

Congress Calls for Stricter NCCA Recruiting Regulations

by M.E. Sprengelmeyer - Scripps Howard News Service

March 11, 2004 If University of Colorado's leaders can take responsibility for the sex scandal surrounding its football program, other universities should too, members of a congressional subcommittee said Thursday.

A House Commerce subcommittee put University of Colorado President Betsy Hoffman in the hot seat, grilling her about the allegations that sex and alcohol have been used as a recruiting tool.

But some of the toughest questions were reserved for the NCAA, as members pressed for the association to follow CU's lead and create tougher recruiting standards as well as measures to hold university presidents more accountable.

Although it was the scandal in Colorado that prompted Thursday's hearing, members of the subcommittee said it was just a small part of a larger scandal surfacing nationally.

Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., showed a chart listing headlines from across the country about allegations that universities lured promising high school athletes with sex, female strippers and wild parties.

"Iowa, Michigan, Oregon, Alabama, Florida, Minnesota," DeGette said. "These are just a handful of the universities where there have been allegations of sexual assault and/or reports of sex at recruiting parties," DeGette said. "If this isn't an indication that we are dealing with a deeply rooted institutional problem, I don't know what else it would take to make the public and we as lawmakers sit up and take notice."

Hoffman generally won praise from committee members after outlining what some consider the most stringent recruiting guidelines in college football.

The reforms limit the time of campus visits by recruits; require parents or a designated coach to supervise them from start to finish; impose curfews and specific bans on private parties or visits to bars or strip clubs.

Hoffman was questioned about her decision to suspend, rather than fire, football coach Gary Barnett for critical comments he made about a former female kicker who alleged a teammate raped her before she left the school.

"If I were in charge of the university, he would have been fired," said Rep. Janice **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., whose Evanston-area district includes the school where Barnett first earned his national

reputation, Northwestern University.

"Here's a person who embodies the culture of NCAA athletics . . . It seems to me this is the kind of thing that we say 'No,' " **Schakowsky** said, pounding the table to make her point.

Hoffman defended her decision, saying Barnett's status would be decided only after an independent panel completes its investigation into charges from several women who say football players or recruits raped them.

Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., who chairs the subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, compared university presidents to the CEOs of corporations.

After a series of scandals involving corporate accounting, Congress forced company executives to begin signing documents to certify their direct responsibility for accounting statements. He suggested university presidents do the same, signing papers to certify their schools are following NCAA recruiting rules.

"The NCAA can do all these rules, but I think the presidents of the universities ultimately must be responsible for conduct at the university," Stearns said.

Hoffman agreed, saying that is what she has already done at CU.

"It's time university presidents really take charge of what's happening in the athletic programs," Hoffman said. "If I have to lead, that's my responsibility."

The NCAA is in the process of rewriting its recruiting rules, partly motivated by the Colorado scandal. NCAA Vice President David Berst said the proposals include a ban on off-campus entertainment for recruits and the elimination or strict limits on campus visits.

Witnesses said recruiting problems nationally appear to be motivated by the fierce competition to attract the best athletes and win games, as college football has become a very lucrative enterprise.

Former University of Nebraska coach Tom Osborne, now a Republican representing Nebraska in Congress, said it would be easy to determine which schools are breaking the rules by talking to recruits who made site visits then ultimately decided to go elsewhere.

Osborne said he was reluctant to testify because he does not think Congress should dictate how a private association governs itself.

"The NCAA is a voluntary organization and I think its very important Congress not try to get involved in the NCAA legislation," Osborne said. "It would be like the Washington Redskins coming in here and writing tax policy they just don't understand."

Jenn Stewart of Scripps Howard News Service contributed to this story.

