HURRICANES ATHLETICS' BIGGEST FAN REFLECTS ON COLLEGE SPORTS

COMMUNICATION

By Donna E. Shalala, Ph.D.

University of Miami President Donna Shalala cuts the net at the 2013 ACC championship game against Clemson University.
At the University of Miami, Hurricanes athletics are a public relations boon that provides both great rewards and vexing challenges. With more than 400 highly talented student-athletes competing in the national spotlight, managing our messaging is only one part of a major operation within a complex news environment.

As university president, my first priority will always be the education, health, and safety of our student-athletes. That’s non-negotiable. I am also communicator-in-chief and the No. 1 cheerleader for our intercollegiate athletics program. Promoting our terrific players and coaches is one of my favorite on-the-job hats I get to wear with pride.

Inquiring minds truly want to know everything about Miami Hurricanes athletics.

Recently, a senior university administrator spoke at a local chamber of commerce lunch on the groundbreaking and lifesaving work of our health care enterprise, UHealth—University of Miami Health System. When he finished, he asked the attentive audience of business and civic leaders if they had any questions. One person raised his hand but steered his question to the university’s athletics director (also in attendance). The burning question: Were the rumors about a new football stadium true?

With so many significant research initiatives and medical advances taking place throughout our institution, getting the word out can sometimes be a little frustrating. Case in point: One local media outlet dedicates five reporters at any given time to cover Hurricanes sports teams, while the rest of the university must share the outlet’s one higher education reporter with six other universities and colleges.

ATHLETICS: THE FRONT PORCH OF A UNIVERSITY

Of the three schools I’ve led, both the University of Wisconsin at Madison and the University of Miami are home to major intercollegiate athletic programs. These programs have been essential to building each institution’s sense of community and identity. And while this is certainly typical of most large state schools, like Wisconsin, it is indeed special in a mid-size private institution, like Miami.

An athletic department is the “front porch” of any institution, and playing on national television provides exposure on a grand scale. In many instances, potential students and their parents first learn about a university through athletics. Athletics are a significant and positive piece of the much larger puzzle that makes up a university.

The reality is we have learned to embrace both our academic and athletic personas, and I can happily say that at an institutional level, each supports the other for maximum benefit.

IT’S ALL ABOUT THE U

Founded in 1925 as the first higher education institution in South Florida, the University of Miami has blossomed, like our dynamic metropolitan hometown, into a world-class academic and research enterprise with a major health care system and revenues exceeding $2.5 billion per year. We have been ranked in the top tier of national universities by U.S. News & World Report for the past five years, and our Miller School of Medicine is ranked No. 38 in receiving National Institutes of Health funding—making UM the top school in Florida in both rankings.
Yet from a national visibility perspective, it is our storied Miami Hurricanes athletics program that initially put the university on the average media consumer’s map. Known globally as “the U,” the highly recognizable orange and green split-U logo prominently featured on our athletic gear has been adopted by the entire organization, starting with the launch of UHealth in 2008, which provides outstanding, cutting-edge care throughout three university-owned hospitals, as well as other university facilities and affiliated partners.

The split-U is one of the most recognizable collegiate marks nationally, and this is perhaps the first time an academic and health institution stands on the broad shoulders of its celebrated athletics program.

Today the U stands for far more than success on the playing field—it also represents the finest in teaching, research, and patient care. It really is “all about the U.”

Fueled by a combined nine national championships in football (five) and baseball (four), and a legendary roster of former Hurricanes in the NFL, the U is a powerhouse brand with a compelling story to tell at the heart of the university’s communications initiatives.

Anytime you turn on a television to watch an NFL game, you hear familiar names:

- Ed Reed, Safety, The U
- Andre Johnson, Wide Receiver, The U
- Frank Gore, Running Back, The U
- Jimmy Graham, Tight End, The U

Former student-athletes maintain a close connection to and abiding passion for their University of Miami family. It is this love of the U that recently led us to create a new University PSA highlighting our former athletes’ dedication to their alma mater.

CHALLENGES
While athletics provide much publicity for a university, this high-visibility enterprise is also subject to many challenges and rules that must be carefully navigated in order to succeed.

One of the biggest challenges facing universities and athletic departments nationwide is the regulatory environment within which they must operate under the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the governing organization made up of member institutions. These member institutions create and pass the rules we all must follow. These rules govern our day-to-day operations, providing guidance for scholarships, recruiting, donor behavior, and more.

This regulatory environment provides for built-in checks and balances to help us avoid NCAA rules violations as much as possible. To stay in accordance with the rules, each university must employ a compliance staff that is in charge of teaching, interpreting, and monitoring NCAA rules for athletics and university staff. Compliance officers are here to help us and offer guidance, but it is everyone’s duty to be compliant.

Because the NCAA affects the institution as a whole, it is important that a clear line of communication exist between a university president and the athletics director.

Additionally, colleges and universities have the fundamental responsibility to protect their students. Federal laws, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), help us protect the privacy and individual rights of each of our students. Before releasing any kind of information on a student-athlete, we must ensure that we are not breaking any law by divulging superfluous information that would cause him or her harm.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA VS. NEW MEDIA
Two additional challenges that have forced every college’s communications team to change course are the decline of traditional media and the rise of social media. No longer are the media limited to those who are credentialed for events. If you own a smartphone, then you can now post “news”; in an instant, a story can be created and disseminated worldwide thanks to social media.
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While this scenario isn’t unique to colleges, athletic departments nationwide are susceptible to the 24-hour news cycle, as they are continuously under the watchful eye of the traditional and new media. Traditional media sources (e.g., newspapers, periodicals) have given way to new media phenomena (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, blogs), and because traditional media has declined in numbers over the past decade, universities are tasked with the opportunity and the responsibility to become their own news outlet. University athletic departments are now in direct competition with the traditional media, creating unique and creative content to tell stories in a new and compelling manner.

Long ago, communications offices were charged with two tasks: 1) promoting their teams and 2) working with the media. Now, in 2014, our communications staff isn’t here to serve only the media. The university has a multitude of constituencies that it must serve with information on a daily basis—alumni, donors, season-ticket holders, student-athletes, coaches, faculty and staff, and recruits, to name just a few. There are many groups to juggle, necessitating slight adjustments to our messaging with each group.

Miami Hurricanes Wide Receiver Allen Hurns scores a touchdown against Georgia Tech.
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The university has done a phenomenal job of promoting the U through social media, engaging an ever-growing fan base that is eager for the latest in Hurricanes athletics. According to the college athletics Social Media Top 25 rankings developed and posted by Auburn University, Miami ranks in the top 25 of nearly every major social media category:

- Facebook #20
- Facebook Engagement #5
- Facebook Football #12
- Twitter #18
- YouTube #7
- Instagram #2
- Vine #8

This showing is especially impressive when you consider that Miami is one of a handful of private institutions featured in these lists, has a much lower undergraduate enrollment and fewer alumni than large state schools, and competes for media attention in a major professional sports market.

All media outlets are under pressure to break news, but it is up to each institution to make sure they get the story right. More than a source, we must be a comprehensive resource to our wider audience. Having our own robust online and social news outlets ensures that we get to tell our side of the story in an accurate and balanced manner.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

A school’s communications efforts are especially challenged during a crisis, such as the nearly three-years-long NCAA investigation into possible rules violations by Miami student-athletes and staff. This story played out on a national stage, with major news outlets (traditional and new media) covering developments in a too-often sensational and biased manner. As an institution, we had to walk a fine line between public demand for information and honoring the integrity of the NCAA investigation, which restricted what we could and could not share.

Images and social media also tell an abbreviated story, which can be just as powerful as a longer article in leaving their indelible mark on the reader’s overall takeaway impression. Don’t forget that a picture is worth a thousand words—they just may not be the words you would want to represent your organization. During the NCAA investigation, select images were used by media outlets that skewed and condensed the story into a brief caption, which might have been the only part of the report that many people read.

I admit to having scanned reader comments, and from the comments, it was clear some peoples’ impression of Miami—good or bad—was set in stone and unlikely to change no matter what was reported.

This is why we have an overarching responsibility to our student-athletes, our staff, and the entire U family, including alumni, donors, and fans, to make sure we continue to promote the great work taking place both on and off the field—it’s the bigger picture.

One of the most telling developments in Miami Hurricanes athletics over the past decade has been the steady increase in the Academic Progress Rate (APR) and Graduation Success Rate (GSR) of our student-athletes, as measured by the NCAA.

The APR provides a real-time look at a team’s academic success each semester by tracking the progress of each student-athlete on scholarship. In the most recent numbers announced by the NCAA this year, every Miami program registered an APR score of at least 960, well above the 930 threshold where teams are subject to penalty. Nine teams scored 990 or better out of a possible 1,000 points, and we were one of only 17 Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools to score a 970 or higher in football, men’s basketball, and baseball.

The NCAA’s most recently published GSR for our student-athletes is 92 percent. We are tied for 10th overall among FBS programs, and eight of 14 teams graduated 100 percent of their players, including men’s baseball and swimming, and women’s rowing, golf, swimming, tennis, track, and volleyball. Our student-athletes are making the
grade and graduating with valuable college degrees and the unparalleled experience of competing at the top of their sport.

Given the current national dialogue on the legitimate role and rights of student-athletes, this is an especially strong message to communicate to our constituencies that can help break down outdated narratives about student-athlete success in the classroom and in competition.

COMMUNICATIONS IS A TEAM SPORT
An institution’s sports communications efforts must be coordinated beyond the athletics department. At the University of Miami, this starts with strong leadership from our director of athletics, who works closely with other members of my administration—every area from the provost and student affairs, to our central communications and fundraising teams.

An institution’s governing board, in Miami’s case the Board of Trustees, is a valuable partner whose members can deliver strong messaging and support to internal and external audiences.

The office of the general counsel and a recently launched university-wide program in compliance and accountability help ensure the accuracy of information we report and help protect the rights and responsibilities of not only the institution, but also each and every person involved.

Our alumni and fans constitute a priceless national and international social network of spokespeople who help promote the good news about Hurricanes athletics and the University of Miami as a whole. Because of NCAA restrictions, this creates another layer of monitoring by our athletics communications and compliance staff to ensure no one inadvertently violates any rules. We’ve launched a major educational effort to inform internal and external audiences about contacting potential recruits, their families, and coaches on social media. (See box: “To Tweet or Not to Tweet.”)

Win or lose, student-athletes play their hearts out for the love and respect of their sport and their school. I am so proud of these fine young women and men who are at the top of their game with so much potential and promise in their futures. This is a never-ending story about the quest for excellence in both athletic and academic endeavor. We own it.

“TO TWEET OR NOT TO TWEET” FOR FANS

Educating fans about responsible use of social media is a university-wide effort that stretches well beyond the athletics department. Well-informed faculty and staff are a vital part of the overall communications team.

**DO**
- Always ask before you act! Check with the institution’s compliance staff before you do anything that could render a student-athlete ineligible.
- Encourage student-athletes—win or lose. Share your experience and affinity for your school.

**DON’T**
- Make recruiting contacts with prospects, their relatives, or legal guardians (prospective student-athletes include a student entering the 9th grade, 7th grade for men’s basketball).
- Make death threats or use other threatening language.
- Spread rumors or inaccurate information that could damage the school, a coach, or student-athlete.

The University of Miami encourages faculty and fans to employ responsible social media practices when communicating about athletics... or any other topic.

DONNA E. SHALALA is Professor of Political Science and President of the University of Miami. She has more than 30 years of experience as an accomplished scholar, teacher, and administrator. She has held tenured professorships at Columbia University, the City University of New York (CUNY), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She served as President of Hunter College of the City University of New York from 1980 to 1987 and as Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1987 to 1993. Shalala served as U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services from 1993 to 2001 under President Bill Clinton, and is the longest-serving HHS secretary in U.S. history.