage it. Because of the pervasive nature of college athletics, this situation impacts employees (current players, coaching staff, and faculty) and the Baylor community (fans, students, and even local businesses who rely on Baylor football's popularity) as well.

In public relations, practitioners must be prepared to handle complaints honestly and truthfully. By ignoring the allegations and coercing victims not to press charges, Baylor broke several PR rules. And when the report was released, Baylor had no defense.

So how did Baylor attempt to address the crisis? Before the report was released, they distributed small signs with the phrase "Real Men Respect Women" by the practice field (Mervosh, 2017). And after firing several coaches and the athletic director, they hired Merrie Spaeth, an eminent crisis-management specialist, to help monitor media relations (Czarnecki, 2016). The school also brought in Brenda Tracy, who works with victims of sexual assault, to speak to the team. Tracy later spoke about the situation harshly, saying she was reprimanded afterward by an antagonistic football staffer (Lavigne, 2016).

At first, Baylor took strong actions, bringing in a third-party to investigate, and then they responded appropriately to the crisis by firing the various parties involved, despite their popularity on campus. A month later, the university's interim president claimed the school was implementing the 105 recommendations offered by the report, and Baylor created task forces and a dozen teams to implement them. Baylor did refuse to release the full Pepper Hamilton report,

though, despite calls for its release from the Big 12 Conference, the Baylor Line Foundation, and Baylor alumni (Ericksen, 2016).

Garland promised to double the size of the school's counselors, and the school later created a trauma recovery team to train staff in dealing with cases of sexual assault. The school invested \$900,000 into expanding its counseling center and offered students unlimited, free visits (Lewis, 2016). Baylor's Title IX coordinator Patty Crawford later spoke to the media positively about the new changes, saying that she had received zero pushback from the administration (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017). In August, the school pushed toward transparency with the creation of a page on its website for tracking progress on the report's recommendations. Baylor also created a new website, in which students could report Title IX violations, and they established a hotline for students to report crises (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017). Two months later, Baylor held a forum on campus for students to discuss sexual violence on college campuses (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017). On ESPN College Gameday, ex-coach Briles even took responsibility for the program's misdeeds, acknowledging his need to improve (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017).

Baylor made a strong effort, and it seemed like the school was recovering. They had taken a lot of necessary steps, and they seemed to be making progress. And then it fell apart.

In October, Crawford abruptly resigned, citing resistance from senior leadership. (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017). Baylor accused her of attempting to profit from the scandal. More lawsuits began to add up, as the fan base grew restless. Soon a grassroots movement began to lobby for Briles' reinstatement as coach. Soon after, the U.S. Department of

Education began investigating the Title IX violations at Crawford's request (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017).

However, their quick actions offended many members of the Baylor fan base, which then divided the school. Also, because many of the parties involved refused to accept responsibility or to move on, sordid details emerged through a series of lawsuits against the university.

Later on, various coaches (including the current [women's basketball coach](#)) and [Starr](#) complained about the negative media attention, often declaring that the school or Briles was the victim of media attacks (Timeline: Baylor Sexual Assault Controversy, 2017).

In the two years since the scandal began, several other school employees have been arrested. After TCU's football victory over Baylor in November 2016, one of Baylor's public image officials was arrested on charges of assault for his purported attack on a sportswriter (CBS News, 2016). In February 2017, assistant strength and conditioning coach Brandon Washington was arrested on charges of soliciting a prostitute (Inabinett, 2017). A former basketball manager was also arrested on charges of harassment after he sent explicit messages to women he did not know (Hoppa, 2017).

Ex-president Starr later claimed that the media had treated Briles unfairly and that he was an honorable man (Watson, 2016). Boosters lobbied for Briles to be rehired, and the disgraced coach told the media that he was innocent of any wrongdoing (Grosbard, 2016). Text messages later revealed that Briles was complicit in several cover-ups and worked actively to get charges against players ignored or dismissed (Mervosh, 2017).

To this day, legal action against Baylor is proceeding after a judge rejected Baylor's motion to have it dismissed (Judge: Federal Lawsuit Against Baylor Can Proceed, 2017). Texas

Rangers are investigating the situation, and many football players have deserted the program, deciding to transfer elsewhere (Mervosh, 2017). However, Baylor saw a large spike in early applicants in 2016, a 19% jump over the previous year (Mervosh, 2017). And as of March 20, Baylor had drawn a record number of applicants, hinting that the university's brand remains strong. (Baylor Draws Record Number of Applications Despite Scandal, 2017).

So, which of Baylor's publics have been affected by this scandal? Their fans, their employees and football players, their boosters, the sexual assault victims, and potential students were all affected. But although Baylor initially responded well after the situation was publicized, the school's culture remained unchanged. And after that initial effort, many members of the Baylor family refused to recognize the seriousness of the situation, and many of them brushed off the staff's transgressions. This led to the booster's campaign to rehire Briles, and it was the catalyst for the defensive remarks and complaints about the media coverage. After the initial round of firings, it appears that many of Baylor's fans, alumni, and staff believed that they should no longer suffer. But because the issues were not being sufficiently addressed and the oppressive culture remained, the media refused to stop. Plus, the constant legal trouble and investigations that have plagued the school seem to prevent the school from recovering.

In our opinion, Baylor should have continued to take responsibility, worked to change the culture, and continued to push for transparency. They also should have done a better job of hiring new coaches and personnel to avoid the future arrest headlines. They should have worked harder to implement Pepper Hamilton's recommendations. Also, a stronger, unified social media campaign denouncing rape and sexual violence would have helped Baylor. But the school's traditional, conservative nature seems to have prevented these steps from taking place. Much like in the Catholic church and Penn State's pedophilia scandals, the administration worked to keep

the embarrassing, taboo incidents quiet in efforts to maintain a sterling reputation, which hurt the victims.

Other universities should note Baylor's actions and work toward fighting sexual violence on their campuses. Also, transparency is important. Schools should be open about sexual assault investigations, and they should promote justice and awareness for the issue, not repression. College football is a huge deal in NCAA Power 5 programs, and successful schools experience huge financial gains, higher attendance rates, a flourishing local economy and more. Before Briles was fired, he was making more than \$4 million per year. When star players are accused of rape and other illegal actions, administrators and fans often wish they could look the other way. But in this world of increasing connections and a 24/7 news cycle, these administrators should be very careful about ignoring crimes and their victims. Baylor is currently paying the price, although they seem to have successfully reached many students, faculty, and fans with their own message of media oppression and their own status as victims of a belligerent, offensive media.

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