



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

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Holden Thorp, Chancellor
UNC-Chapel Hill
103 South Building
CB# 9100

Dear Holden:

I apologize for cluttering your mailbox with yet another random opinion about the ongoing football scandal, and you should feel no obligation to respond. But I wanted to lay out my concerns in a document more formal than an e-mail and more private than either an e-mail or an op-ed in the DTH. As you may have guessed from my comments at the Faculty Council meeting on October 8, as a rule I do not have great confidence in the Honor Court. I have been burned by the inefficiency and general incompetence of the student staff far too often to expect the Court to handle these alleged infractions properly, and with broad concern for issues of academic integrity. But that's a big discussion for another day, and I am already working with Andy Perrin and the EPC to think through the procedures of the Honor Court and to contemplate possible reforms that the EPC might wish to recommend.

The more immediate issue is the football program itself. The part of the scandal that most bothers me is the light that has been cast on academic misconduct. Everything about it—the fact that the offending tutor worked in the home of the head coach, that multiple players (evidently) thought nothing of having a tutor write papers for them, that the discovery of the misconduct was inadvertent—suggests that we're seeing only the tip of an iceberg. By coincidence, just in the past two weeks I have encountered two other troubling cases of football players behaving badly. Two weeks ago a former teaching assistant of mine, one who is teaching his own section of History 151 (Western Civ) this semester, e-mailed me quite by chance to ask for advice on how to handle an alleged instance of academic misconduct. At the completion of an in-class midterm exam, a student came to report to the instructor (my former TA) that the student sitting next to her had been using his Blackberry throughout the exam in order to search ID items on Google. It turned out that the student in question was a football player. In the end, after some hand wringing, the instructor reported the incident both to the student attorney general and to Jonathan Sauls, who presumably would know the details of this new pending case. Then, just last week I learned that a prominent football player is enrolled in my own History 151 this semester. When I contacted the TA's to investigate his performance to date (as requested by Robert Mercer in Student-Athlete Development), I discovered that, with the exception of the first recitation meeting of the semester, he has missed every recitation meeting of the term (seven to date), that he failed to show up for a quiz in late September, and that he failed to turn in his take-home midterm on Monday, October 11.

Sadly, this is merely the continuation of a pattern long observed in my History 151 over the years. The most recent football player I can recall from this course passed the course with the lowest possible D, and his performances on in-class exams were laughable. (He was saved by grades earned with at-home written assignments, papers written with the assistance of who knows what tutor or other assistant). The most recent basketball player in my 151, a star of the team on whom much attention was focused, also performed poorly and attended only intermittently before dropping the class on the last drop day of the semester. To put it bluntly, I have grown accustomed to the feeling that I am participating in a charade. And I resent what I see—perhaps I am wrong—as an elaborately constructed system built to encourage academic irresponsibility, the evasion of serious academic work on the part of student-athletes, and a rhetoric of NCAA “compliance” that even a charitable person would see as a mask for hypocrisy. Needless to say, you are in no way responsible for the system you inherited, and your own instincts and the messages you have conveyed to this point in the ongoing saga have been admirable—so much so that you’ve given hope to athletics skeptics like me.

Short of abolishing the football program, which I suggested (only half-facetiously) at the last Faculty Council meeting, the ongoing institutional investigation of the program should do everything possible to uncover and examine the culture that prevails over the world of student-athletes. Getting to the bottom of that culture is especially vital with regard to the student-athletes in the big-money sports, many of whom have been pampered, coddled, and shielded from responsibility for most of their lives. Statistics and analysis that outline the following might help to dispel (or, alas, confirm) my worst suspicions:

- How many student-athletes, and what percentage, withdraw from courses retroactively each year? How do the numbers compare to the student body as a whole?
- How many student-athletes, and what percentage, drop courses each semester? When do they drop their courses? How does this compare to the student body as a whole?
- Are there courses, majors, and instructors that have disproportionately high numbers of student-athletes? (Especially important for football and basketball). If so, what explains the student-athletes’ methods of selection? Are they “coached” to take certain courses or instructors? Steered away from others? If we think not, how can we be sure?
- Do faculty ever receive free tickets or other inducements (lunch with the coach, access to practices, claims on Final Four tickets, etc.) to attend or otherwise support the athletic endeavors of the University? When, to whom, and under what conditions are these inducements offered?
- What are the class attendance habits of student-athletes and how are those habits tracked and verified?
- What is the student-athlete rate of participation in non-athletic clubs and activities? Are there systems in place to encourage their engagement with and involvement in

the life of the wider University? If so, how do we measure the effectiveness of such systems?

- How many contact hours do student-athletes spend with tutors? How does that figure compare to contact hours in the classroom?
- Are athletes actively encouraged to visit faculty during office hours? How many do so each year? (To the best of my knowledge I have seen only one in twenty years—though I have taught dozens of athletes, almost all in Western Civ).
- How are the concepts of proofreading, editing, revising, drafting, and composing taught to student-athletes?

Other items could be added to this list, but the University community would have a much clearer picture of the athletics department and its modes of operation if we had answers to these questions. We might also then have a clearer idea of what needs to be done—what reforms need to be implemented—to ensure that respect for academic rigor and a universal commitment to academic responsibility become hallmarks of UNC athletics. Too much public evidence, and too much personal experience in my own case, show that that is not the case now and has not been the case for quite some time.

Sincerely,

Jay M. Smith
John Van Seters Distinguished Term Professor

