

Calhoun heads to UPenn: Athletic director announces transfer

By Nick Amatangelo

In a surprising move, Loyola's Vice President and Director of Athletics Dr. M. Grace Calhoun has announced she will leave Loyola University Chicago to take a similar position at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. This comes on the same day that Vice President for Student Development Dr. Robert Kelly also stepped down from his post. The Athletic Director oversees coaches and staff of the athletic department.

Calhoun could not be reached for comment on her departure.

She will replace Penn's Steve Bilsky, who has held the post over the last 20 years.

"To Father Michael Garanzini and the leadership of Loyola University Chicago, thank you for being gracious and understanding and allowing me to follow my heart," Calhoun said in her introductory press conference at Pennsylvania's famous Palestra Arena on Monday, March 25.

The move comes as a slight surprise to Loyola Administration.

Provost Dr. John Pelissero said in an email statement to The Phoenix, "We were not expecting her to resign because she has two years remaining on her contract."

The news was not as surprising for Loyola President, Rev. Michael J. Garanzini, S.J., who also said in an email statement to The Phoenix, "I had some idea that Grace was being wooed by other institutions. But, no clear idea."

Calhoun is leaving Loyola to return to her Ivy League roots. She ran track at Brown University, where she graduated magna cum laude in electrical engineering.

Calhoun will remain in the position until the middle of May, when she will take over at Pennsylvania on July 1. She will become the first female AD in Big Five history (Pennsylvania, Villanova, Saint Joseph's, Temple and La Salle Universities).

Prior to her arrival at Loyola in 2011, Calhoun served as the assistant athletic director at Indiana University.

Upon her arrival, Calhoun made a controversial decision in her first weeks at Loyola: She fired Men's Basketball Head Coach Jim Whitesell despite the fact he had one year remaining on his contract.

The move took Whitesell by surprise, since he had an above-500 record as head coach at Loyola, and believed he would have a chance to prove himself to Calhoun.

At the time, Whitesell said in a New York Times article "I'd been told I was a model employee. I thought I'd get a chance to prove myself to the new A.D."

But it was not to be for Whitesell, who was replaced by current Head Coach Porter Moser, who has gone 32-61 in his three seasons.

Two other coaches left the university under controversial situations under Calhoun. Former Men's Soccer Coach Brandon Eitz was informed his "appointment would not be renewed" after taking the team to the Horizon League Championship game two years in a row, winning in 2011. Former Women's Basketball Head Coach Eric Simpson resigned after taking the team to the championship game of the Horizon League tournament, and finishing with the best record that the team has had in decades. Eitz was replaced by Northwestern Assistant Head Coach Neil Jones, while Simpson's successor is WNBA legend Sheryl Swoopes. In their first years as Head Coaches, Jones went 6-11-2, while Swoopes finished with an 11-21 record. The men's soccer team was eliminated in the first round of the MVC tournament while Women's Basketball won the first game of the MVC tournament against Bradley University, before falling in the second round to Indiana State University.

Three years after Calhoun's hiring at Loyola, only two Division I coaches remain from the old regime: Softball Head Coach Missy Beseres and Men's Volleyball Head Coach Shane Davis. According to the Loyola Athletic Department website, in three years, 40 new staff members have been hired in the department.

Beseres was entering her first season as head coach when Calhoun was brought on.

"From Dr. [John] Planek to Dr. Calhoun ... a lot of things have changed ... both were really great," Beseres said.

Head coach turnover was not the only controversy in Loyola Athletics under Calhoun's direction. In 2011, after a 4-22 season, seven players from the Women's Volleyball team were cut with little explanation. The reasoning offered at the time was an excess of players at certain positions caused the cut, despite the fact that only six players remained on the roster after the cuts.

Under Calhoun, Loyola athletics has seen several successes as well. In Loyola's final year in the Horizon League, Loyola won the McCafferty trophy in women's athletics in 2012, while the men finished second to Cleveland State University. The McCafferty trophy is given to the best all-around athletic performance throughout the academic year in the Horizon League. Both teams were bolstered by the Cross Country and Track and Field teams which won five out of six possible first place titles. In addition, Calhoun oversaw Loyola's transition from the Horizon League to the Missouri Valley Conference last year. With Calhoun gone, the search is on to find a new Director of Athletics. Both Garanzini and Pelissero said that the search for a new A.D. will be national and that a replacement likely will not come from within the university.

The question remains whether the new A.D. will continue to follow along the path that Calhoun has set for Loyola, or embark on a new path.

Pelissero believes that Calhoun's replacement will continue to build upon the foundation Calhoun has laid. "We will continue that momentum after her departure because we have a strong coaching staff and a solid financial foundation for our athletics teams and programs," Pelissero said.

Calhoun's departure for a higher-profile institution is a reminder of the business of college athletics.

There is fear that Loyola is simply a stopping point for coaches and administrators to get experience before they can acquire jobs at more prestigious universities.

According to Pelissero, "We constantly strive to keep our top people, but at times the outside opportunities are too attractive for our people to pass up."

Garanzini took a more optimistic stance, saying, "When your program is on the rise, it will attract people with ambition and talent. The world of intercollegiate athletics is a very fast-paced and, to a great extent, is a world where talent must be flexible."

When a new athletic director is chosen, he or she will likely want to put their own coaches into the position, much like Calhoun did. Beseres doesn't believe Loyola's coaches are worried about their positions, at least not yet.

"At Loyola we have our Jesuit background beliefs. We handle our business, we make sure we are representing Loyola every day," Beseres said.

Whatever direction the university chooses to go with the hiring of the next athletic director, it is clear that this could be a turning point — for better or worse — in athletics at Loyola.