

A premature monument

By William C. Kashatus

The bronze statue of Joe Paterno remains outside Penn State's Beaver Stadium in spite of damning findings about his role in the cover-up of the Jerry Sandusky sexual-abuse scandal. The university's embattled trustees refuse to remove the sculpture lest they be viewed as buckling to media pressure.

Sounds like more of the self-righteousness and football-first culture that got Penn State in this mess. The statue must come down if the university hopes to regain its self-respect and correct the mistake of dedicating a statue to a person who was still alive.

The Paterno statue is a lasting monument to hypocrisy. In gold letters on the stone wall behind it are the words "Educator, Coach, Humanitarian." It's important to note that "Educator" comes first — a reminder that educating young people, not coaching football, was Paterno's primary responsibility as a university professor.

To be sure, Paterno was a magnificent educator. After he was hired in 1966, he introduced a "grand experiment" melding athletics and academics, an idea he had learned during his years as a student-athlete at Brown. As a result, Penn State's football players consistently enjoyed more academic success than other Division I athletes. Hundreds of his former players attest to Paterno's success in transforming egocentric adolescents into selfless young adults who gave something back to society in a variety of fields, including medicine, law, and education itself.



The 7-foot, 900-pound Joe Paterno statue was erected at Penn State in 2001. Associated Press

These were Paterno's enduring contributions as an educator, which must not be forgotten when history makes its final judgment.

But Paterno had a greater responsibility. We have always looked to educational institutions to develop not only the intellectual and physical abilities of students, but also ethics and good citizenship. Faculty are hired based on their character as well as their competence in specific fields. Thus, there is and should be a higher moral standard for educators.

Paterno failed to uphold that standard when it came to Sandusky. It doesn't matter that his classroom was a football field and his students were young men. He had a respon-

sibility as an educator to protect any young person whose safety was threatened, particularly within his program and on his watch.

By allowing Paterno's statue to remain, Penn State is condoning his and the university's failure to carry out and preserve a basic part of the school's mission: to provide a safe environment for young people to learn and grow as human beings.

Institutional hypocrisy is only part of Penn State's mistake. Another was dedicating a statue to a living person. Such monuments can only create an inflated sense of importance in their honorees, suggesting they are above the rules and policies that the rest of us must obey.

I'm sure Penn State erected the Paterno statue in 2001 to demonstrate its appreciation of all the educational and philanthropic contributions the coach made to the university. But the very existence of the statue signaled Paterno's immortality and validated his behavior not only up to that point in his life, but afterward. It may even have given him license, at least in his own mind, to conceal the scandal.

Until very recently, statues were dedicated only to the dead for good reasons. Living honorees can still act in ways unworthy of such distinctions, and their accomplishments and reputation can't be seen in proper perspective.

Until Paterno's statue comes down, Penn State will continue to worship a false idol and a football culture that remains bigger than the university.

William C. Kashatus is a writer and historian. He can be reached at bill@historylive.net.