USF places official on leave after learning of affairs with students at previous job

Samuel Bradley was suspended as director of the Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications on Wednesday.

By Anastasia Dawson

The University of South Florida placed on administrative leave the director of its communications school Wednesday when it learned he was demoted at his last job after having affairs with three students and an inappropriately close friendship with another.

The revelation hampers efforts by USF to right the course of its Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications, which has been through six directors in five years.

USF placed director Samuel Bradley, 42, on paid administrative leave Wednesday, one day after The Tampa Tribune submitted questions to the school about an investigation of Bradley’s relationships with students while he worked at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

A report of the investigation was completed in January 2013. Bradley was hired at USF the following August as a visiting professor and interim director of the Zimmerman Advertising Program — at the time, a part of the school of mass communications.

Eric Eisenberg, Bradley’s boss and dean of the USF College of Arts and Sciences, declined a request for an interview about Bradley and released a statement to the Tribune on Wednesday without naming him.

“We are very proud of the Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications and remain deeply committed to its students, vision and goals,” the statement reads. “On March 22, 2016, we learned of information regarding a current employee of the school. This information was not disclosed during the hiring process, either by the employee or the employee’s former employer. Now that the university has this information, it will be carefully reviewed and an appropriate response will be determined. In the meantime, the employee has been placed on paid administrative leave.”

Bradley did not respond to requests for an interview.
The Texas Tech investigation found Bradley violated three operating policies relating to personal relationships with students, as well as the Faculty-Student Conflict of Interest provision of the faculty handbook. The university has no formal policy prohibiting relationships between faculty and students, but ruled Bradley “engaged in generally unprofessional behavior on numerous occasions that was embarrassing to Texas Tech University.”

The 87-page report includes interviews with more than 20 witnesses as well as intimate messages sent via email, text and social media. In the fallout from the scandal, according to the report, one student was hospitalized for emotional distress, another delayed his graduation a semester, and Bradley’s wife bust out the windshield of a car driven by one of his students.

Texas Tech declined to elaborate on Bradley’s time at the school or on the conditions of his departure.

Bradley’s history at Texas Tech came to light as one of his employees, long-time communications professor Rick Wilber, was appealing his dismissal by Bradley.

Wilber contends the action came, in part, out of retaliation for complaints he lodged against Bradley with the associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The complaints arise from Bradley’s handling of grievances from female faculty members who felt they were singled out during a faculty meeting, Wilber told the Tribune.

When Wilber asked why he was being dismissed, he was told it was related to “changes in the curriculum.”

A USF instructor since 1989 whose courses include Mass Communications and Society, Wilber has received only exemplary evaluations at the university but said he has never received his required evaluation from Bradley since Bradley took over the school.

The grievance Wilber submitted over his dismissal was denied Friday by Kofi Glover, USF vice provost for human resources and facilities. Wilber and officials with the United Faculty of Florida have asked for an appeal. He is scheduled to lose his job Jan. 10.

“The more I wondered why this had taken place the more I thought it had something to do with retaliatory action because of our disagreements,” Wilber said. “Some of those faculty meetings got a little heated.”

The most recent entry in Bradley’s USF personnel file is an August memo he wrote reassigning a female employee of his to another supervisor because of what the memo heading calls “Nepotism.” The memo said the employee is not related to Bradley but that the transfer was being made “to prevent the possibility of a perception of a conflict of interest.”

None of those named in the memo could be reached for comment Wednesday.

Bradley’s personnel file also includes a resume detailing his education at New Mexico State University, Kansas State University and Indiana University, and his early work as a newspaper copy editor and sports editor in New Mexico. He holds a PhD in mass communications and cognitive sciences from Indiana.
The file also includes details about his progress from a non-tenured, visiting associate professor and interim director of the ad program, making $74,900 a year, to tenured professor, and finally, last June 5, to director of what now is the Zimmerman school. Bradley has nearly doubled his salary in 2 1/2 years to $145,385 a year.

USF’s school of mass communications has undergone a series of challenges since Jay Friedlander stepped down as director in 2012. The next director, Fred Pearce, was asked to resign a month before the school was visited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, a process that happens every six years.

The team found issues with the mass communications program, and in 2013, the university voluntarily let its accreditation for that portion of the school lapse after nearly four decades. The school went through three more interim directors before Bradley was promoted.

Enrollment has dropped every year since a fall 2007 high of 1,428 students and now stands at 862.

The school was renamed the Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications last March when Fort Lauderdale advertising executive and USF graduate Jordan Zimmerman made a $10 million contribution.

Bradley’s suspension over the Texas Tech investigation comes in the same week Zimmerman returned to the campus to celebrate the school’s new direction with students.

Here are highlights from the report of the Texas Tech investigation.

Bradley began working in July 2006 as an associate professor at Texas Tech in the College of Media and Communication. The first reports that Bradley had an intimate relationship with a graduate student he was advising came in fall 2009.

When questioned by the dean of the college, Bradley admitted to sending sexual text messages and emails to the student as well as kissing her but said the student initiated the relationship. The investigation also found the two stayed in the same room during a conference in Chicago in May 2009. Bradley said the relationship would end, and no further action was taken by the university. In spring 2009, Bradley began a relationship with another graduate student in his Advertising and the Consumer class. He eventually told the student he was going to leave his wife and wanted to marry her, and tried to persuade her to move in with him, according to the report. The two kissed in a bar in front of a number of students after classes were finished but before grades were submitted.

The relationship ended for a brief period until the student learned she had to take another course with Bradley as a graduation requirement, despite her request to take an Independent Study course instead. The investigation found Bradley showed text messages sent by the student to other graduate students of his and discussed their relationship openly.

When Bradley’s wife at the time discovered text messages between the two, she sent them to the graduate student’s husband. The graduate student had an “emotional breakdown,” became suicidal and required hospitalization, according to the report.
The student feared Bradley would stand in the way of her graduation, and once she received her degree, she reported Bradley’s behavior to the provost’s office. No further action was taken.

In May 2010, Bradley was awarded tenure by Texas Tech and promoted to the position of associate professor. Later that year, he became the interim chair of the department of advertising. In January 2011, he became chair of the department.

In spring 2012, officials learned Bradley was involved in a relationship with an undergraduate student who had traveled with him to a conference in Utah, the report said. Bradley was asked to resign as chair that May.

The student had been elected to the Dean’s Council at Bradley’s suggestion, and Bradley had inquired about using faculty senate money to pay for her travel expenses. He never followed through. According to the report, Bradley spoke openly about his sexual relationship with the student to his graduate students.

In April 2012, Bradley’s wife went by his residence late at night and Bradley and the undergraduate student were sitting around drinking, the report said. Questioned later by the dean, Bradley said the two were working late on a project and that “his wife and another graduate student of his were making things up about him.”

He and his wife divorced but were in the process of reconciling when she discovered the undergraduate student’s car in Bradley’s garage and the two in bed together. She smashed a car window and named the student in a Facebook post outing the relationship, the report says.

At the same time, Bradley was also having problems with a male graduate with whom he had “an extremely close personal relationship,” according to the report. Bradley had become involved with the student’s ex girlfriend, who was not a student of his.

Because of the problems, Bradley stopped working on the student’s dissertation until the student found another academic advisor. This caused a delay in his graduation by at least one semester, according to the report.

On the day the graduate student presented his oral defense of his dissertation, Bradley tweeted “apparently our program has done away with all standards.”

“According to one faculty member, Sam was hot and cold with graduate students, and there would always be someone upset with Sam,” the report said.

The report also said Bradley made comments to other faculty members that he could hire whoever he wanted and use his faculty senate purchasing card for office items unrelated to faculty senate business.

“He made statements such as ‘the rules do not apply to me’,,” the report said.

Bradley spoke with the dean of the College of Media and Communication, as well as the provost of the university, a number of times in 2012 about their concerns with the relationships, the report said. Bradley denied any inappropriate behavior.
Bradley was placed on administrative leave from Texas Tech in August 2012 pending the outcome of the investigation. He turned down the opportunity to provide any information to investigators, the report said.

The investigation ended in December 2012 and Bradley was hired by USF the next fall.