

The New York Times

Wednesday, September 13, 2006

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Duke Grappling With Impact Of Scandal on Its Reputation

By KAREN W. ARENSEN
Published: April 7, 2006

Duke University is widely considered one of the great success stories in higher education, having transformed itself from a respected regional university with a history of segregation into a selective research university on a par with the country's most elite institutions.

But now as university officials grapple with accusations that three white members of the lacrosse team sexually assaulted a black woman, officials fear that the events could affect how many recently accepted students -- particularly women and blacks -- will enroll. They have scoured the e-mail messages that roughly 600 alumni have sent to monitor opinion. And they say they worry that everything they have accomplished across several decades could be at risk.

"This event served as a lightning rod," said Robert J. Thompson Jr., vice provost for undergraduate education and dean of the undergraduate college of arts and sciences, pointing to underlying issues of race, class, sex and privilege.

"It tapped into underlying feelings that existed," Mr. Thompson said in an interview, adding, "Whatever we have been doing to address these problems has been insufficient and needs to be redoubled and tripled."

The stakes are reflected in the breadth of the university's response Wednesday after Durham County authorities disclosed an e-mail message, sent less than two hours after the alleged rape, in which a lacrosse player said he wanted to invite strippers to his room, kill them and cut off their skin.

Richard H. Brodhead, Duke's president, canceled the men's lacrosse season and accepted the coach's resignation. He also announced creation of several in-depth investigations -- not only into lacrosse, but also into his administration's handling of the accusations and into the campus culture, especially drinking.

Peter Lange, Duke's provost, who has watched the university's transformation in his 25 years here, said, "I only hope that after we get through this that we can restore and expand the real character and reputation of the institution."

Christoph Guttentag, director of the office of undergraduate admissions, said he would not know until May how many students had decided to enroll in the fall. "We'll be paying attention to the responses over all and group by group," Mr. Guttentag said.

Duke had 19,358 applicants this year and admitted 19 percent of them. The university has 6,200 undergraduates.

From the start of the two-week-old crisis, administration officials have said they have been hampered by uncertainty about what actually happened at the March 13 off-campus party for which the lacrosse players hired the woman to strip. The woman has said she was assaulted in a bathroom by three team members. The players say that they are innocent and that they will soon be vindicated by the results of DNA tests.

"The issues at root are very serious and are a source of outrage," Mr. Brodhead said in an interview, "and yet we know we need to balance that against waiting until the facts are established, and each day brings fresh surprises."

But critics have called the Duke administration's response slow and insufficient. Houston A. Baker Jr., a black professor of English and of African and African-American studies, in a letter before the latest e-mail message emerged, accused the university of "a tepid and pious legalism."

"All of Duke athletics," Mr. Baker wrote, "has now been drawn into the seamy domains

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of Colorado football and other college and university blind-eyeing of male athletes, veritably given license to rape, maraud, deploy hate speech and feel proud of themselves in the bargain."

A full-page advertisement in the college newspaper on Thursday, taken out by the department of African and African-American studies along with other departments, called the situation a "social disaster."

Duke was for decades a bastion of Southern privilege that worked to broaden itself and started attracting some of the best students from outside the region.

It also sought diversity. From 1994 to 2004, Duke doubled the number of black faculty members, to about 80, or about 3.5 percent of its faculty. In 1984, 91 percent of its incoming class was white and 9 percent of the class members identified themselves as students of color. Last year, 10 percent of the incoming class was black, 7 percent Latino and 20 percent Asian-American.

Looking back, some Duke officials said they had inklings that the university's athletic culture -- and particularly the lacrosse team -- could bring problems.

In early December, the president, the provost and the executive vice president met with members of their audit committee to analyze what could go wrong on campus and how they would handle it. Athletics was an area of possible concern, along with health care quality and billing, relationships with Durham, research practices and some kind of catastrophic event.

"I think the thing we were most worried about was that something could happen in athletics," said Tallman Trask III, the executive vice president. "We didn't know what or how. But Duke athletics are on a pedestal, and the higher you climb, the faster you fall."

Mr. Trask, who helps oversee the athletic functions at Duke, said that the fact that so many lacrosse students had received notices of violations for misbehaving -- 15 in three years -- had been a kind of red flag. "I pulled all their disciplinary records a year ago," he said, adding that he had found 13 citations for holding malt cans in public and 2 for public urinating.

"In hindsight, do I wish I had done more?" Mr. Trask asked. "It is a stretch to get from their previous boorish behavior to gang rape."

William G. Bowen, the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, who has been the co-author of two books about what he sees as deeply rooted problems with college sports, said the problems at Duke could have happened anywhere.

"If you recruit aggressively, as Duke does in lacrosse, then you are going to end up with a group of students who are there primarily to play their sport," said Mr. Bowen, one of two people named by Duke to investigate how the university had responded to the accusations against the lacrosse team. "That's their focus. That is why they were recruited, why they were admitted. Then if you allow them to hang out together, to live together, you get a group of people largely cut off from the values of campus."

Several top Duke officials, including the president, argued that big-time sports was not at the heart of the problem. "The notion that this kind of behavior is confined to athletes is just not so," Mr. Brodhead said.

Student reaction is divided. Shawn Brenhouse, a white junior from Montreal, said that he saw no racial tension on campus and that he did not believe that the current problems would be a blot on Duke's prestige.

"When it's over, we'll remember it," Mr. Brenhouse said. "But it's not something we will stress on."

Taiesha Abrams, a black freshman from Brooklyn, said she had not had any problems on campus. But she said one of her black male friends, "a big guy but not an athlete, found that when he walks around, white women look at him and are scared."

"If racism is a problem," Ms. Abrams said, "then we need to act on it; both races need to work together to change Duke."

