Case in Point: The “Traditions” of Bluebonnet State University

The Case

Bluebonnet State University (BSU) is a comprehensive public institution, with an enrollment of 25,000 students, primarily undergraduate. Founded in 1913, this regional school is competing with peer institutions to advance its status as one of the state’s premier institutions, and has embarked upon a multi-million dollar capital campaign to benefit several areas of the campus. With a long history of rich tradition and strong alumni support, the fundraising effort is expected to provide much needed funds for programs, services and construction projects, supplementing the dwindling financial support received from the state and propelling its reputation as a top-tier state institution.

As the newest administrator on campus, you have been hired to serve in the role of Vice President for Student Affairs (VPSA), not only for your exemplary professional reputation at your previous institution, but also for the close ties you maintained as an alumna with BSU. During your first six weeks on the job, you conducted a “Listening Tour,” meeting with a variety of constituents across the university and within the community. Your goals are to immerse yourself in the university’s campus culture, and to reacquaint yourself with a campus that has drastically changed in the 20 years since you completed your undergraduate degree.

As you met with student leaders and alumni, you became concerned with the repeated use of the word “tradition” when referencing student events and activities. While no one has explicitly used the word “hazing,” it seems to be implied when you discussed the current culture of student life. From alumni, many of whom have already pledged significant amounts to the capital campaign, you receive a “nod and a wink” as if to imply that you understand these behaviors since you were once an undergraduate on that campus. From students, you are left with the impression they believe you will be sympathetic with the status quo and not “rock the boat.”

While reviewing your notes from the “Listening Tour,” you receive a phone call from the Dean of Students to alert you that his office initiated two hazing investigations. One matter involves allegations that several new members of a professional business fraternity were subjected to acts of servitude and drinking-related games throughout their pledge program, and most of the new members are under the age of 21.

The second hazing allegation involves members of the marching band who returned from this past weekend’s football game. The section leaders subjected the freshmen to severe beatings in order to join the secret fraternity that resulted in two members being rushed to the hospital.

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As you hang up the phone, your assistant brings you several messages from alumni you know personally or met since you returned to campus who would like to speak with you immediately about the hazing investigations. The majority of the names you recognize as top donors from the capital campaign. There is also a message from your colleague, the Vice President for Development, as well as a message from your supervisor, the President, both requesting an immediate return call regarding the hazing allegations.

It seems as if BSU’s “traditions” may be changing sooner than expected. What do you do next?

WHAT ARE THE RELEVANT ISSUES?

WHO ARE THE STAKEHOLDERS?

WHAT IS YOUR PLAN OF ACTION/RECOMMENDATION?
Lisa Perez
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

What are the relevant issues?

Allegations of hazing within student groups:

- Professional business fraternity: acts of servitude & underage drinking
- Marching band: freshmen subjected to beatings from section leaders; serious injuries leading to hospital visit

Current university capital campaign potential donations could be negatively impacted due to hazing allegations (reputational risks).

"Traditional" culture among people associated with the university implies that they believe hazing is OK.

Who are the stakeholders?

Students involved with allegations, as well as general student population
Parents of those students involved with allegations
President
Vice President for Student Affairs
Dean of Students
University Police Department & local police department
General Counsel
Vice President for Development and Development Office
Alumni
Music Department (band)
General Public

What is your plan of action/recommendation?

First thing I would do is return the President's phone call and provide information about what I learned regarding the allegations of hazing. Then, I would follow up with the Dean of Students to ensure the university police department was alerted to allegations of hazing so that they can begin their investigation, since hazing is a criminal charge. Additionally, I would gather information from the Dean of Students about the status of the students who were hospitalized (e.g. are students still there; schedule visit if so). I would let Dean of Students know that I am available to assist, if needed, but that I have confidence in Dean and staff to follow proper protocol and request that I be kept apprised on progress of investigation so that I can keep President informed.

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Next, I would make a phone call to General Counsel to give a “heads up” about the hazing allegations. Then, I would follow up with my colleague, the Vice President of Development to listen to any concerns, but not make any promises I cannot keep, especially as it relates to doing what is right. I would express my hope that my colleague is calling to provide words of encouragement and moral support for our division and the university in having to go through this unfortunate time and not to influence the outcome of the investigation. Eventually I would return the other phone calls, but those would not be my priority. I would “stick to my guns” and be silent on the details of the allegations, standing firm on keeping the information confidential.

My future plan of action, based on what I learned from the "Listening Tour," would include working with staff in the division to develop a realistic plan to begin to change the "traditional culture." It seems, from the information presented, a serious awareness campaign on hazing not being a tradition is needed. As student affairs professionals, we have a professional and ethical obligation to do what is right. It may be difficult along the way, but that should not stop us from making the effort.
Keith T. Kowalka  
University of Houston

What are the relevant issues?

The Vice President for Student Affairs is new in the role.

There is a perception that these "traditions" have been going on for many years.

When do "traditions" that are left to exist unchecked run the risk of becoming a liability for an institution?

Are there clear policies and procedures in place for the institution to address hazing allegations? Both organizationally and from an individual student perspective? What are the ideals, principles, and ethics of the President?

What are the ideals, principles, and ethics of the Vice President for Development?

How "close” are the President and the Vice President for Development?

Are any of the important alumni also connected to the Board of Regents/Trustees?

How comfortable/confident is the President in his/her position in relation to the Board of Regents/Trustees?

Although the Vice President for Student Affairs has felt that students view her as someone who will not “rock the boat,” what are their thoughts/concerns about the "traditions”? This may be difficult to gauge.

How were investigations handled in the past from a Dean of Students perspective? From an Office of General Counsel perspective?

Who are the Stakeholders?

Students  
General student body  
   Students involved in student organizations/groups  
   Students affected by alleged hazing activities  
   Parents  
Dean of Students and staff  
Vice President for Development  
President

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Board of Regents/Trustees
General Counsel
Alumni/Potential Donors
Other Vice Presidents, Deans and Chairs who could stand to benefit from the capital campaign

**What is your plan of action/recommendation?**

This is a very complex question to answer, as at each step, there could be anywhere from 1 and 5 different ways to handle the next step. The primary concern, as the new Vice President for Student Affairs, is to understand what you are willing to handle from an ethical perspective. Hopefully, the President (and Board) hired the Vice President for Student Affairs with the understanding that she would not allow these "traditions" to continue, if allegations are proven. However, based on the scenario provided, it is expected that there will be considerable challenges surfacing.

*Here are the initial major steps:*

Return the call of the President.

Ascertain responses to the relevant issues listed previously.

Vice President for Student Affairs should address preferred process for handling the two allegations from a student development model and discuss potential impacts/influences in how to handle.

Vice President for Student Affairs should meet with the Vice President for Development to ensure they are on the same page, with each other and the President.

Return calls from alumni, once the Vice President for Student Affairs, President, and Vice President for Development have a game plan.

Vice President should not share any information about the allegations; however, ensure the alumni know these issues are both organizational and individual, and that they will be handled according to university policies, procedures, and due process.

Review manner in which allegations involving hazing have been handled previously with Dean of Students and General Counsel.

Encourage the Dean of Students to run a comprehensive investigation, following university policies, procedures, and processes.

Review the recommendation from the Dean of Students as to the result of the investigation. Prior to finalizing the recommendation, consult with the General Counsel and President. The Dean of Students should issue all decisions regarding the investigations.

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