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Rising concerns from FAMU Board of Trustees put new men's basketball contract approval on hold

By Gerald Thomas III
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Florida A&M's contract for new head men's basketball coach Patrick Crarey II is on hold.

On Monday, the university's Board of Trustees met to discuss and possibly sign off on a three-year contract worth \$450,000 (\$150,000 per year) signed by Crarey on April 17 to lead Rattlers men's basketball.

However, concerns revolving around the newly hired coach's alleged dismissal of players and the board's desire to learn more details of a voluntary employment agreement between Crarey and FAMU put a pause on the contract's approval until the board's retreat in August.

"At this point, given where we are and the concerns we all have about the process and the needs for additional information, I move that we table this discussion until further notice from the chair of the appropriate date and that can be as soon as our upcoming August retreat or before," FAMU trustee Kelvin Lawson said.

On April 17, FAMU hired Crarey as its 15th head men's basketball coach. Crarey most recently served as head basketball coach at **St. Thomas University**, a private Catholic university in **Miami Gardens**. He also was the school's assistant athletic director.

Crarey was scheduled to officially be under contract at FAMU, starting July 1, following the June 30 contract expiration of dismissed Rattlers' men's basketball coach Robert McCullum.

Therefore, to begin immediately setting his framework, Crarey signed a voluntary agreement with FAMU in April, which FAMU Vice President and Director of Intercollegiate Athletics Tiffani-Dawn Sykes says was "fully executed through the university through the proper channels" for Crarey to "operate and advise (Sykes) in some decision making as a volunteer employee."

Sykes told trustees that the non-paid agreement between Crarey and FAMU has been on file with the university's human resources department.

Sykes added that Crarey hasn't been on campus every day since his April hiring. Sykes explained that Crarey had traveled to campus "often on his own dime" to advise ordering equipment for the upcoming season.

However, trustees quickly expressed concerns about the agreement.

Deveron Gibbons, vice chair of the board, worried that Crarey's voluntary employment contradicted the NCAA Division I Council's volunteer coaching rules. Lawson was concerned about whether it was a Title IX

violation.

In 2023, the Division I Council voted to eliminate the voluntary coach designation across Division I, instead including those coaches within a new limit for countable coaches in each applicable sport, per the NCAA's website, which Gibbons read from.

The Division I Council supported an increase of two coaches in men's and women's basketball. The additional coaches may engage in coaching activities but not recruit off campus.

Lawson said he was made aware of a Title IX issue because of "a person working on camps, not under salary or contract, and addressing and dealing with student issues." Lawson added that the legal council told him he can't go much further on that comment.

"What that (the NCAA Division I voluntary coach ruling) essentially does is not eliminate volunteer coaches, but allows people who are operating, whether they're compensated or not compensated, to have the same scope of responsibilities to those that are paid coaches," Sykes said in response to Gibbons.

"And to my knowledge, I'm not aware of it being a Title IX violation," Sykes said to Lawson.

The FAMU Board of Trustees' pause on approving Crarey's contract comes on the heels of a detailed letter from an influential Tallahassee pastor questioning actions taken by Crarey that led to the dismissal of 16 current players, including the minister's son.

In a letter obtained Sunday by the Tallahassee Democrat, Bethel AME Church's senior minister, The Rev. Dr. Julius McAllister penned a letter to FAMU President Dr. Larry Robinson expressing his discontent of 16 players, including his son, Colin, being notified via telephone on April 27, they were dismissed from the Rattlers' basketball team by Crarey without allowing them to compete for a spot, "as promised by AD

Sykes," McAllister stated.

McAllister stated that Crarey's notification was at the beginning of FAMU's final exams and four days before the college basketball's transfer portal entry deadline on May 1.

"It is my strong opinion that If Coach Crarey and AD Sykes have made decisions to release players from their scholarships and forced them to transfer two days before the closing of the portal (the portal closed on May 1, 2024), Mr. Crarey should not be hired as the next coach of the university's Male Basketball Team and AD Sykes should be required to answer tough questions and thoroughly explain the circumstances surrounding the authorization of the dismissal of an entire basketball team, including questions pertaining to the intolerable treatment of our most precious investments – our young African American men," McAllister wrote in the letter to Robinson.

"If her answers are inadequate, she too should be released from her contract."

Lawson initially mentioned the player's dismissal. Colin McAlister is a 2023 Maclay School graduate who performed as an All-Big Bend point guard for the Marauders.

While not mentioning names, Sykes said, "The local community member's child was a walk-on student-athlete."

She also refuted McAllister's claims that Crarey released all players from the team. According to Sykes, when Crarey signed the volunteer agreement, there were 19 FAMU men's basketball players, with 13 Division I-allowed full scholarship players and six walk-ons or non-scholarship players. She said three of the scholarship athletes are still on the team while "there's an opportunity" for three of the six walk-ons or additional walk-ons to be added.

Sykes told the trustees that three returning scholarship players remain on FAMU's men's

basketball roster. Sykes said the other 10 departed scholarship athletes either graduated or entered the transfer portal.

"All of the student-athletes were not dismissed. It is not true that all of their scholarships were taken and all 13 people on scholarship were dismissed from the team," Sykes reiterated.

During the meeting, Sykes mentioned she requested Crarey to downsize the roster from 19 to 16 as a "cost-saving measure for the (athletic) department." She said she asked the same from former FAMU coach McCullum before his departure.

How is Patrick Crarey II's contract to coach FAMU basketball impacted?

Crarey is not out of the FAMU job.

During the meeting, FAMU President Robinson explained that as FAMU searches for answers revolving around Crarey's status, he could offer to hire the coach for a one-year contract.

Single-year agreements do not have to come before the board of trustees.

Robinson says the one-year contract can be a placeholder while FAMU addresses questions of player dismissals, voluntary employment, and previous salary before extending Crarey a multi-year offer.

"I do have the authority to hire him for a single-year contract. I hope the board recognizes that, and there's no anxiety around that if I do, in fact, make that decision," Robinson said.

Gibbons said he feels trustees need more information on Crarey's voluntary contract. He questions whether FAMU tripled the coach's salary from his previous job at St. Thomas before approving Crarey's signing with FAMU.

"We don't know the process, the individuals,

and can't get a clear answer on if this person's salary has been tripled," Gibbons said. "I've never seen where a head coach in a volunteer status comes in without a contract. That brings red flags to my mind. We should push this back or not hire this person."

Sykes said FAMU didn't triple his salary as Crarey made \$95,000 annually at St. Thomas and agreed with FAMU to earn \$150,000 yearly.

The current discussions of Crarey's contract with FAMU may lead to a new approach to approving coaching contracts.

FAMU trustee Otis Clait II feels early dialogue could assist with having a smoother process of approving contractual endeavors.

"This conversation should've occurred back during the volunteer contract phase. We've had a coach on campus since April, working as a volunteer, and we're voting in June on a contract," Clait said.

"So, if we were to not agree with the contract, we've just had a person with a family on campus for this period of time that may or may not get voted in. We can't continue to get on a call like this and work out stuff that should have been worked out on calls with individuals."

Gerald Thomas, III covers Florida A&M University Athletics for the Tallahassee Democrat. Contact him via email at gdtomas@tallahassee.com or on the app formerly known as Twitter @3peatgee.

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