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Report Faults Binghamton U. for Weak Oversight of Athletics

By Libby Sander

Binghamton University's president and former athletic director failed to rein in a host of problems in the institution's troubled men's basketball program, according to an exhaustive, 99-page report that was presented to the trustees of the State University of New York on Thursday at their meeting in New York City.

The Board of Trustees had commissioned the study in October following a series of embarrassing incidents involving the athletics program at Binghamton, which is part of SUNY. In addition to providing extensive details surrounding those incidents, the [report](#) also offers several recommendations for how the university should strengthen its oversight of athletics going forward.

One of those recommendations includes the creation of a systemwide position for an "athletic oversight officer" who would monitor the admission, academic progress, and behavior of athletes; oversee compliance with the National Collegiate Athletic Association's rules; and advise the system on athletics policies for all of its campuses. The person holding this position, the report suggests, should report only to the Board of Trustees and to the chancellor.

Nancy L. Zimpher, chancellor of the SUNY system, said officials were "digesting" the contents of the report and planned to act "thoroughly but quickly" on its recommendations. In a telephone conference with reporters, Ms. Zimpher said she could present specific recommendations to the board at its meeting next month.

Last October, the board enlisted the help of Judith S. Kaye, a former chief judge of the State of New York, and her law firm, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, to dig into the facts. Ms. Kaye and her colleagues made several trips to Binghamton last fall, interviewed more than 80 people, and reviewed thousands of electronic and paper documents.

The report focused on Binghamton's admissions standards for athletes, the scope of its support of athletes with weak academic

credentials, and how the university handled the high-profile incidents involving players who were arrested. It also weighed in on the circumstances involving an [adjunct professor](#) who said she was pressured by athletics officials to give better grades to basketball players, then told her contract would not be renewed when she refused to.

Ms. Zimpher, whom one sports columnist has dubbed "the toughest Ph.D.-toting woman in academia," is known to have a firm stance on athletics: As president of the University of Cincinnati, she ousted the university's popular but controversial basketball coach Bob Huggins in 2005, displeased with his players' history of low graduation rates, suspensions, and arrests. (The coach was also arrested on a misdemeanor charge of drunken driving in 2004, to which he pleaded no contest.) Ms. Zimpher said on Thursday that she intended to emphasize the importance of presidential control in the recommendations she will soon make to the system's board.

Some of her recommendations for oversight of athletics may extend beyond Binghamton to include the entire SUNY system, she said. "I can't turn the hands of time back, but I can provide leadership in moving forward," said Ms. Zimpher, who [became chancellor](#) last June.

A Difficult Chapter

It has been a rocky few years for Binghamton, which moved into the NCAA's Division I in 2001.

Last year, the university's men's basketball team won its first conference championship and went to the NCAA tournament for the first time. But the team's success was tarnished by the actions of several of its players: Ten athletes either quit or were dismissed for misconduct or academic deficiencies after the season ended. Last fall, six more players were dismissed. On the heels of those departures, Binghamton announced that its athletic director, Joel Thirer, had stepped down and was being reassigned to the provost's office.

Behind the scenes, tensions were mounting between officials in the admissions office and in athletics over how much latitude Binghamton's head basketball coach, Kevin Broadus, should have had in his recruitment of athletes. (Mr. Broadus has since been placed on indefinite leave.)

Admissions officials "resisted" the enrollment of applicants they deemed academically unqualified, but the coach was supported by the university's president, Lois B. DeFleur, in his quest to find

talented athletes and build a winning team, the report said.

Ms. DeFleur, Binghamton's president since 1990, [announced](#) last month that she would step down in July. Ms. Zimpher declined to elaborate on how the report's findings would affect Ms. DeFleur. But the report had sharp words: "The president took no corrective action in her role as the supervisor of the athletic director and the person charged with ultimate responsibility for BU's intercollegiate athletic program," it said.

It also faulted Mr. Thirer for failing to adequately supervise the men's basketball coach.

The report also raised the possibility that Mr. Broadus and his coaching staff may have broken NCAA rules. Ms. Zimpher, who notified the NCAA last fall when the board began its investigation, said she will look for potential compliance issues as she reviews the report.

"Our intent is to cull out of the findings of the investigation anything that might have a compliance implication, to discuss that directly with the NCAA," she said.

Second Chances

One of Binghamton's missteps, the report said, was in admitting athletes in need of more academic support without ensuring that it would be able to provide that help.

"It is important, and admirable, for a university to create opportunities and second (or more) chances for particularly challenged student-athletes," the report stated. "But those opportunities become illusory if the institution does not have a sufficient support network already in place to help these individuals succeed."

But the problems were not purely academic, the report noted. Some of the athletes' behavior outside the classroom caused problems as well.

One e-mail message from an assistant basketball coach to another athletics official read: "What is the deal with [specified player] and also the rest of the guys? I am starting to think that for the long run we have to stay on top of these guys real tight. They a[re] capable of going off the deep end."

Carl T. Hayden, chairman of the Board of Trustees, said during Thursday's conference call that Binghamton's struggles and the findings of the report did not cast "a pall" over the university's decision to move up to Division I.

"What it says is if you are going to move your universities into Division I status, you really need to be circumspect in the way in which you go about it," Mr. Hayden said. "You need not only the right controls in place, but you also need to have the right support systems."

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