

Editorial: Should Baylor be a nation or a family?

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Contrasting descriptions of Baylor University flashed brightly in [our article about the latest changes in the Bears' athletics department](#).



Marv Knox
Ian McCaw announced his resignation as athletics director four days after Baylor's board of regents sanctioned him and placed him on probation in the university's sexual assault scandal.

"I am grateful to Baylor Nation for its support and dedication ...," McCaw noted.

Meanwhile, Jim Grobe accepted the job as interim head football coach, replacing Art Briles, whose successful tenure collapsed under the weight of the scandal.

"... I want to assure the Baylor family that every decision we will make in this football program will be made with Baylor University, her students and our student-athletes in mind," Grobe said.

So, is Baylor a nation or a family?

At the risk of over-simplification—a tempting-yet-perilous possibility when discussing any university, much less Baylor's byzantinely complex recent past—nation vs. family provides a fitting metaphor for the gnawing identity

crisis at the root of Baylor's problems.

Family ...

A family, even a deeply dysfunctional family, instinctively realizes its obligation to nurture, care for and protect all its members. A nation, on the other hand, tends to focus on power, prestige and pre-eminence. A family, even a very large family, thrives on knowing one another and being known by one another. A nation, conversely, cannot hope to know one another and naturally divides into fragmented constituencies.

For generations, Baylor referred to itself as the "Baylor family." The term embraced students and alumni, as well as faculty, staff and administration. Even Baylor supporters, mostly Texas Baptists, who never studied or worked at Baylor felt part of the Baylor family—distant cousins, maybe, but still all in the family.

Or nation?

Recently, Baylor began to call itself a nation. If memory serves correctly, ex-President Ken Starr started talking about "Baylor Nation." Or maybe the term popped up among the ubiquitous Baylor billboards that dot Interstate 35. Either way, it copycatted powerhouse collegiate football programs; Florida State's "Seminoles Nation" comes to mind.

Baylor Nation signaled the Bears' soaring aspirations, particularly on the football field. They intended to out-run the Sooners, leap over the Frogs and slaughter the Longhorns. They expected the sports writers and coaches to rank them in the Top 10 every weekend throughout the fall. They dreamed of national championships. Why am I saying "they"? Shoot, "we" dreamed of conference titles, more Heisman trophies and national championships.

The ambition voiced in Baylor Nation summed up and, fueled by the the

fever of football, eclipsed the university's academic aspirations. Baylor desires to be ranked among the Top 50 major universities in the nation. But, by golly, the Bears better be in the NCAA's Top 10.

Eye off the ball

Along the way—and this didn't necessarily start with Starr or even Briles; the regents, who make ultimate decisions about the university, hold final responsibility in any era—Baylor took its eye off the ball. And we're not talking about a football.

Across the decades, Baylor's motto has been Pro Ecclesia. Pro Texana. For Church. For Texas. Subtly, perhaps imperceptibly, Baylor Nation undermined that vision.

A university created, maintained and charged to strengthen the church—and, more specifically, Baptist churches—cannot fulfill its mandate if it strays from Christian values. Those values are multiple, but high among them is Jesus' command to look after and protect those who are weak and vulnerable.

Of course, you could consider anyone blessed and/or lucky enough to attend a major university such as Baylor among the privileged class. But young people still learning to make adult decisions, and particularly young women living in today's sexualized culture, are vulnerable, no matter how academically privileged they may be.

Failure vs. protection

Baylor Nation failed them. Perhaps Baylor family would have been more protective.

If Baylor still thought of itself as a family—and the adults in charge cared for students as tenderly and wholeheartedly as they care for their own

children—perhaps Baylor would have exceeded, instead of lagged behind, the Title IX mandates regarding sexual abuse. If Baylor still thought of itself as a family, possibly it would not have allowed one section of the family, the football program, to live by its own rules. If Baylor still thought of itself as a family, maybe it would have taken every step, including self-sacrifice, to protect its daughters.

Most dads and moms I know would throw themselves between their daughters and rapists, not turn out the light and look the other way, then refuse to listen to the daughter, blame the daughter for her rape, and tell her to hush and go about her business.

Heathy family practices

Of course, we should not be naïve or overly romantic. Baylor never was perfect, even in its family days. It won't be perfect a year from now or even a decade from now, even if it begins to think of itself as a family again. Still, Baylor needs to engage in some activities healthy families practice in order to get healthy again:

- *Come clean.* Healthy families don't keep secrets. Even when telling the truth hurts, it provides the pathway to wholeness.

The regents can start this process by disclosing the full Pepper Hamilton report on the sexual abuse scandal, redacted only for the names of victims. The regents also can promote healing by disclosing who has been and will be fired over this. Failing that, which they shouldn't, they can report the positions of fired employees.

- *Face problems and challenges.* Baylor's crisis runs deeper than the football program, or Title IX compliance, or the role of the Waco Police Department in campus life. Baylor must do something that challenges even the healthiest families—talk about sex. Oh, and alcohol, too. Baylor's policies champion historic ideals, which most Baptist churches expect. But

codifying them and then clamming up doesn't help.

With 16,000 students, the vast majority between the ages of 18 and 23, sex and alcohol, not to mention sex after drinking alcohol, are going to happen. A Baylor family would talk about that—and not just about laying down the rules. They would talk about expectations, sure, but also reality. They would talk about consequences, but also redemption. They would admit students come from all kinds of backgrounds, but all come out of a sex-saturated culture. They would talk about the value of people as individuals, not as sex objects. They would tell their stories and seek to instill empathy. In particular, males would understand more about being female in contemporary culture.

- *Talk about identity.* Exceptional parents help their children understand both who they are and whose they are. They ground their children in family identity, so they make solid decisions—on their own, whether or not anyone is watching, in all kinds of situations.

Unfortunately, Baylor's identity is unfocused, at best, and it has been unfocused for years. Is Baylor a Baptist school? A Christian university? A Tier I research institution? A football factory? A women's basketball power? A business and/or political launching pad? Is it something else? Can it be more than one of those at a time?

Baylor says it is for Ecclesia and Texana—for the church and for Texas. That would imply it is a Christian school. A good friend, who happens to be a renowned historian, says: "There are no 'Christian' universities, since sooner or later, a university—an institution—acts in ways that are less than Christian. ...

"Baylor has huge assets, great teachers, great faculty support—but it hasn't been able to decide who it is: Baptist? Evangelical? Wheaton? Notre Dame? US News and World Report? The new Ohio State/Alabama/U. Texas for

sports?”

In recent years, as Baylor, and particularly the regents, has touted the university as increasingly Christian, it has felt more secular in many respects. Many Baylor constituencies—from administrators, to regents, to faculty and alumni, to students, to friends—have spent countless hours talking about Baylor’s identity. But it’s more muddled than ever.

Baylor Nation might ignite a civil war trying to resolve that identity. Perhaps the Baylor family can talk it out with love and respect.