



UNC  
COLLEGE OF  
ARTS & SCIENCES

THE UNIVERSITY  
of NORTH CAROLINA  
at CHAPEL HILL

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

HAMILTON HALL  
CAMPUS BOX 3195  
CHAPEL HILL, NC 27599-3195

T 919.962.2115  
F 919.962.1403

September 22, 2011

Karen Gil  
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences  
205 South Building  
CB# 3100

Dear Karen:

I've been following the football scandal closely since it broke in the summer of 2010, and (as you may know) I've been outspoken in calling for root and branch reforms to prevent the further erosion of UNC's academic integrity. Recent events suggest that you're the next person I should talk to. I recently tried to prod the chancellor into forming an independent committee to examine "athletics" and the modalities of its interactions with academic personnel and our academic mission generally, but I fear that that idea is going nowhere. At a meeting with Holden on September 16, he referred me to Steve Reznick and the Faculty Athletics Committee; my subsequent conversation with Steve was dispiriting to say the least. I love the guy, and he's a great colleague on many, many levels. But he was less than receptive to my concerns. He insisted that the FAC was already doing everything it could possibly do, that the scandal was a complete anomaly, and that UNC should be seen as a paragon of virtue until proven otherwise. For now at least, the chancellor seems inclined to allow the various ad hoc committees that have recently come into existence (Honor System, Academic Support, and now the Independent Studies review—by Ad Boards?) to attempt piecemeal "reforms" in the coming months, and he apparently hopes that the sum total of fixes will take care of all problems. I strongly disagree with such an approach; I believe a faculty committee—filled with honest, smart, genuinely impartial people—should carry out a one-time holistic review of athletics, from admission to graduation. I'll continue to push for that, but in the meantime please allow me to make a few observations for your benefit (recognizing, as I do, that a set of serious, coordinated reforms in the College would at least go a long way toward eliminating opportunities for future abuses).

--Departmental autonomy over independent studies is quite clearly a source of big problems. Departments that attract athletes in disproportionate numbers will naturally be asked to oblige those athletes with disproportionate numbers of independent studies. I've taught independent studies myself, and I know all about the temptation to cut corners, and to look the other way while the student cruises toward an easy three credits—and I'm one of the people who take standards seriously. Independent studies (whether taken by athletes or not) should be rare, tightly

controlled, approved only for exceptional reasons, and monitored from on high. Departments should not only develop new “minimum” standards for contact hours etc., but should have to a) get permission from the Dean to conduct an independent study, and b) report to the Dean at the end of the term the results of that study—along with the “syllabus” and a copy of the written project(s) completed by the student. If we want to stop the sort of nonsense that has been going on in Afri, we have to make it clear that independent studies are being watched closely by Deans, and that faculty do NOT have complete autonomy with regard to the conduct of non-regular, non-permanent courses.

--Reinvigorating the faculty advisory committee for the Academic Support Program for Student Athletes is a fine idea, but by itself it will accomplish little. Having a distracted committee get together once or twice a semester to rubber stamp stats and reports provided by Robert Mercer and prepared by the SAD for Undergraduate Ed may provide a useful fig leaf for “support” operations, but if athletics department personnel remain the de facto supervisors of tutors and the go-to people for advisors (and there’s no getting around that fundamental reality), the invitation to corruption will remain strong. To say that academic support personnel “ultimately” report to the Dean of the College really doesn’t say much at all, as you and I both know. The “reports” of tutors pass into the hands of one professional staffer (Mercer), whose report to the SAD is further mediated, I believe, by at least one additional level of bureaucracy. If you really want to clean up that program, get faculty in the building. Have tutors making eye contact with and recognizing the presence of faculty overseers. Marginalize or remove “staff” whose first loyalty is to coaches, associate athletic directors, and sports programs. Have faculty on site, continually re-articulating the primacy of academic integrity in all dealings with the student-athletes. This may cost money, and it may require a campaign to get faculty more engaged, but faculty are the people who have reason to care what tutors are really up to; they shouldn’t need too much reminding of that. Faculty representatives need to be involved in “support” at ground level. (I hate to call out anyone, but...Robert Mercer once tried to get me to fly to Charlottesville on the team plane and stroll the sidelines of a game so I could get to know “coach”—this was when I was associate dean for curricula and was implementing a new set of rules that concerned him—so I think we have good reason to question his priorities.)

--Advising is another area that needs close inspection. Advisers, again, “ultimately” report to the Dean of the college, but there is far too much room in the current system for preferential decision-making of various kinds—decision-making that, in practice, is never second-guessed by anyone in a position of real academic authority. Take the independent studies situation in Afri. Are we to believe, first of all, that the football

players discovered entirely on their own that a faculty member in a department not in their major was open to the idea of “helping out” with independent courses—including (I understand from the N&O) nine in one summer? (While, again according to the N&O, this faculty member taught only one non-athlete in such a course?) The idea strains credulity. They were steered in that direction (and who knows where else they’re steered) by someone in the know. Who did the steering? (I was assured in a face to face meeting with John Blanchard last year that no such steering ever occurs; he also told me that, to the best of his knowledge, no faculty and no academic programs ever bent rules for football players. After Marvin Austin’s adventure in a 400-level course before his first fall term—and Austin was a special case from the get-go—Michael McAdoo’s 2009, and recent statistics on course selections by football players, you can guess what I happen to think of Blanchard’s credibility at this point.) Second, even if we assume that advisers were completely innocent of directing the players anywhere, how is it that the obvious pattern that has developed with athletes—taking many independent studies, apparently in select programs—was not flagged by concerned advisors, who know full well what form of “progress” toward degree these athletes are making? Something stinks here, and clearing the air is going to require a serious, probing review of the advising system. Athletics has always claimed and always will claim that they “need” their own advisers, advisers whose specialty is helping athletes. Maybe that’s true. But those advisers must be watched closely, their performance reviewed regularly.

--Generally speaking, I also think it’s important to send a clear signal to the entire College that the risks to academic integrity that “athletics” represent means that the College must occasionally exercise its authority in ways that may **seem** to infringe on the autonomy of faculty, departments, and support units. That’s just the price we have to pay for having made the Faustian bargain we’ve made with big-time athletics. In practice, this may mean that programs and procedures have to be tightened and closely monitored so as to prevent the abuse of loopholes by athletes and their many enablers. The independent study issue is one I’ve already mentioned. (Yes, Physics, you have to surrender your autonomy, too; it’s the price of membership in a community that has common values and a need to enforce them). But other possible changes might include:

- 1) identifying the courses/majors/Gen Ed options favored by scholarship athletes and subjecting the programs in question to close scrutiny. If athletes really do fulfill their FL requirement disproportionately with Portuguese, to take one example—that’s been the word on the street for many years—is the College not justified in asking, and even obligated to ask, what’s going on here? And can we not use SACS as a ready excuse for any such probing? (A question to ask with regard to FL: are they learning the

language? Or are they turning in assignments written in English?) If all programs have to prove to the College their rigor and seriousness because of stray abuses brought to light by football players—so be it.

2) mandating that all courses have syllabi (and prescribing the form of the syllabus);

3) establishing the guideline that faculty—not TAs or graders—will grade all written work done by scholarship athletes (and/or other categories as needed, if there's a need to avoid the appearance of targeting);

4) making the appointment of fixed-term faculty by chairs contingent on the approval of the Dean;

5) requiring that the Honor System keep statistics on categories of students (e. g., athletes), and that they report infraction and conviction rates—broken down by category—to the Provost each year.

Other changes could be added to this list. The overriding point is that the College and all faculty/units within it have a responsibility to be vigilant with regard to all threats to academic integrity, and we all need to acknowledge that vigilance sometimes requires a bit of sacrifice.

I'd be happy to talk with you about these (and many other) reform ideas if you're inclined to have the discussion. I'd like to think that by the time a new Athletics Director assumes his/her post, the germ of a reform program, or at least a commitment to a thorough review, will already be in place and waiting for action. I've been heartened by the news of your increased involvement in managing the aftermath of this embarrassing scandal, but I still await the sign that bold measures are on the horizon. There's a real opportunity for attention-getting leadership in this terrible mess in which we find ourselves.

All the best,

Jay M. Smith  
John Van Seters Distinguished Term Professor and Associate Chair

PS I wouldn't object to your sharing this with anyone, even those named in the letter.

