

Academic Fraud at UNC

In the summer of 2007, a football player at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC) took a 400-level course in the Department of African and Afro-American Studies (AFAM) and received a B+. The student athlete was about to enter his freshman year at UNC—in the fall of 2007—yet he took an upper level class before completing a 100- or 200-level course. A syllabus for the summer course did not exist. Most freshmen at UNC were not typically allowed to take 400-level courses without special permission from professors or advanced placement.

This and other cases were a part of the evidence in allegations of academic fraud against UNC in a report released by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 2015. The report references “unchecked” coursework over the course of 18 years in which many student athletes at UNC enrolled in fraudulent classes in the AFAM department or were given special advantages. As the report stated, “These were classes that involved no interaction with a faculty member, required no class attendance or course work other than a single paper, and resulted in consistently high grades.”

Julius Nyang’oro, professor and department chair of AFAM, oversaw this system of coursework. Deborah Crowder, who was employed as a secretary with the department, operated the “paper” classes, often categorized as independent study courses. Several counselors in UNC’s Office of Academic Support Program for Student Athletes also knew of these classes and, in some cases, steered students to them. These courses enabled student athletes with poor academic performance to continue to be eligible to play sports. The courses were also open to non-athletes and became popular among fraternity members.

Many of the staff members implicated in the allegations were named by Mary Willingham, a learning specialist at the university who went public with details about the ongoing operations. “I was part of something that I came to be ashamed of,” she stated, “We weren’t serving the kids. We weren’t educating them properly. We were pushing them toward graduation, and that’s not the same as giving them an education.”

The concern over giving student athletes an education raised larger questions about the balance between strong academics and strong athletics at major universities. Richard Southall, director of the College Sport Research Institute at the University of South Carolina, stated, “We pretend that it’s feasible to recruit high school graduates with minimal academic qualifications, give them a full-time job as a football or basketball player at a Division I NCAA school, and somehow have them get up to college-level reading and writing skills at the same time that they’re enrolled in college-level classes.” He added, “We’re kidding ourselves.”



The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation organization placed UNC on probation for one year, ending in June 2016. UNC instituted reforms with higher governance standards, accountability for student athlete support programs, and classroom and coursework audits. In 2017, the NCAA concluded its investigation. While the organization agreed that UNC was guilty of academic fraud, it did not punish the university or its athletic program. The NCAA's infractions committee declared it did not have the power to levy penalties against the university because the "paper" courses were not exclusive to student athletes but were accessible to any UNC student.

Concept: Incrementalism

Ethical Insight:

The academic fraud scandal at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill centered around offering classes that were not real classes. They were taken disproportionately by student athletes. The practice likely started with just one or two classes offered to help a couple of student athletes keep their grades up in order to stay eligible to compete on the playing field. But offering such courses became standard practice, little by little, over time. This is incrementalism in action. A number of other illicit academic activities seem to have grown out of these efforts as well as faculty, staff, and students gradually became involved in widespread academic fraud.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways was incrementalism involved in the case of academic fraud at UNC? Explain.
2. Faculty, staff, and students were all implicated in academic fraud at UNC. Why might faculty and staff knowingly teach or encourage students to take these "paper" courses? Why might students take these classes? How could making an exception for a few student athletes turn into the slippery slope that led to academic fraud?
3. Once UNC created a "paper" course for one or two student-athletes, would it be difficult to say "no" to other student athletes who wished to take similar courses and had similar needs? Explain your reasoning.
4. Once UNC has created a system of "paper" courses for student-athletes, would it be difficult to say "no" to non-athletes who wished to take similar courses?
5. If, before this scheme ever started, an athletics coach had come to Nyang'oro and Crowder and said: "I'd like you to create a system of hundreds of fake courses for student-athletes and non-athletes," do you think that they would have done it? Explain.
6. Richard Southall discussed the unrealistic feasibility that a student athlete achieves academic success while having a "full-time job as a football or basketball player." Do you agree? Why or why not?

7. What responsibilities do major universities have to student athletes in the balance between academics and athletics? Explain your thoughts. How can universities support both academic and athletic success?
8. Have you been aware of academic fraud happening at your own institution? What happened and how did the institution to respond?
9. Most accounting and securities frauds start relatively small and then grow larger and larger over time. Can you draw parallels between that process and what happened here?
10. Accountant Scott London of KPMG described an insider trading scheme he had with a friend, saying: “Once it happened and it worked, then it became easier for both of us. Once I saw that nothing was happening, my standards became lower.” Do you think that might have been the case also at UNC? Explain.
11. In describing his job, an executioner at a state penitentiary described “desensitization through routinization”: “No matter what it is, it gets easier over time. The job just gets easier.” Do you think that was the case with the UNC staff members here? Discuss.

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