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## Smith first speaker in Fisher Black MBA leadership series

Published: 2011-02-14

Although Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith is nationally known for his success in collegiate athletics, his professional foundation began in corporate America.

Smith was the first speaker for Fisher Black MBA Student Association's February Leadership Speaker Series. Although he attended Notre Dame on a football scholarship and did some coaching, athletics was not a top priority in Smith's life, he told students, staff and faculty gathered for the annual event.

"I really didn't aspire to be an athlete," he said. He initially planned to go to trade school and work with his father, an electrical contractor, who owned his own company.

"I worked at (my father's) company from the time I was five years old until I was 18 and went off to college. My background was embedded in my experience in working with him."

In addition to a strong work ethic and an appreciation of business ownership, his parents instilled in Smith an appreciation of education. Instead of attending his neighborhood high school, he attended private school, and the scholarship at Notre Dame.

"I got my degree in business administration and after coaching, I decided I wanted to go to work in the private sector. So I got a job at IBM in 1981. Back in those days going to work at IBM was like obtaining your MBA. I was selected for a 12-month company training program," said Smith, who currently teaches the Fisher course, "the Business of Sports," with his wife Sheila. The course is offered through the Department of Management and Human Resources.

Shortly after joining IBM, he found an opportunity to merge his experience in business with athletics. "I enjoyed my experience at IBM, but I didn't love it." He was working in Indiana for IBM when Notre Dame's athletic director approached him about a position as associate athletic director.

In addition to looking for someone with a business background and experience in collegiate athletics, the athletic director also indicated he was looking for minority candidates.

"He was very straight forward about that," Smith said. "He wanted to diversify his athletic department." Smith said he learned early on the importance of diversity after attending a mostly white high school and it



particular importance to him as an athletic director.

When he first arrived in the director's job and saw photographs of the mostly white athletic staff in the football program, he eliminated the photographs in subsequent programs. "I know what the mothers of the players are thinking about when they see something like that," Smith said, eluding to the fact that many of the players are black. "I didn't allow photographs back into the programs until I could make the changes that I needed to make."

"Diversity should be something we should be conscience of all the time," he added. "And I'm not talking about just diversity in ethnicity, but across the board—whether it be people from different parts of the world, diversity in ages, thought, socioeconomic backgrounds. We need to celebrate diversity."

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