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Lessons Unlearned

Colleges and athletics officials cope with falsehoods on résumés and in biographies

By WELCH SUGGS

It seemed like a great fit: James A. Larimore, dean of Dartmouth College, and Charles S. Harris, whom a search committee had chosen as the college's new athletics director.

Last month, the panel picked Mr. Harris from among five finalists, having vetted their backgrounds and references. Dartmouth brought him from North Carolina, where he had served as commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, for a campus visit along with the other four. Mr. Larimore joked with Mr. Harris's wife about him needing snow boots to replace the clogs he always wore.

And then the deal fell apart.

Mr. Larimore received a copy of an old résumé. He would not say where it came from, but it showed that when Mr. Harris applied to become athletics director at the University of Pennsylvania in 1978, he claimed to have a master's degree in journalism from the University of Michigan.

In the résumé he submitted to Dartmouth, however, and in subsequent conversations with Mr. Larimore and other members of the search committee, Mr. Harris made clear that although he had taken classes at Michigan, he had not earned a graduate degree.

Mr. Larimore and Mr. Harris sat down together on Monday evening, June 10, and the dean handed the prospective hire a copy of the old résumé. Almost immediately, Mr. Larimore recalls, Mr. Harris said it would be best for Dartmouth and for himself if he turned down the job -- just a day before his first news conference was scheduled.

"Charles felt that that situation, concerns about that situation, really would have cast a very big shadow over his ability to focus on the job," the dean says.

Mr. Harris agrees. "I thought the responsible thing to do was to remove any impediments to Dartmouth College in the business of running their athletic program," he said in an interview last week. "The reality is, I screwed up, and do not ever want to represent anything other than that. I had 24 years to correct it, and at some time, I did, but those things happen."

Whether the bogus degree had helped him get the Penn job or not, Mr. Harris had had a successful career in college athletics. After stops at Penn and Arizona State University, he had served as chairman of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I Management Council during his tenure at the MEAC.

And he had never lied to Dartmouth.

Should a 23-year-old mistake of "youthful exuberance," as he called it in his letter of withdrawal, have cost him the

job?

Questions like that have been popping up with alarming frequency in college sports since December, when a reporter discovered that the University of Notre Dame's brand-new football coach, George J. O'Leary had a few inaccuracies in his official biography. That touched off a wave of résumé-checking that put some coaches on the hot seat, and a few of them out of a job.

Athletics directors and other college officials are clear: Those who misrepresent themselves on job applications commit serious breaches of ethics and ought to be held accountable. But cases like this year's aren't quite that simple.

"This whole situation does raise some larger questions," Mr. Larimore says. "Had Charles been direct in letting the search committee know at the outset that he had made this mistake earlier in his career, would they have handled the hiring differently?"

Erroneous Claims

First and most notorious among the recent cases is that of Mr. O'Leary, who in December stepped down after five days as coach at Notre Dame. The move came after a New Hampshire reporter, working on a local-boy-made-good story, discovered that, contrary to his published biography, Mr. O'Leary had never played for the University of New Hampshire, nor had he earned a master's degree from New York University.

Then, in February, the Georgia Institute of Technology (which previously employed Mr. O'Leary) fired Rick Smith, a newly hired assistant football coach who had claimed erroneously in his media-guide biography to have played football and baseball for Florida State University. Another new assistant, Tommie Robinson, was retained even though his biography indicated that he had a master's degree from Troy State University, in Alabama. Georgia Tech officials pointed out that he had made an effort to correct the biography while he was still employed by Oklahoma State University, where sports-information officials had made the initial error.

Shortly after the Charles Harris debacle, Allegheny College's football coach, Blair Hrovat, resigned after revealing that he had falsely claimed to have a bachelor's degree from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

And in the most convoluted of these incidents, Vanderbilt University hired and then fired Tom Collen as its women's basketball coach, after discovering that he had told his previous employer, Colorado State University, that he had two master's degrees from Miami University in Ohio. Between being hired by Colorado State and by Vanderbilt, he had changed his résumé to specify that he had only one degree, with two majors.

Then, after both Colorado State and Vanderbilt had hired other coaches, Miami officials determined that Mr. Collen actually had earned credit for both degrees, as he had told Colorado State. He and his wife, who had been one of his assistants, are both jobless.

To some officials, the résumé furor has gotten out of hand. "We have some prominent head coaches who have been involved in rules infractions, and we have coaches who may have had a little something wrong on their biographies," says one athletics director. "Do we cast them out and say they can't coach? There just seems to be some hypocrisy."

What's Fair?

The irony is that degrees, and often even playing experience, have nothing to do with being a good coach. That was the view advanced by several soccer players at the University of California at Los Angeles, along with their parents, in January, after Todd Saldaña, their coach, was dismissed when officials discovered that his bachelor's degree was from a diploma mill.

"I have absolutely no problem with it," said Hannah N. Akwari, mother of Nelson N. Akwari, a sophomore on the team. "All he's doing is coaching soccer. He's not a professor. He's not teaching my son."

Joseph R. Castiglione, athletics director at the University of Oklahoma, says that the point is not the degree, but how the coach represents himself. "A master's degree may not have anything to do with an employee's day-to-day responsibilities, and therefore, if someone's hired without any requirement for a master's degree, people may ask, Why should it be an issue?" he says. "The issue comes into play where an institution reviews a person's integrity. Integrity is the most important thing any of us have to offer."

As Mr. Harris put it: "Anytime anyone, for whatever reason, creates an issue of questions about integrity, that to me becomes an impediment, especially in an industry largely impacted by public opinion and whisper campaigns. I just don't think that's the way you get started."

The question is whether candidates have been honest about their record -- the failures as well as the triumphs, say other officials.

Relevant Factors

"I think the fact that the degree they were claiming to have wasn't really a qualifier for the job, is not really relevant to the question we're talking about here," says William L. Kibler, the vice president for student services at Texas A&M University at College Station. "We're still talking about a false claim, or an attempt to take credit for something that they have, in fact, not achieved."

A relevant factor is whether the job applicant admits an earlier error, like including a bogus degree on an earlier résumé that might still turn up, says Mr. Kibler, a former president of the Center for Academic Integrity, a consortium of colleges that is based at Duke University.

"If you have someone who's covered something up in the past and never been adequately confronted for a breach of ethics that allow them to get the job in the first place," he says, "you can't just, based on time, assume forgiveness comes because everyone's forgotten. You have to own up that you have deceived another institution."

It doesn't have to be a life sentence, Mr. Kibler says -- and, indeed, for some of the fallen coaches, forgiveness has come swiftly. Mr. O'Leary was hired to help coach the Minnesota Vikings of the National Football League, and Mr. Smith was hired as Louisiana Tech University's co-coordinator on defense.

"The mistake Rick Smith was involved in should not prevent him from coaching again at the collegiate level," says Jim Oakes, Louisiana Tech's athletics director. "He came to us highly recommended from some of the most respected people in college football. As far as I'm concerned, Georgia Tech's loss is Louisiana Tech's gain."

Mr. Smith's record demonstrates that the biographical error is not part of a pattern, adds Mr. Oakes, noting that the coach has paid a price for a relatively minor mistake: Louisiana Tech pays nowhere near as well as Georgia Tech, whose football team is a perennial member of the Associated Press Top 25.

Repentance and Forgiveness

Charles Harris typed up a wistful letter to Mr. Larimore in the early hours of June 10, withdrawing as Dartmouth's athletics director.

"In hindsight, perhaps I should have presented myself to the Dartmouth search committee solely on the basis of my professional performance in the intervening years, and asked to be evaluated in that regard," he wrote.

Perhaps so. But along the way, say Mr. Larimore and Mr. Kibler, he should have owned up to misleading Penn officials back in 1979. If that was an aberration, and he took responsibility for it, they argue, there's no reason that

he can't go on with his life.

Mr. Harris hopes that happens. In the meantime, he's going to take time off and perhaps consider getting back into athletics in the future.

"I'd like to think there will be opportunities where I can make a difference, but by the same token, I recognize that my ability to affect what people think now, in large part, is going to be impacted by the events of early June," he said. "Someone else is going to decide whether I have a job in college athletics."

A SERIES OF EMBARRASMENTS

This year a slew of college coaches and athletics administrators have had their academic credentials and other entries on their résumés called into question. Those who lost their jobs as a result include:

George J. O'Leary. The University of Notre Dame hired the football coach away from the Georgia Institute of Technology in December. A reporter in New Hampshire then discovered that Mr. O'Leary had never played for the University of New Hampshire, as he had claimed in earlier job applications. In the ensuing furor, New York University officials announced that Mr. O'Leary did not have a master's degree from that institution, as his official biography stated. He resigned from Notre Dame and later was hired by the Minnesota Vikings of the National Football League.

Todd Saldaña. The men's soccer coach at the University of California at Los Angeles was fired in January, after officials there discovered that his bachelor's degree came from a diploma mill in Louisiana.

Rick Smith. Georgia Tech hired the assistant football coach from the University of Kentucky in January. During a résumé check after the O'Leary controversy, officials discovered that he had not played football or baseball at Florida State University, as his official biography stated. Mr. Smith resigned in February from Georgia Tech and later was hired as an assistant coach by Louisiana Tech University.

Charles S. Harris. The former commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference turned down an offer from Dartmouth College to become its athletics director in June, after officials at Dartmouth received word that he had told a previous employer that he had a master's degree.

Tom Collen. Vanderbilt University hired the women's basketball coach away from Colorado State University, but he resigned in May, when Vanderbilt officials found discrepancies between the academic credentials he submitted to Colorado State and those he had given to Vanderbilt. He was later cleared of any wrongdoing.

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