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Penn State's Dangerous Culture of Silence at the Top

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Former university president Graham Spanier, not Joe Paterno, deserves the majority of the blame for covering up the child-molestation allegations



The issues that are tearing Penn State apart stem from a fundamental, recurring issue in institutional scandals: a culture of silence that puts protection of the university (or the corporation or the church or the governmental department) ahead of doing justice in individual cases and preventing injury in future ones.

The ultimate symbol of that dangerous culture of silence is not Joe Paterno, but the president of Penn State for 16 years, Graham Spanier. Both were fired by the Penn State trustees Wednesday evening for failing to ensure the police were informed of,

among other things, a 2002 apparent rape of a young boy in a Penn State locker room by Jerry Sandusky, a former defensive coordinator of the football team.

Paterno's firing will receive the greatest attention--and commentary. But the ultimate responsibility for the failure to act lies with the university president.

According to [the grand jury report](#), Spanier, like Paterno, knew of the 2002 incident but failed to go beyond the actions of the athletic department prohibiting Sandusky from bringing young boys onto the Penn State campus: this was nine years ago.

Spanier, a trained therapist, with a Ph.D. in psychology, had to know that a possible crime, of a serious nature, had been committed. He had to know that the alleged perpetrator could, quite possibly, repeat his actions, even if no longer in a Penn State locker room. He had to know that he had a moral responsibility to let public law enforcement authorities investigate and resolve the case in the name of both justice and prevention.

Yet he did nothing. Somehow, he convinced himself that "protecting" the institution by sweeping the issue under the rug was more important than protecting young boys. That Paterno would want to do the bare minimum legally--report the incident "up to" the athletic director and then look away--is understandable even if indefensible, given his deep involvement in the football program.

But the decision of the president of a university, the ultimate authority who cannot kick the issue upstairs, is not just indefensible, it is not understandable, given his responsibilities. Yet, as with so many leaders of huge institutions who commit sins of omission, not commission, the moral impulse to do the right thing by individuals not the organization was weak.

Spanier was the one who in 2002 who could easily have handled this matter correctly. At the end of the day, the deadly culture of silence always starts at the top. The leader has to make clear that the institution has a primary responsibility for integrity, not just doing what is lawful (which may not have occurred here) but also for doing what is right (which almost surely didn't happen here).

When informed of the board of trustees' decision to fire him, Paterno, with little grace, said that he was disappointed that he was not allowed to finish the season. Spanier at least had the good grace to say he understood the board's decision and that "the buck stops here."

Yes, it does, but his acknowledgment of this fundamental precept came nine years too late.

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