

**STRANGER UNDER SIEGE:
A HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY OF
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY'S SAM OLENS**

Gordon W. Maples
Vanderbilt University

Abstract

This case study and analysis explores the brief, 17-month tenure of Sam Olen as president of Kennesaw State University, including his controversial appointment, leadership mis-steps, and eventual resignation. The political and social contexts of his tenure, which coincided with political turmoil in the wake of the 2016 election and a subsequent resurgence in progressive activism throughout the country, are considered as contributing factors to his downfall. Likewise, his status as an outsider to higher education at the time of his appointment, his visibility as an outspoken conservative, and his employment being the perceived benefit of political corruption are all noted as contributing elements to his inability to earn the confidence of the faculty and student body of Kennesaw State University. Additional factors include his divisive, misguided, and ill-conceived actions while in the executive position at the university. The role of institutional context explored includes the recent histories of Kennesaw State University, the University System of Georgia, and the state of shared governance in

American higher education as a whole. These contexts set the stage for Olens's tumultuous and temporary reign at Kennesaw State. A set of recommended courses of action are presented as counterfactual alternatives to the events as they actually occurred, based on higher education leadership literature.

Keywords: *Higher education leadership, college president, higher education governance*

2016: The Controversial Appointment of Sam Olens

In June of 2016, Kennesaw State University's president, Daniel Papp, retired amidst a sequence of financial scandals, which cost the jobs of many of his fellow high-level administrators (Davis, 2016). His retirement also came on the heels of a secretive merger between Kennesaw State University and nearby Southern Polytechnic State University enacted by the Board of Regents, which met with criticism and disdain both within the university and in the local community at large (Rivard, 2013).

Following Papp's departure, there was, surprisingly, no national search for a new leader. This is customary practice to fill a presidential vacuum at a higher education institution, as a search process typically allows the various vested parties within the university—such as the faculty senate—a voice in the search process and candidate selection (Schmidt, 2016). Kennesaw State University faculty were less than thrilled with this decision to forego a search, as it completely shut them out of the process of naming a new leader for the institution. On September 27, 2016, the *Marietta Daily Journal* and the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* both reported that Sam Olens, the state's Attorney General, was to be announced as the next president of Kennesaw State University (Williams, 2016). Olens, though an experienced state politician, was disliked by many for his stances on homosexuality, as well as his general conservatism (Zamudio-Suarez, 2016). On top of this, the decision drew early criticism because of Olens' lack of credentialing (he lacked a PhD) and his complete inexperience with higher education.

Adding fuel to the fire, it was revealed on October 4, 2016, by *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* that Olens was the "lone candidate for president," and that "there [were] no immediate plans to search for another candidate" (Stirgus, 2016). University System of Georgia Chancellor Hank Huckaby confirmed that the typical national search process was forewent, prompting an immediate response from faculty and staff in the form of an online petition in opposition to Olens becoming Kennesaw State's president (Sturgis, "Sole Candidate," 2016). On October 10, the American Association of College

and University Professors—a vocal and prominent faculty rights advocacy organization—wrote a public letter calling for the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia to “conduct a national search for the president of Kennesaw State University with full participation from faculty” (AAUP, 2016).

The protests drew national attention throughout October, particularly in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, which both noted Olens’s lack of education experience, and the overwhelmingly negative reception to the hiring decision from the faculty and staff of Kennesaw State (Jaschik, 2016; Schmidt, 2016). On October 24th, a group of Kennesaw State faculty led by Dr. Anne Richards, Dr. Susan Raines, and Professor Valerie Dibble made a last-minute effort to oppose the appointment of Sam Olens as president through an EEOC lawsuit, which claimed that each of the women had submitted applications for the Presidency, but were never considered for the position due to their sex (Fox 5 Atlanta, 2016). Nevertheless, Sam Olens was officially recognized as the fourth president of Kennesaw State University on November 1, 2016.

2017: Sam Olens vs. The Kennesaw 5

On Saturday September 30th, 2017, in solidarity with the widespread NFL Black Lives Matter demonstrations spurred by Colin Kaepernick, five cheerleaders for Kennesaw State University, soon to be known as “The Kennesaw 5,” chose to kneel during the playing of the national anthem prior to a Kennesaw State University football game (Roll, 2017a). The following week, there was an abrupt change of Kennesaw State policy, which prevented the cheerleaders from being on the field during the national anthem. The Kennesaw State administration initially claimed that this decision was made exclusively by the Athletic Department of Kennesaw State University, and that it was “part of a number of changes that have been made...as we continue to refine and enhance the game-day atmosphere for our fans” (Roll, 2017a). On October 17th, however, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* leaked text messages that indicated that Sam Olens himself directed the change in athletic policy that kept the cheerleaders off the field, in response to pressure from State Representative Earl Ehrhart and Cobb County Sheriff Neil Warren (Roll, 2017b).

On October 18, 2017, the Board of Regents announced that there would be a formal review of Sam Olens’s handling of the matter of the cheerleaders’ protest (Stirgus, 2017a). In the midst of the scandal, Sam Olens was officially sworn in as president of Kennesaw State University at an investiture ceremony on October 19, 2017, to widespread, vociferous protest from students, faculty, and community members (Haney, 2017). On November 8, 2017, giving in to the overwhelming outcry from the

public and scrutiny from his superiors, President Olens reversed the policy, and the cheerleaders were allowed on the field pre-game once again (Roll, 2017c).

On November 21, 2017, lawyers for the Georgia Board of Regents publicly stated that Olens “failed to keep state officials informed” about his decisions related to the cheerleaders’ protests, “did not advise the state’s university system of the change in the pregame routine even though he had been instructed to do so,” and that Olens “didn’t follow...legal guidance,” for which he was reprimanded (Associated Press, 2017). On December 6, 2017, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported, via state government sources, that Sam Olens was going to be removed as president of Kennesaw State University due to his actions regarding the cheerleaders’ protests, and his general unpopularity with the campus community (Downey, 2017). The resignation of Sam Olens as Kennesaw State University’s president was formally announced on December 14, 2017, effective as of February 15, 2018 (Roll, 2017d; Stirgus, 2017b).

Case Analysis

Context

The odyssey of Sam Olens’ brief and troubled presidency at Kennesaw State University cannot fully be understood nor appreciated without a significant understanding of the contexts surrounding the period. In the words of Peter Eckel and Adrianna Kezar (2011), “presidential leadership is influenced by interacting webs of administrative routines, environmental pressures, and political processes that take place in the context of institutional history and culture” (p. 287). Culturally, Olens’ Presidency began on the brink of the highly politicized, national presidential election of 2016, the result of which spurred a widespread revival of progressive activism. Not only that, but his first full academic year as president began during a wave of highly publicized Black Lives Matter protests by players in the National Football League, which inspired the Kennesaw 5 to launch their own football demonstration.

The culture of the institution itself must also be taken into account: when Sam Olens arrived, the campus had just come out of the other side of a massive financial scandal that led to the expulsion of much of the upper administration of the school. The faculty, students, and local community of Kennesaw State likewise grew weary and suspicious of the state governing board, the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents, due to their clandestine and authoritatively mandated university mergers across the state’s higher education landscape, which were notoriously executed without stakeholder consultation (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumport, 2016, p. 250). University

faculty state-wide felt tenure and shared governance were at risk, and students sensed the lack of stability.

As a large public state school under the jurisdiction of University System of Georgia's Board of Regents, state authority is ever-present in the university administration of Kennesaw State. Despite the conventional wisdom that effective policy leadership for higher education needs to counter inappropriate political and partisan influences, this guidance was eschewed through the seemingly preordained Kennesaw State presidential appointment of conservative politician and higher education outsider Sam Olens by members of the Republican state government (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumport, 2016, p. 256). From the beginning, the temporal, political, and cultural contexts of the appointment made for a tempestuous backdrop for Sam Olens to begin his tenure as president of Kennesaw State University.

Key Players

The various internal parties involved with the saga of Sam Olens' Presidency at Kennesaw State University included the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents (and its Chancellor, Hank Huckaby), the faculty of Kennesaw State University (notably Dr. Susan Raines, Dr. Anne Richards, and Professor Valerie Dibble, who each legally challenged the initial appointment of Olens), Sam Olens himself, and the Kennesaw State University's activist cheerleaders. Beyond the academic structure, additional outside parties included State Representative Earl Ehrhart, Cobb Co. Sheriff Neil Warren, and local public media outlets like *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Governance Issues

The presidential tenure of Sam Olens has been defined, from the beginning, by violations of accepted traditional norms of shared governance for higher education institutions. His appointment, to begin with, eschewed the "understood" notion that boards "consult the faculty when a president is to be named" (Bowen & Tobin, 2015, p. 133). While consulting the faculty is not a mandatory part of a presidential appointment, it is considered part of the accepted "check and balance machinery" (Bowen & Tobin, 2015, p. 136) that comes with the selection of a new university president. This machinery ensures a degree of buy-in and acceptance on the part of the faculty, whose relationship with their presidents is typically "contentious" (Birnbaum, 1992), even with an acceptable level of input on decisions.

Another notable lapse in conventional wisdom in this case is how Sam Olens generally chose to respond to protests—by not responding. According to Susan Pierce (2014), effective university presidents "encourage dissent" and "take into account and address the arguments of their critics" (p. 112), as well as "talk with and listen to their

students” (p. 200). Olens, over the course of his tenure, generally tried to avoid addressing student activists directly. It is notable that he went through with his investiture ceremony, even though it was in the middle of the most heated period of the Kennesaw 5 scandal, during which his text messages indicating his public deceptions were released. Perhaps his political background prohibited malleability, so that he was never likely to be “influenced by the campus community” (Pierce, 2014, p. 111). Though he did reverse his policy keeping the activist cheerleaders off of the field, the sequence of events seems to indicate that this was a move made under pressure from his superiors, and not as a response to the sentiments of the campus community.

Much like Olens, the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents adopted a policy of ignoring dissent through much of Olens’s appointment process and tenure. It took weeks of outcry and public shaming before the Board of Regents decided that Sam Olens’s decisions surrounding the Kennesaw 5 protests required any kind of investigation and review, and even afterwards, essentially only chastised the president for not keeping them sufficiently informed of his decisions. During the protests relating to Olens’s selection as president without a national search, the Board of Regents decided not to address the criticisms at all, and the silence was deafening to the students and faculty who were clearly not being heard. One thing that the University System of Georgia’s Chancellor, Hank Huckaby, did do well during the controversy over Olens’s appointment was draw pushback away from the pending president, something that Terrence MacTaggart (2011) cites as an important role for boards in his article, “Boards as Game Changers.”

Another interesting anomaly from presidential standards is Sam Olens’s background as a politician. University presidents who enter the role from a field other than academia, and have little to no background in the field, are sometimes referred to as “strangers” (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001), and are typically found at specialized institutions. Reportedly, only 3.9% of university presidents are “strangers,” making Sam Olens’s appointment all the more notable.

This case also interestingly involves a significant amount of external pressure from members of the greater Atlanta and Georgia communities on Kennesaw State University. To begin with, Sheriff Neil Warren’s and State Representative Earl Ehrhart’s back-channeling with Sam Olens during the Kennesaw 5 protests are clear examples of political, external pressures on the university administration. Ehrhart’s budgetary control over the institution is an ethical dilemma, which will be discussed more in the “Ethical Issues” section below. Additionally, local media outlets like *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* played a significant role in this case, particularly in rallying support against President Olens and the Board of Regents throughout Olens’s appointment and tenure. The coverage created an interesting sort of proxy war between

the media and the state government through Kennesaw State University's internal conflicts.

Ethical Issues

The appointment and tenure of Sam Olens as Kennesaw State University's president was rife with ethical lapses from a number of individuals, according to the ethical principles outlined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS; 2006)—the accepted ethical guidelines for the field of higher education administration at large. President Sam Olens, by lying about the nature of the policy change that kept the Kennesaw 5 off of the football field for their protests, violated the CAS ethical principle of veracity (VI), which mandates that individuals “act with... honesty in all endeavors and interactions” and “relay information accurately.” Additionally, Olens violated the CAS ethical principle of justice (IV), which states that individuals “respect the rights of individuals and groups to express their opinions,” when he sought to suppress the speech rights of the cheerleaders through his athletics policy alterations.

The University System of Georgia's Board of Regents violated their fair share of ethical principles as well. These included CAS (2006) principle III, beneficence, which indicates that individuals “consider the thoughts and feelings of others,” which the Board of Regents failed to do when they ignored the numerous protests and calls for a national presidential search when details of Olens's appointment were initially revealed. Likewise, the Board of Regents violated CAS principle V, fidelity, for merely giving the appearance of a conflict of interest along political lines for the appointment of Sam Olens without any competition.

Both State Representative Earl Ehrhart and Cobb Co. Sheriff Neil Warren also acted unethically, due to their respective abuses of power and position to leverage a political administrative move from Olens, as this violated the CAS (2006) principle II, non-maleficence. Representative Ehrhart in particular was far out of line with his abuse of power: due to his position of budgetary authority over Kennesaw State University as a member of the state legislature, he was able to implicitly threaten the institution financially in order to leverage a desired political policy on campus (Sheinin & Salzer, 2017).

Recommendations

When it comes to recommendations for what actions might have been taken to avoid the situations that plagued Sam Olens's induction and first year at Kennesaw State University, it is best to start at the beginning. The first and simplest action that should have been taken was the launch of a national search for a new president of Kennesaw

State University in 2016. Sam Olens may very well have still been the final candidate that best pleased the Board of Regents, but the search should have been conducted regardless to at least to give the appearance of competition for the role.

Second, the faculty of Kennesaw State University should have been at least nominally involved in that search process to at least give them the illusion of input on a decision that would critically affect them. It would also have given Olens (or another candidate) a better introductory relationship with the faculty: as it happened, he was off on the wrong foot to begin with. In the words of Robert Birnbaum (1992), presidential “trajectories, once established, become self-reinforcing and difficult to change” (p. 21), meaning that once Olens was started off in the wrong direction, it was unlikely that he would have been able to successfully course-correct and win the faculty over, regardless of the later Kennesaw 5 protests.

Following the appointment of Olens as Kennesaw State University president, there was one more time where the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents could and should have effectively rectified the ongoing, contentious scenario surrounding Sam Olens. Once *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* revealed that President Olens, at the behest of State Representative Ehrhart and Sheriff Warren, effectively conspired against the protesting student cheerleaders to undermine their speech rights via an abuse of his executive power, he should have been dismissed immediately from his position as president by the Board of Regents.

Frankly, there was no way for Sam Olens to earn back the confidence and trust of the Kennesaw State University student body after such a betrayal had been revealed to the public. When taken in conjunction with his already tense relationship with the Kennesaw State faculty due to his appointment process, there was nothing that could have been done at this point to put the Olens Presidency on track. The Board of Regents should have read the situation, cut their losses, and conducted the national search for a replacement that should have been undergone in the first place.

Conclusion

The Presidency of Sam Olens at Kennesaw State University was poorly conceived of to begin with and was bungled from then on by the overly autocratic and inflexible University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents: a group that deserves much of the blame for the events that transpired. The Board of Regents choosing to forgo consultation and communication with faculty and students throughout the Olens appointment process and Kennesaw 5 scandal contributed to an adversarial culture on campus, which made the job for Sam Olens all the harder. To his own credit, Olens’s decisions, particularly to undermine the Kennesaw 5 and publicly evade blame, were

poorly thought-out and executed. However, it is hard to levy all of the blame for the decisions on the inexperienced Olens; he behaved like a politician unfamiliar with the intricacies of higher education management. The Board of Regents should have never put such an unqualified individual in the position of president, so all of his shortcomings in the role must be partially attributed to the Board of Regents not doing their due diligence of conducting a presidential search. In the future, the Olens Presidency should be looked back on as a cautionary tale of the consequences of a governing Board of Regents eschewing shared governance norms and exhibiting inflexibility to widespread petitions and protests, as well as an exemplary tale of the potential drawbacks of recruiting a “stranger” (Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001) into the role of University President.

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