

House Football at the Lawrenceville School: Tackling a Divisive Issue

Eric R. Langstedt

Mount Saint Mary College

Abstract

In September 2013, the Lawrenceville School, an elite private high school in New Jersey, received national media attention upon announcing that after 124 years of tackle football contested between Academic Houses, they would instead play flag football. As Lawrenceville boasted the nation's longest-standing tackle football league, the administration's decision surprised and angered many of the Lawrenceville School's traditional stakeholders while also eliciting opinions and comments from populations not affiliated with the school. With activist groups forming around this issue, the alteration of this tradition posed potential consequences for the school that extended far beyond the gridiron.

Keywords: educational administration; stakeholder relations; alumni relations; tackle football; Lawrenceville School

Introduction

Decisions to modify or remove long-standing traditions at educational institutions should not be undertaken lightly. When pursuing such changes, it is essential to consider whether stakeholder groups will have a negative reaction, and, if so, if their concerns can be ameliorated. Complicating matters, stakeholder groups differ in both their opinions and interests, with schools needing to consider administrators, faculty, staff, alumni, students, potential students, and the parents of students, to name just a few.

With an abundance of non-profit institutions vying for donations, schools soliciting alumni have competition. Participation in organizations and activities while at school has consistently predicted future institutional

To cite this article

Langstedt, E. R. (2014). House football at the Lawrenceville School: Tackling a divisive issue. *Case Studies in Strategic Communication*, 3, 142-164. Available online:

<http://cssc.uscannenberg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/v3art7.pdf>



philanthropy (Haddad, 1986; Keller, 1982; Okunade, Wunnava, & Walsh, 1994; Wunnava & Lauze, 2001), with students more involved in school activities becoming more charitable alumni. As such, institutions must consider whether the removal of cherished traditions, organizations, and/or activities will negatively impact philanthropic giving.

Founded in 1810, and in proximity to Princeton University, the Lawrenceville School is steeped in history. Emulating the residential college system common in Great Britain, the Lawrenceville House System was established in the nineteenth century. Lawrenceville instructors act as Housemasters and, “each house bears its own flag to which each student bears as strong allegiance as to the School at large” (“The House System,” n.d.). Each house has its own dining room, and sports competitions are contested between academic houses.

The most notable of these inter-house sports is the House Football League, which has operated continually since 1888. With contests between academic houses occurring each year since its inception, Lawrenceville’s full-contact house football league maintained continuity that even the most storied collegiate rivalries could not. With all other football rivalries having years in which contests did not occur, often during World War I and World War II, Lawrenceville School’s House League emerged as the longest-running full-contact league in American football, which was a point of pride for the institution.

In early September 2013, the Director of Athletics, Michael Goldenberg, informed students who attended the first day of house football practice that, for the upcoming season, full-contact football was being replaced with flag football. Criticized for “ending an institution as old as the House system itself without any consultation from students” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 2), attempting to diffuse the situation, and make their rationale known, the administration explained their actions. Specifically, they noted a lack of student participation in house football.

Upon hearing that the 124-year long tradition of tackle football between residential houses was to be terminated, many students, alumni and other parties were vocal in their disagreement. With a large and enthusiastic alumni community, who are supportive of the school both vocally and financially, Lawrenceville administrators found themselves in a position in

which appropriate stakeholder relations were crucial. To miscalculate in their strategic response would likely result in the loss of support from key stakeholder groups.

Background

Administration

The initial decision to replace tackle football with flag football was made by Head Master Elizabeth Duffy and Director of Athletics Michael Goldenberg. Elizabeth Duffy has held the position of Head Master since 2003. As noted on the Lawrenceville School website, “the Head Master is the chief executive officer of the School reporting to the Board of Trustees and is responsible for the overall management of the School” (“Head Master,” n.d., para. 1). Taking ownership of the actions, Duffy noted for the Lawrenceville School newspaper, *The Lawrence*, “[Goldenberg] and I made the decision about this year. Then we told the housemasters that we will have a discussion after we see what happens this year about what’s going to happen long term” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 4).

It is unlikely that the administrators foresaw the speed with which the Lawrenceville stakeholder groups reacted. Occurring on the first day of football practice, the announcement’s timing, coupled with the abruptness of the announcement, likely exacerbated the stakeholder outcry. The timing also ensured the issue would not be resolved in time for the 2013 fall season, causing the league’s streak of consecutive seasons playing tackle football to end at 124. Complicating matters further, the issue would remain unresolved for over four months, with the Ad Hoc Committee on House Football only releasing their report on January 17, 2014.

House Football at Lawrenceville

House football at Lawrenceville is contested between the six Circle houses: Hamill House, Kennedy House, Dickinson House, Woodhull House, Griswold House, and Cleve House. While less formal football games were contested between academic classes since the 1870s, the House Football League formed in 1892 (“Hamill House,” n.d.). Emerging from this tradition were several trophies to be contested annually between teams.

The annual Hamill/Kennedy House game is played for “The Crutch,” while the Woodhull/Griswold Houses play for “The Muffler” and Dickinson and Cleve vie for the “Pride of the Circle” (Cooper, Main, & Marrow, 2011).

Nicholas Everdell '97 captained the Hamill House Football team for two years, and fondly recalled winning “The Crutch” both times. The prized crutch was a byproduct of the 1947 game between the two houses when two players fell out of bounds at the end of a play, hitting Kennedy House Coach, John Chivers. Already suffering from a broken leg, Chivers' crutch snapped during the incident, thereafter becoming the trophy for the two houses yearly game (“Hamill House,” n.d.). Referencing “The Crutch” as the rivalry's trophy, Everdell added: “if you want to know why they've gotten rid of house [tackle] football, that's your answer,” noting that house football was not without its share of injuries (N. Everdell, personal communication, November 19, 2013).

Changes at the Lawrenceville School

Operating as an all-boy's school for over 170 years, Lawrenceville accepted its first female applicants in 1985. Thereafter, the school's demographic population has become quite equitable, with the 2013 enrollment including 419 male and 397 female students. The school's diversity extending beyond gender, in 2013 Lawrenceville's student population represented 38 countries (“The Lawrenceville School,” 2013).

With colleges viewing participation in inter-scholastic sports favorably, many male students sign up for varsity football, cross country, water polo or soccer. For students not on a varsity or junior varsity team, alternative activities are available to fulfill the student athletic requirement. Traditionally, all male students who are not on a varsity or junior varsity team would fulfill this requirement by playing football on their house's team.

With Lawrenceville expanding its offerings to include dance, karate, and other activities for students to fulfill their athletic requirement, the number of students participating in house football decreased from 98 in 2011 to 63 in 2013. A concern expressed by administrators was that, with fewer participants to field a team, tired or injured students would be

pressured to play. A second concern regarded the possibility of serious injury, due to the physical disparities of the participants.

Lawrenceville School Stakeholder Response

While the Lawrenceville School administration suggested that strong support was shown for both the retention of house tackle football and its abolition, stakeholders who favored the continuance of this tradition were more vocal. When Director of Athletics Goldenberg initially made the announcement, the entire Hamill House squad left in protest, and many current Lawrenceville students vocalized their disagreement. One Lawrenceville student, A.J. Ryan, noted, “house football was one of the reasons I decided to come to Lawrenceville” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 8). Regarding the change to flag football, a second student, Will Christofferson, noted, “thus the oldest football league in the nation has been reduced to an elementary school gym class” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 8).

Alumni responses expressed on the message boards accompanying house football articles on *The Lawrence* newspaper website strongly favored the reinstatement of house football. The first article written on the change in format elicited 58 alumni responses. An analysis of the responses found 50 respondents opposed to the change, two in favor, and six not explicitly expressing a preference. Common themes provided by alumni included resentment towards the administration for not appreciating tradition, and reflections on their experiences as students playing house football.

Examples of these sentiments included Michael Chan, a 2009 Lawrenceville alumnus, who noted,

I can say that Lawrenceville House Football was one of the shining moments of my time at Lawrenceville, and one of the memories that I will miss the most. To bastardize this 125-year tradition is madness. Lawrenceville will certainly be under the microscope from thousands of alumni. And we will certainly be speaking with through [sic] our donations if this continues. (Chan, 2013, para. 3)

A second alumnus, Charles Gallagher, noted, “This is sickening. Lawrenceville’s greatest attributes are its traditions, and to eliminate

perhaps the school's most cherished one brings shame to my alma mater" (Gallagher, 2013, para. 1).

While most alumni reactions on *The Lawrence* message boards condemned the change, others agreed with the administrators' decision. It was the opinion of alumnus David Stewart,

Frankly, I'm surprised this decision took so long to reach. The terrible and permanent consequences –especially on adolescents – of repeated small concussions induced by tackle football is not well understood. Perhaps it's worth taking the risk if you think you have a shot at a football scholarship. (Stewart, 2013).

In a letter to the editor of *The Lawrence*, Jeffrey Durso-Finley, Director of College Counseling and Coach of the Woodhull Team noted that participation in other activities, not the administration, are to blame for the death of house football. He further noted,

I was worried when I thought about tackle football for a few of the kids on my team the last two years, because they are simply not physical enough for football. Given the numbers? They *have* to play to field a team. That's not fair. (Durso-Finley, 2013, para. 3).

Media Attention

With the House Football League holding the distinction of being the oldest continually running football league, alumni outcry propelled the story into the media spotlight. The *New York Times* published an article "Anger and indifference after a school ends a full-contact tradition" (Pilon, 2013). The "indifference" alluded to in the article's title referenced the opinion of some Lawrenceville students, and can be summarized by Lawrenceville senior Jonathan Marrow, who noted: "It's a change of attitude. Here football isn't as big of a deal. We're a really academic school" (Pilon, 2013, para. 13).

Framing the issue differently, *Forbes* picked up the story under the title "Why the world's oldest tackle football league is ceasing to exist" (Cook, 2013). Other media outlets discussed the subject while taking sides on the issue, with the *Los Angeles Times* writing an opinion piece titled: "Don't let

the killjoys kill football” (Flynn, 2013). Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh shared this sentiment while reaching millions of listeners and publishing transcripts on his website (Limbaugh, 2013).

Coombs (2002; 2011) expressed the need for organizations to monitor online conversations, with information spreading faster through this medium than any previous form of communication. Many Lawrenceville stakeholders learned of the administration’s decision through social media, with links to *The Lawrence* sent through email and other online channels, and message boards provided stakeholders opportunities to vocalize their opinions. Just one day after the decision to play flag football was announced, a Facebook page titled “Bring Back House Football” had over 800 “likes” with momentum for the movement continuing to build (Saguil & Thauer, 2013).

SaveHouseFootball.com

Developed by a group identifying themselves as the “Save House Football Alumni Committee,” SaveHouseFootball.com was an informational resource for stakeholders who disagreed with the administration’s actions. The website attempted to organize stakeholders who favored the re-institution of house tackle football. Their mission statement read:

We, the people of the Lawrenceville School Community, (students, parents, and alumni) wish to support the grand, 124 year old tradition of intramural tackle house football. We believe that intramural tackle house football program fosters important developmental attributes in young men including life long [sic] bonding friendships, friendly competition, emotional and physical coping skills, group identification with a house, pride in the house, and most importantly pride in the School. (“Save House Football Mission Statement,” n.d., para. 1)

A concern voiced by the committee was that *The Lawrence* was not publishing editorials supporting house football, while those favoring the change to flag were being published. The organization’s website assembled hyperlinks to articles written by school officials, with the authors often commenting on, or providing counterarguments for, the perspectives conveyed by the administration.

A second concern put forth by the creators of SaveHouseFootball.com was the censoring of comments made on *The Lawrence* message boards. With a flurry of activity on the message boards following the administrators' decision, for a time the comments section for these articles were shut down. More problematic to some, upon reopening the comments section, many comments critical to the administration were removed, resulting in accusations of censorship.

When the message board was reactivated, ten messages had been removed. While it is unclear who removed them, or if it was simply a technical glitch, a member of the "Save House Football Alumni Committee" saved the messages using an RSS feed. If the messages were purposely taken down, it is unclear why. While they were unfavorable to the administration's decision, so were a large majority of the other messages. Perhaps the most noteworthy comment removed was from James Loutit '86, who provided links to a Facebook group for those hoping tackle football would be reinstated.

Research & Strategy

One conclusion that may be drawn is that prior to taking action, the Lawrenceville administrators did not undertake sufficient research to appreciate the importance of this tradition to their stakeholders. James Twitchell (2004) argues that those attending elite academic institutions are purchasing the aura of the institution. He further notes that a key difference between the elite and non-elite schools is that while non-elite schools sell a product, elite schools sell an experience (Twitchell, 2004, p. 130). What came out during this debate, and what research might have provided administrators, was the belief of many Lawrenceville stakeholders that house tackle football is one, and perhaps a significant, experience that distinguishes the Lawrenceville School experience from others.

Lawrenceville, as well as other educational institutions, should conduct research to understand the importance of traditions on stakeholder groups. In an attempt to classify types of traditions, Hobsbawm (1983) identified three categories: (1) those that establish or symbolize social cohesion or group membership; (2) those that establish or legitimize institutions, status, or relations of authority; and (3) those with the main

purpose of socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems, or behavioral convictions (p. 9). While quantitative research tools, such as surveys, may provide administrators a general understanding of stakeholder's beliefs, understanding the degree to which traditions are important to them and why will likely require qualitative research.

Using the Hobsbawm (1983) classification, an examination of stakeholder responses on *The Lawrence* message boards and expressed via social media suggest that, while personal experiences in house football varied, for many this tradition touches on all three categorizations of tradition. It is unclear how much attention administrators gave to stakeholders who valued the sport's tradition. A lack of understanding of this stakeholder group's opinions, or the size of this group, may have influenced the changes pursued in the fall of 2013.

Lawrenceville administrators should have conducted research to determine stakeholders' tolerance for change. The changing of traditions will often encounter resistance. Traditions

...inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past...they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp.1-2)

The reactions of stakeholders to a transition to flag football suggested a general feeling that an unacceptable level of change disrupted continuity. More problematically for the administrators, such changes may lead to behavioral changes by their stakeholders, such as withholding contributions.

Philanthropic Concerns

The message boards of *The Lawrence* included several alumni stating that they would be withholding financial support from the school because of these changes. A cause of concern for organizations undertaking philanthropic development is the willingness of donors to substitute donations from one organization to another (Reinstein, 2009). For educational institutions, this involves the balancing of new institutional offerings, with the retention of traditions that appeal to their donors.

Beeler (1982) identified emotional attachment to the school and alumni attitudes towards their educational experience as significant predictors of donation to educational institutions. The Lawrenceville School has excelled in this area, with its endowment exceeding \$330 million, which is greater than that of many colleges. Over the 2013 fiscal year, alumni contributions to the school exceeded \$22 million (Brooks, n.d.).

Participation in membership societies while attending an educational institution promotes alumni giving (Marr, Mullin, & Siegfried, 2005). Hints of drastic changes within the fraternity and sorority system at Dartmouth College prompted unrest in both the student body and the alumni community. Students involved in the fraternity and sorority system protested participation in the Winter Carnival, a major event for the college, while some alumni declared their withdrawal of financial support to the institution (Thomas, 2003). The house system of Lawrenceville parallels the collegiate Greek system in many ways. Just as a fraternity or sorority's foundation is based on more than the building's physical structure, as one Lawrenceville alumnus noted, "if you take away house football, you might as well call the houses dorms" ("Why is this Happening?," n.d., para. 11).

Sports tend to arouse loyalty among stakeholders. After fielding teams for 91 years, the 1997 announcement that Boston University would no longer field a football team left some stakeholders questioning their relationship with the school. As noted by one alumnus: "A part of BU has really died. And that's why I am a UCONN and UMASS supporter now" ("Boston University Football Alumni," n.d.).

Its issue based on similar grounds as those faced by Dartmouth and Boston University, Lawrenceville needed to monitor the response of its stakeholders to avoid actions that would lead to long-term stakeholder disenchantment. In response to Head Master Duffy's comment that students "are voting with their feet," (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 4) alumnus Al Sullivan noted, "Well, we alumni may not vote with our feet, but we do in fact vote with our dollars. I would expect a serious outcry on this matter" (Sullivan, 2013, para. 3). Echoing this sentiment, Lawrenceville alumnus Jeff Bell, whose class would return to campus for their 50th reunion that spring, suggested the classes donations be put into

escrow, with Lawrenceville only receiving them if and when tackle football was restored (“Bring Back House Football,” n.d.).

Tackle Football Safety Concerns

While traditions are considered important, what should the administration do if it strongly believes the tradition might have severe, detrimental consequences for the students?

As quoted in *The Lawrence*, Michael Goldenberg noted, “times have changed, we know more about the science of the brain now than we did 20 years ago” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 7). Goldenberg’s comments came soon after the 2013 settlement totaling \$765 million reached by the NFL and retired players who endured head trauma while playing in the league gained national media attention (“NFL,” 2013).

Statistical evidence suggests that football carries a higher risk of concussion than other high school sports. One illustration of this was data from high school athletic trainers suggesting high school football players receive 11.2 concussions per 10,000 games to 6.9 for lacrosse (Belson, 2013). Robert Graham of the Institute of Medicine noted: “We need people to say a concussion is a significant injury . . . but it’s an invisible one, and there is a tendency to say ‘shake it off’ and go back in the next series” (Belson, 2013, p. B14). To continue playing with a concussion is to risk a subsequent brain injury.

As Head Master Elizabeth Duffy noted, “what we do worry about is that boys in the house will feel pressured to play house football, and frankly I don’t worry about that as much if it’s flag football because there’s not the same level of danger” (Saguil & Thauer, 2013, para. 5). While Duffy’s comments centered on the safety of students, some alumni who had participated in house football did not accept her explanation. Some alumni cited the continuance of the school’s varsity and junior varsity football programs as contradictory to the administrator’s professed safety concerns.

If Lawrenceville administrators conducted research in advance of making their decision, and the conclusion of their findings was that house tackle football was too dangerous, from a strategy perspective, this information

should have been conveyed to key stakeholder groups. With most people placing value on student safety, a well-developed information campaign for their stakeholders might have made them more supportive of this traditions modification. By acting first and offering explanation afterward, it may be perceived by some stakeholders that the administrators' purported concern was simply a justification for actions that were not well received by stakeholders. As previously noted, if using threat of brain injury as a rationale for this change, the administrators should be able to argue for why this same reasoning should not be used at the varsity and junior varsity football levels.

Time Concerns

Time considerations would play a vital role in the resolution of this issue. For the Lawrenceville administrators, arriving at a solution quickly would likely reignite the conclusion of some stakeholders that the decision to drop tackle football was not given an appropriate level of consideration. In contrast, to ignore the issue, or to delay making decisions, may further alienate key stakeholder groups.

The speed in which social media allows information to be transferred can lead to increased messages distortion (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). This, in turn, may exacerbate problems for the administration as they attempt to develop amicable solutions. While not necessarily providing misinformation, a reliance on the "Bring Back House Football" Facebook group, or savehousefootball.com, undoubtedly provides the reader one-sided, persuasive, information.

While more than 800 people "liked" a Facebook page named "Bring Back House Football," a Facebook group by the same name was formed, with 217 people joining. SaveHouseFootball.com also engaged alumni, with several articles submitted to the site, and 184 people signing a petition to reinstate tackle football. Recognizing that key stakeholders in this conversation were already discussing the issue on social media, and knowing that "no comment" can be extremely detrimental during a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2010), Lawrenceville administrators and board members directed several statements towards stakeholders early in the controversy.

With many criticizing the move by Duffy and Goldenberg as hasty, Duffy noted “a larger conversion” between her and the Board of Trustees would take place during the fall. In the near term, the school could only measure alumni responses provided in dialogue and through media channels. The administrators’ communication efforts would take place over a four-month period, and involve several messages directed towards stakeholders.

The strategic communication required of the Lawrenceville administrators was a product of the environment in which they found themselves. An abundance of stakeholders expressing their dissatisfaction with the actions of the administration required the administrators to open up dialogue with these groups. While ideally one conducts research before a crisis emerges, the October 11th announcement of an “Ad Hoc Committee on House Football” was the Lawrenceville administration’s response to stakeholder discontent.

Execution

Three days after the announcement was made and the controversy erupted, an initial response by the school took the form of an open letter to alumni, parents and friends dated September 16, 2013. Key message objectives in this letter included noting the low turnout for house football, and acknowledgement of the “impassioned social media discussions, phone calls and emails.”

On September 20, 2013, Head Master Duffy hosted a town hall meeting that included students, faculty, and staff of the Lawrenceville School. During this meeting, both Head Master Duffy and Director of Athletics Goldenberg reiterated their desire to “preserve some form of football” in a time when students seemed disinterested in participating in tackle football. They echoed previous statements about low turnout, noting the largest team had only 14 members. Duffy further noted that the school’s Board of Trustees would discuss the issue during a fall meeting. The meeting offering students an opportunity to make their opinions known, Neil Menghani noted “numerous students spoke out . . . [and] the general consensus among students who spoke was that the switch to flag football was a sudden and surprising decision that should have been considered more carefully and more reasonably” (Menghani, 2013).

Perhaps reassuring alumni that the issue was not dying on the vine, a second open letter dated October 11, 2013 reiterated the Board's ongoing discussions on this matter, which was posted on the school's website. Tom Carter, President of the Board of Trustees and the letter's first author, wrote

Some of you voiced a passionate response to the news about house football, and we have heard your concerns. We regret that this news took most of you by surprise, but the limited student interest presented us with no viable alternative this season. (Carter, Fitzgerald, & Duffy, 2013)

The letter also provided the email address housefootball@lawrenceville.org as a place for stakeholders to provide input.

Board President Carter also announced "an ad hoc committee to consider ways to continue house tackle football or otherwise perpetuate the great tradition of house football" (Carter, et. al., 2013). In total, the committee included 19 people, among them members of the Lawrenceville Board of Trustees, alumni, faculty, and staff. A noteworthy omission from the ad hoc committee was student representation.

While the administration attempted to diffuse what had emerged as a controversial decision, disenfranchised stakeholders remained unmoved by this action. A fundamental criticism was the administration's use of the phrasing "to continue house tackle football or otherwise perpetuate the great tradition" ("The Ad Hoc Committee," n.d., para. 1). To some, this suggested their attempts to restore tackle football might have been disingenuous. An additional concern voiced was the makeup of this ad hoc committee, the Head Master and the Board making this decision unilaterally ("The Ad Hoc Committee," n.d.).

After its October 11 statements, three months passed before the Ad Hoc Committee on House Football released its report. As noted in the report, the committee met three times during November and December and several committee members attended the flag football games. The Lawrenceville administration made no public statements during this time,

though media outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* (Flynn, 2013) and stakeholders on social media continued to discuss the situation.

The Ad Hoc Committee Report

The Ad Hoc Committee on House Football released its report on January 17, 2014, and published the report to the school's website. The four-page document outlined who was on the committee, the matters considered, their communication with alumni, and the conclusions they drew. An appendix was also included, which illustrated the participation in fall sports, including house football, over the prior decade. Examining the participation in house football, the committee noted that the number of participants had drastically fallen in recent years. Attempting to explain this decrease, the committee noted that participation in interscholastic sports, in which students participated against other schools, had increased during this time.

The committee agreed to return to a tackle football format, though reducing the number of players from eight to six. It was further agreed that each team should have at least ten to twelve players. Within these new guidelines, tackle football would be reinstated. If teams were unable to field teams within these guidelines, the school would return to the flag football format. The committee further noted that it was its hope that the recent dialogue would encourage greater participation among the current students.

The committee addressed the outpouring of responses from alumni, and listed some of the solutions the committee had considered before arriving at six-man tackle football. These included allowing male students to play for their former house in their junior year, and to reduce the size of some of their interscholastic sports teams. Concluding the message, the report noted that it would remain engaged in this issue, and would examine the upcoming 2014 football season, which would be played under this new format, at the January 2015 Trustees meeting.

Evaluation

Response to Stakeholders

Early in the execution phase, the administration held a town hall meeting allowing students to express their opinions while also allowing the administration to convey its perspective. As noted by Lawrenceville student Neil Menghani, “Many students urged the administration to consider bringing back the tackle football league in future years provided that students show enough interest” (Menghani, 2013, para. 4). The solution put forth by the Ad Hoc Committee echoed the general sentiment of the student population.

Both administrators and board members saw a large alumni response to this issue, with phone calls, emails and other communications taking place. Following the October 11, 2014 announcement of an official email address for house football issues, 98 emails were sent through this channel. As noted in the ad hoc committee report, “The views expressed by alumni/ae and parents were diverse and ranged from strong views that house tackle football should be discontinued to strong views that it should be preserved at all costs.”

Above and beyond the information received from these emails, the simple act of providing an email exclusively for this issue signaled that the administration both took this situation seriously and cared about the opinions of its stakeholders. Providing stakeholders the opportunity to comment was particularly beneficial for this issue, with dissenting stakeholders criticizing the actions of the administration and the way in which the Ad Hoc Committee was selected.

While it cannot be known to what extent the message board comments influenced the Ad Hoc Committee, an examination of the Ad Hoc Committee Report suggest that some of the ideas implemented originated from alumni. Alumni Jeff Dolan and John Kelsey III both proposed reinstating tackle football with fewer players as favorable to flag football.

To evaluate Lawrenceville’s actions as a whole, one may draw two conclusions. What turned into a heated issue might have been avoided if

administrators better understood the importance of this long-standing tradition to their stakeholders. While stakeholders may still react negatively to this change, research may have allowed the administrators to anticipate the alumni's responses. From this, one may conclude that more research should have been undertaken before making this decision.

As noted above, the administrators' communications with their stakeholders would have likely been different had they undertaken research prior to taking action. This not being the case, an examination of the issue as it played out suggests that the administrators navigated the issue methodically, rather than making quick decisions. While encountering negative reactions by stakeholders, the administrators listened to these stakeholders in an effort to find a proposal that would be acceptable to most. While the conclusion of the Ad Hoc Committee was not to return to the previous format of house football, the solution provided incorporated elements found to be important to different stakeholders leading to what most would consider a positive conclusion.

Metrics to Determine Communication Success or Failure

Though many stakeholders approved of the decision of the Ad Hoc Committee on House Football, the 124-year streak of tackle football played between houses is now over. Schools do not operate in a vacuum, and it cannot be assumed that all subsequent stakeholder behaviors are in response to this particular issue. With that in mind, the attention this controversy received suggests that reduced stakeholder involvement may have its roots in this issue.

A primary metric of stakeholder response will be alumni giving rates. The reinstatement of tackle football in the six-man format, while different, may appease alumni who were not in favor of this change, and threatened to withhold contributions. Whether the actions of the board and administrators will be viewed this way can only be seen over time. As noted in the Ad Hoc Committee Report, "if the numbers are not there, we will be ready to revert to the flag format" (Board of Trustees, 2014). While desired by most stakeholders, the school's unwillingness to commit to tackle football may lead to some alumni foregoing their contribution to Lawrenceville in favor of other causes.

As previously mentioned by Twitchell (2004), a measure separating schools is the sale of a product versus an experience. The actions of current and potential Lawrenceville students should also be monitored. After a period of decline, the attention intramural football received may serve as a catalyst to reinvigorate house football in the Lawrenceville student population. If this does not occur, one may conclude that this experience, which has elicited such a strong response in the alumni community, does not hold the same place in the lives of the current student population.

To conclude the analysis of the school's response to this issue, the proposal put forward by the Ad Hoc Committee on House Football incorporated many of the ideas put forward by key stakeholder groups. While the report suggests that they will pursue returning to tackle football, their disclaimer regarding flag football as a back-up plan may concern some stakeholders. In terms of evaluation of their efforts, to determine the long-term impact of the administrators' decision to terminate tackle football and subsequently to restore it will require time.

Discussion

First used by Howard Chase in 1976, issue management is "a process used to align organizational activities with stakeholder expectations" ("What is Issue Management?," n.d., para. 1). The model put forth by Chase consists of the following five steps: (1) issue identification, (2) issue analysis, (3) issue change strategy options (4) issue action program, and (5) evaluation of results (Chase, 1977).

The situation faced by the Lawrenceville administration makes a strong case for consistent communication between administrators and key stakeholders when altering long-held traditions. It is the belief of the author that the administrators did not anticipate the strong disapproval their decision would elicit, likely because they did not recognize the importance of house tackle football to many Lawrenceville stakeholders. Effectively, the administrators did not identify and analyze this issue, instead acting without understanding the expectations of key stakeholders.

The change strategy option for Lawrenceville might have included a different timeline. The replacing of tackle with flag football was announced on the first day of football practice. Administrators suggested that the timing of the decision was due to a lack of participants. For lack of communication leading to the announcement, it was the belief of many that the decision to drop tackle football in favor of flag was done hastily and without sufficient consideration.

The timing of the announcement was unfortunate for the administrators, as it did not allow them time to involve stakeholders in the decision, or prepare them for this change. When considering current students, as noted in the town hall meeting, a majority of them favored returning to tackle football. To address this issue earlier may have spurred greater participation among current students, preventing the issue from occurring. Stakeholders offered several alternatives in the ensuing debate including the inclusion of students still enrolled at the school to play with their former house. A better evaluation of options may have assisted the administrators in avoiding the undesirable situation in which they found themselves.

A final point worthy of consideration is how to approach an issue that has elicited strong, and mostly negative, stakeholder response. After determining flag football would be played in the fall 2013 season, an ad hoc committee of 19 people was formed. While it was noted on savehousefootball.com that some stakeholders were skeptical of the makeup of this committee, the inclusion of a large group of administrators, board members and alumni signaled the administration's desire to both listen to, and make decisions with, Lawrenceville's stakeholders. This effort may have been taken further by allowing current students a voice in on the committee.

While pressure continued to build over this issue, the Ad Hoc Committee took an appropriate amount of time to consider the issue. While some stakeholders may criticize the administration's initial actions as hasty, the time taken by the Ad Hoc Committee to deliberate and consider the breadth of opinions suggests a well-considered final decision was made.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the timing of the announcement, which was made during the first day of practice for the upcoming football season. Was this appropriate? If not, when would have been an appropriate time to address this issue?
2. As noted in the “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on House Football” administrators are reserving the right to return to flag football if participation rates for tackle football remain low. If this were to occur, this issue will likely again lead to stakeholder outcry. What other alternatives would you propose to the Ad Hoc Committee to avoid this potential issue?
3. With many alumni declaring they would no longer donate to Lawrenceville in the wake of this issue, what alumni relations efforts would you recommend the school take to maintain and re-establish relationships with their alumni?
4. When considering the alumni reaction, do you believe this was solely about football or some larger issue?

References

- The ad hoc committee to consider saving house football. (n.d.). *SaveHouseFootball.com*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://savehousefootball.com/adhoccommittee.php>
- Beeler, K. J. (1982). *A study of predictors of alumni philanthropy in private universities* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT.
- Belson, K. (2013, October 30). Younger players face bigger concussion risk, report says. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/sports/football/nfl-roundup.html>
- Board of Trustees. (2014, January 17). Report of the ad hoc committee on house football. *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.lawrenceville.org/news/item/index.aspx?LinkId=8651&ModuleId=22>
- Boston University Football Alumni [LinkedIn group]. (n.d.). *LinkedIn*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Boston-University-Football-Alumni-1233167>
- Bring Back House Football [Facebook group]. (n.d.). *Facebook*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1409842685899607>

- Brooks, W. (n.d.). From the Chief Financial Officer. *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved March 14, 2014, from <http://lawrencevillepubs.org/annual/from-the-chief-financial-officer>
- Carter, T., Fitzgerald, D., & Duffy, E. (2013, October 11). Board update: House football. *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.lawrenceville.org/news/item/index.aspx?linkid=8202&moduleid=54>
- Chan, M. (2013, September 12). Comment to C. Saguil & R. J. Thauer, House football sacked—America's oldest active football league radically changed, *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.org/news/house-football-sacked-oldest-active-football-league-in-america-radically-changed#comment-4238>
- Chase, W. H. (1977). Public issue management: The new science. *Public Relations Journal*, 33(10), 25–26.
- Cook, B. (2013, September 17). Why the world's oldest tackle football league is ceasing to exist. *Forbes*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from www.forbes.com/sites/bobcook/2013/09/17/why-the-worlds-oldest-tackle-football-league-is-ceasing-to-exist
- Coombs, W. T. (2002). Assessing online issue threats: Issue contagions and their effect on issue prioritization. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2(4), 215-229.
- Coombs, W. T. (2011). Crisis communication and social media. *Institute for Public Relations*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/crisis-communication-and-social-media>
- Coombs, W. T. & Holladay, S. J. (2010). *PR strategy and application: Managing influence*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cooper, J., Main, L., & Marrow, B. (2011). House football highlights; Woodhull wins 10th muffler. *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.net/sports/house-football-highlights-woodhull-wins-10th-muffler>
- Durso-Finley, J. D. (2013, September 23). [Letter to the editor]. *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.net/opinions/letters-to-the-editor-2>
- Flynn, D. J. (2013, October 17). Don't let the killjoys kill football. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/blowback/la-ol-nfl-football-concussions-flynn-blowback-20131017.0,3888891.story>
- Gallagher, C. (2013, September 13). Comment to C. Saguil & R. J. Thauer, House football sacked—America's oldest active football league radically changed, *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.org/news/house-football-sacked-oldest-active-football-league-in-america-radically-changed#comment-4247>
- Haddad, F. D. (1986). *An analysis of the characteristics of alumni donors and non-donors at Butler University* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Butler University, Indianapolis, IN.
- Hamill House history. (n.d.). *Hamill House*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.hamillhouse.org/house-history>

- Head master Elizabeth A. Duffy. (n.d.). *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.lawrenceville.org/academics/faculty-and-administration/head-master/index.aspx>
- Hobsbawm, E. (1983). Introduction: Inventing traditions. In E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (Eds.), *The invention of tradition* (pp. 1-14). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- The house system. (n.d.). *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.lawrenceville.org/about/history/the-house-system/index.aspx>
- Keller, M. J. C. (1982). *An analysis of alumni donor and non-donor characteristics at the University of Montevello* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL.
- The Lawrenceville School 2013-2014 information. (2013). *The Lawrenceville School*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from http://www.lawrenceville.org/data/files/gallery/ContentGallery/InformationSheet_2013.pdf
- Limbaugh, R. (2013, September 16). The demise of football creeps closer. *RushLimbaugh.com*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/09/16/the_demise_of_football_creeps_closer
- Marr K. A., Mullin C. H., Siegfried J. J. (2005). Undergraduate financial aid and subsequent alumni giving behavior. *Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance*, 45(1),123-143.
- Menghani, N. (2013, September 23). Head master hosts town hall. *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.net/front-page/head-master-hosts-town-hall>
- NFL, ex-players agree to \$765M settlement in concussions suit. (2013, August 29). *NFL.com News*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap1000000235494/article/nfl-explayers-agree-to-765m-settlement-in-concussions-suit>
- Okunade A. A., Wunnava P. V., & Walsh R. (1994). Charitable giving of alumni: Micro-data evidence from a large public university. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 53(1), 73-84.
- Pilon, M. (2013, October 11). Anger and indifference after a school ends a full-contact tradition. *New York Times*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/12/sports/ire-and-indifference-over-the-loss-of-a-full-contact-tradition.html>
- Reinstein D. (2009). *Does one contribution come at the expense of another? Empirical evidence on substitution among charitable donations* (Unpublished working paper). Colchester, UK: University of Essex. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~drein/psidpaper.pdf>
- Saguil, C. & Thauer, R. J. (2013, September 12). House football sacked—America's oldest active football league radically changed. *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.org/front-page/house-football-sacked-oldest-active-football-league-in-america-radically-changed>

- Save house football mission statement. (n.d.). *SaveHouseFootball.com*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://savehousefootball.com/index.php>
- Stewart, D. (2013, September 13). Comment to C. Saguil & R. J. Thauer, House football sacked—America's oldest active football league radically changed, *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.org/news/house-football-sacked-oldest-active-football-league-in-america-radically-changed#comment-4259>
- Sullivan, A. (2013, September 13). Comment to C. Saguil & R. J. Thauer, House football sacked—America's oldest active football league radically changed, *The Lawrence*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.thelawrence.org/news/house-football-sacked-oldest-active-football-league-in-america-radically-changed#comment-4258>
- Thomas, L. (2003, January 4) A reputational revamp? *thinkCurrent.com*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hcurrent/articles/10020/1.html>
- Twitchell, J. B. (2004). *Branded nation: The marketing of megachurch, college inc., and museumworld*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- What is issue management? (n.d.). *Issue Management Council*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://issuemanagement.org/learnmore/what-is-issue-management>
- Why is this happening? (n.d.). *SaveHouseFootball.com*. Retrieved December 31, 2014, from <http://savehousefootball.com/whyisthishappening.php>
- Wunnava P. V. & Lauze, M. A. (2001). Alumni giving at a small liberal arts college: Evidence from consistent and occasional donors. *Economics of Education Review*, 20(6), 533-543.

ERIC R. LANGSTEDT, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of communication at Mount Saint Mary College. Email: eric.langstedt[at]msmc.edu.

Editorial history

Received March 14, 2014

Revised August 26, 2014

Accepted September 3, 2014

Published December 31, 2014

Handled by editor; no conflicts of interest