

## *What Is the True Measure of Character?*

Many of us are familiar with the timeless adage which says the true measure of a person's character is how that person behaves when no one is looking. Allow me to pose a twist: *In the midst of adversity*, the true measure of a person's character is how that person behaves *when everyone is looking*. In other words, can adversity be a useful gauge of character? Doing the right thing during difficult times and under the glaring heat of public scrutiny is no easy task. So a good case can be made that behavior in the midst of adversity is the truest measure of character.

When assessing character, we expect certain intangibles to be evident: Namely, candor, transparency, and accountability. These traits are not limited to individuals and are equally applicable to institutions. After all, institutions are nothing more than a group of individuals who have joined together for a common purpose, goal or service (e.g., business, church, school, and government). Institutions have character as they are mere reflections of the values and ethos of the individuals with whom they are comprised. And like individuals, institutions experience adversity. Often times adversity occurring within an institution is magnified precisely because of its corporate form. The bigger the institution, the bigger the "scandal" or "wrongdoing." So how can an institution show good character in the midst of controversy when the spotlight is most intense and *when everyone is looking*?

In the spirit of football season, let's examine a recent controversy occurring at the University of Maryland. The University of Maryland's football program is part of the Big 10 Football Conference, the oldest, highest level of athletic competition in collegiate sports. As a Big 10 participant, there is substantial television coverage and revenue associated with the football program. This past summer, controversy struck the University over the untimely death of a freshman football player. During pre-season practice, the freshman began exhibiting multiple symptoms consistent with heatstroke, but team officials ignored these distress signals, failed to initiate prophylactic measures and delayed calling 911. The 19-year old freshman collapsed

and died in the hospital two weeks later. As expected, tons of negative publicity ensued; however, in the midst of it all, the University President convened a press conference and publicly declared that the University was accepting "legal and moral responsibility" for the actions leading to the freshman's death. By accepting responsibility, the University made it easier for the freshman's family to recoup legal damages. The significance of this admission was only surpassed by its timing. Although the University had hired an outside expert to conduct an investigation, that investigation was far from complete at the time of the press conference. By accepting responsibility so early, the University was sending a strong message that the investigation would be a full-scale assessment of what transpired. There would be no whitewash or cover up of the facts. Moreover, while the investigation was pending, the University revised safety policies, conducted training to shore up safety protocols, initiated a separate inquiry into the culture of the football program, placed relevant officials on administrative leave, and established a hotline so players could post anonymous concerns about the program. The public was kept informed at every step.

By the time the report was issued three months after the incident, the University had already taken huge steps towards reassuring students and the public that it had taken this matter seriously. As expected, the report placed substantial blame on University trainers and medical staff. The report also described an abusive environment in the football program. The University did not make excuses for its operational failings. The University did not blame the victim or attack the investigators. Instead, changes were made and wrongdoers were fired. *In the midst of adversity and while everyone was watching*, University officials exercised candor, transparency and accountability. We can safely surmise, the University of Maryland has great character.

**Written by: LaTonya Nix Wiley**  
**Deputy Ethics Officer**  
**DeKalb County Board of Ethics**  
[lnwiley@dekalbcountyga.gov](mailto:lnwiley@dekalbcountyga.gov)