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Penn State's balancing act

With the release of Louis Freeh's exhaustive report on the Penn State child sex abuse scandal, we now know for sure what we figured was true all along: Jerry Sandusky was not a lone predator moving stealthily under the radar to avoid detection.

The danger he posed to young boys was known at the highest levels of Penn State, where he was a venerated assistant football coach of long standing. Yet no one in 14 years sought to stop him from abusing young boys, to reach out to those he hurt or to prevent future predation.

Mr. Sandusky may have been alone with his victims when molesting them, but he did not act by himself. A phalanx of powerful men protected and enabled him by intentionally concealing his actions from the board of trustees, and actually rewarding him with money and perks that continued long after his retirement. (His wife and adopted children had to have known as well -- son Matt said after the trial that he also had been abused -- but they were outside the purview of the Freeh investigation.)

Nor did Mr. Sandusky exist in a vacuum. He was a creature of Penn State -- its cult of personality and football worship; its closed, prideful culture; its hands-off trustees, its fanatical devotion to an image that was more facade than fact.

The report singles out Mr. Sandusky's four main enablers: Football coach and deity Joe Paterno, who died of lung cancer two months after the trustees fired him; former university president Graham Spanier; retired vice president Gary Schultz; and former athletic director Tim Curley.

"These individuals," it says, "unchecked by the Board of Trustees that did not perform its oversight duties, empowered Sandusky to attract potential victims to the campus and football events by allowing him to have continued, unrestricted and unsupervised access to the university's facilities and affiliation with the university's prominent football program. Indeed, that continued access provided Sandusky with the very currency that enabled him to attract his victims."

But perhaps the most damning statement came during a press conference on Thursday, when Mr. Freeh was asked how big a role the greater culture at Penn State played in the Sandusky scandal. His answer:

"What I found to be extremely telling ... is the janitors," meaning the ones who witnessed Mr. Sandusky with a boy in the showers at the Lasch Building on campus in 2000. "The janitors, that's the tone on the bottom. These are the employees of Penn State who clean and maintain locker rooms in the Lasch Building where the young boys are being raped. They witnessed probably the most horrific rape that's described. And what do they do? They panic.

"They said we can't report this because we'll get fired. They knew who Sandusky was. One of the janitors watched him growing up as the defensive coach. They were afraid to take on the football program. They said the university would circle around it. It was like going against the President of the United States.

If that's the culture on the bottom, then God help the culture at the top."

Jerry Sandusky, 68, was convicted in June on 45 criminal counts stemming from his abuse of eight young boys and is likely to spend the rest of his life in prison, but no one knows how many other of his victims are still out there. The Freeh report increases the likelihood that more will come forward because it basically lays out a roadmap for civil lawsuits. Plaintiffs seeking damages from an institution with deep pockets normally have to prove its leaders had knowledge of a bad actor's activities. In this case, the Freeh report has established that for them.

"It demonstrates a colossal and monumental failure of the leadership of Penn State ... an institutional breakdown and individual lack of moral compass and understanding of the fundamental responsibility to the public and to children," [Tom Kline](#), the attorney for Victim 5 in the criminal case, told the Post-Gazette.

Without the report, he added, "We would be starting like we do with much litigation -- on our 10-yard line. And we're now starting on their 10-yard line."

The trustees also held a press conference after the report's release, accepting blame for their lack of response to reports of Mr. Sandusky's sexual misconduct and promising corrective action throughout the university.

"Our hearts remain heavy and we are deeply ashamed," said Kenneth Frazier, chair of the board's special investigation task force.

"We failed to ask the right question, the tough questions or to take definitive action," he said. "Put simply, we did not force the issue."

All of this leaves Penn State with some thorny problems beyond the inevitable lawsuits. How is the school going to deal with the Paterno legacy? After all his winning seasons and the millions of dollars he brought to the university, it can't very well erase him from its history. Nor can it ignore how tarnished his name has become. That's going to be a tough balancing act for many years to come.

Then there's the question of how to bring the football program into line so that it answers to a higher authority instead of living by its own rules. Most of all, a school that depends on public funding has to rebuild the public's trust.

The Freeh report makes a number of recommendations for fixing Penn State's broken system. Underlying everything, though, is a simple truth. Leaders who protect their institution's reputation by betraying its mission and values are going to fall eventually, and there will be no one to blame but themselves.