


Spring 2014

# [Sabbatical Report]

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**To:** Dr. Gordon Emslie  
Dr. David Lee  
Dr. Helen Sterk

**From:** Dr. Angela M. Jerome

**Date:** June 29, 2014

**RE:** Sabbatical Report

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As I suppose happens for a vast number of sabbatical researchers, the research I completed during my sabbatical varied a bit from what I proposed in my sabbatical application. In my sabbatical application, I outlined three studies I wished to complete during my sabbatical that would be part of a book proposal I am working on with two colleagues at other universities. During the fall, my colleagues and I decided to narrow the focus of our book to include only essays that examined communication within the NCAA. This called for me to edit my topics of inquiry as one of my proposed essays concerned NASCAR. We decided to make this change because the NCAA is in the midst of an identity crisis, one that is written about in the media daily. As I note in the book rationale I wrote during my sabbatical, "While a voluminous number of media stories about these issues appear daily, they have not been adequately studied by communication scholars even though communication plays a central role in the organization's success." In the following paragraphs, I outline the studies I undertook, report my progress on each, and offer an outlook for the future of my research.

#### **The NCAA's Policy on Amateurism: Unjust and Ridiculous?**

In this essay, I use argumentation theory to illustrate that the NCAA's main obstacle in defending its policies on amateurism and impermissible benefits, that many perceive to be problematic, lies in the fact that its justifications are built on weak premises that conflict with the core values of its opposition. Then I demonstrate how building arguments on weak premises allows its opposition to capitalize on the use of ridicule to compel change. I completed this essay in March. However, court proceedings related to some elements of these policies are currently taking place. Once legal decisions have been handed down, the essay will be updated accordingly.

#### **Renewal Rhetoric: The Case of Bobby Petrino**

This essay is accompanied by a funny story. My sabbatical proposal mentioned the study of the University of Arkansas/Coach Bobby Petrino scandal as a potential book chapter. At the time I submitted my proposal, however, Coach Petrino was still unemployed and media reports were ripe with speculation about where he would end up. Never once was WKU mentioned. A few months after my sabbatical was approved, I received a text from a former student who wanted to know what I thought about WKU hiring Coach Petrino. Since I had used the Petrino crisis as a case study for my advanced organizational communication course in a previous semester, I thought the student was merely joking. I soon found out he was not. At first, I was apprehensive about studying a crisis that had, literally, landed on my campus. But, the more I looked into it, the more I realized it was an image repair scholar's dream. In the essay I argue that the typology of renewal rhetoric, which is largely understudied, may be used as a tool for collegiate athletic directors to follow when navigating a "risky" hire. To explicate my assertion, I use the rhetorical campaigns undertaken by WKU athletic director, Todd Stewart, and University of Louisville athletic director, Tom Jurich, concerning their respective hirings of the disgraced

coach. All of the key rhetoric used by Stewart and Jurich to date has been collected and analyzed. The essay will be completed in early September as I want to see if/how AD Jurich's rhetoric changes after the first few games of Coach Petrino's tenure at UL.

### **The Communication of a NCAA Intercollegiate Athletics Team**

This essay will report the results of a longitudinal, RCap-funded study I conducted during my sabbatical to assess one women's intercollegiate athletics team's communication over time. To my knowledge, no other scholar in the communication discipline has undertaken such an in-depth study of a sports team. I chose to focus on a women's team because the NCAA recently celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Title IX which revolutionized women's participation in intercollegiate athletics. I truly believe this to be an innovative area of inquiry in the discipline, one that will lead to future research in the area that can assist coaches and players in improving team communication.

To collect the data, I attended two of the team's non-conference away games, three of its practices, and several of its home games during the 2014 season. All players and coaches consented to having their actions observed and reported in my study. During home games I sat in the stands as a fan to observe team interactions from afar. For away games I was allowed unrestricted access to all team activities (I rode on the bus with the team, ate meals with the team, sat on the bench during the game, and was privy to all pre and post-game team communication). I was allowed the same unrestricted access during practices. Such unrestricted access allowed me to observe interactions between coaches, between players and coaches, and between players in real time. Qualitative researchers seek to "blend" such that their participants are uninhibited in their observed behaviors and interactions. I truly believe the players and coaches in my study were "themselves" when I was around. They did not seem to be bothered by my presence nor to hold back because of it.

Sixteen of the seventeen players that remained with the team all season also consented to a one-on-one interview with me during the study. Interviews lasted, on average, 30 minutes. During the interviews, I asked questions aimed at understanding the communication strategies players and coaches used to discuss balancing academics and athletics, build team identification and commitment, handle conflict and discipline, express their feelings about the media's coverage of the team, the sport, and female athletes, and discuss Title IX.

Transcripts of the interviews were prepared by an independently-contracted transcription service during July 2014, and my research assistant is currently coding the interview data. She should be done with the coding by the end of August, and she and I plan to finish this essay during the fall term.

I would like to thank Drs. Gordon Baylis, Andrew McMichael, Helen Sterk, and WKU athletic director Todd Stewart for believing in this project enough to help me acquire funding for it and a team willing to participate. Without them this study would not have been possible.

### **The Future**

As I noted above, I have written a book rationale. My co-editors and I have clearly charted out what areas of communication we would like our book to cover (Image Repair, Policy Issues, Marketing, Traditions/Rituals, and Minority/Title IX Issues). We envision each book section

containing three essays. We have decided which chapters each of us will be writing and which we will have written by other scholars in the field via invitation or a call for chapters. We have pitched the idea to a few publishers and have been told there is a market for such a book. We would like to try for a university press and think the book might be a fit with University of Alabama press after talking with its representative at a recent conference. After all three of my essays are completed in the fall, my co-editors and I will put them together with a completed book proposal package and begin the process of finding a publisher.

Beyond the book, I wish to expand my own research by finding other women's intercollegiate athletics teams to participate in studies similar to the one described above. I see continued collaboration between scholars and sports teams as mutually beneficial and think my insight may aid coaches in creating more effective communication climates for their programs which would undoubtedly aid in team success.