

Restoring Confidence in the University

By HOLDEN THORP

When we learned about possible irregularities in some African and Afro-American Studies department courses at UNC-Chapel Hill, we investigated. We asked hard questions, and we found answers that are painful for a university built on a commitment to academic excellence.

What happened was wrong and completely contrary to what our university stands for, and we've taken numerous steps to make sure it never happens again.

Our first goal was to determine what enabled the problems and who was responsible. The two people implicated in our investigation are gone. We forced the retirement of Professor Julius Nyang'oro, who previously resigned as department chair, and the former department manager retired long ago.

Our next goal was to fix the problems we found and do everything possible to avoid similar problems in the future. We're implementing recommendations coming out of four extensive internal reviews. They covered department course irregularities found between 2007 and 2011, the Academic Support Program for Student-Athletes, independent study practices, and input from faculty leaders seeking to improve the relationship between academics and athletics.

We're cooperating fully with a UNC Board of Governors panel convened by President Tom Ross to assess our investigative work and the new academic controls we've put in place.

As part of our ongoing review of irregularities found in department courses, we've been reviewing the extent to which those may have occurred before 2007. We asked former Gov. James G. Martin, who was a Davidson College professor, to lead an independent review of any additional academic irregularities that may have occurred. He will work with Virchow, Krause & Company, a consulting firm with expertise in academic performance audit procedures and controls. Those findings will be provided to the Board of Governors panel. This is an important step in rebuilding the confidence that North Carolinians deserve to have in the university's academic integrity.

The consultants will examine and assess new academic policies and procedures adopted in the department, the College of Arts and Sciences and the Summer School. The department has a new chair, governance structure and strict procedures for independent studies. The College has adopted best practices for independent study in all departments and annually reviews all teaching assignments and enrollments. The Summer School has new policies and monitoring tools, and a new campus database is helping better monitor and track student records and grade forms.

Faculty leaders asked me to bring in outside experts to help analyze the proper future relationship between academics and athletics. We asked Hunter Rawlings, president of the

Association of American Universities (which represents more than 60 public and private research universities including Carolina), to help us examine that complex dynamic. He will bring unique perspective as a top academic, the former president of two distinguished public and private universities, and a former college basketball and baseball player. We hope to engage the entire campus in discussing an important issue facing American higher education.

On campus, we're making organizational and personnel changes to further strengthen how student-athletes are advised. We want to ensure academic affairs is "fully in control," consistent with our own faculty report and the findings of the 2011 Task Force on Athletics and Academics commissioned by President Ross.

New Athletic Director Bubba Cunningham has eagerly embraced the opportunity to enhance collaborations with College of Arts and Sciences Dean Karen Gil, her colleagues and faculty. One result is that we're making it unequivocally clear that the College is in charge of the Academic Support Program for Student-Athletes. We've restructured that office and will search nationally for a new director. We're adding two positions in Academic Advising to monitor and oversee academic advising for student-athletes. We're expanding the College's successful summer residential academic support program to incorporate student-athletes who may need help with the transition from high school.

Faculty involvement and support is critical for making these changes successful. Under Bubba's leadership, the athletics department is strengthening relationships among faculty advisory committees. In reorganizing his own staff, he hired two new senior administrators to better coordinate the oversight of athletics with the College and our administration.

I am a Carolina graduate. I still serve on the faculty and teach undergraduates. I'm proud to be the chancellor and humbled to represent amazing students, brilliant faculty and devoted staff.

The academic issues that we have confronted are unacceptable, and we are intent on resolving them. Our focus every day remains on fixing the problems we discovered and ensuring they never happen again. Nothing is more important than restoring confidence in the University.

(Holden Thorp, a Fayetteville native, is chancellor of UNC-Chapel Hill.)