

TIGERLAND UNDER INVESTIGATION

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that the fire's cause remained undetermined.

"They have a history of break-ins and fires — mysterious break-ins and fires that are usually well-timed," he said with a laugh. "Grambling's unique."

The NCAA probe was upgraded last month to a formal preliminary inquiry.

Two weeks ago, Hicks replaced the school's athletic director, longtime basketball coach Fred Hobdy, 72. The president said the move was unrelated to any investigation, and Hobdy, who was moved to the new post of assistant to the president for athletics, has said he is pleased with the job change.

But James Caillier, head of the state agency that oversees Grambling, said the action was prompted by the NCAA inquiry.

In March, just after the NCAA contacted school officials, state legislative auditors were finishing Grambling's audit for 1994-95.

Kyle said it was the first time in three years that they could tell enough from the school's scrambled books to conclude anything about its finances.

The findings were hardly glowing. Lax handling of American Express credit card charges at Grambling's bookstore left thousands of dollars in payments uncollected. Auditors also found that more than \$5,000 had been skimmed from students' financial aid accounts.

Hicks released the auditors' report in mid-August and acknowledged publicly for the first time that Grambling's bursar and comptroller and a cashier had been fired or had resigned the previous year after the problems were discovered.

School officials said the district attorney's office is investigating.

By the time Hicks released the audit, questions about grade changes at Grambling had sparked statewide controversy.

The state House Education Committee summoned school officials to a hearing this summer after reports surfaced that the NCAA was questioning 140 grade



"If we didn't have a legendary coach, nobody would be interested in this," Hicks said. Robinson, 77 — universally revered and affectionately known on the tight-knit campus as "Eddie Rob" — had just concluded his 54th season as head coach.

changes made for 72 student-athletes between 1992 and 1995.

Grambling officials initially testified that the school had more than 3,400 grade changes for all students during that period, but later revised the figure to 1,300.

Caillier, head of the University of Louisiana system, said the governing board has determined that Grambling's rate of grade changes is marginally higher than those at the nine other schools it oversees. He said the changes, still under review, appear to be

in line with school policies.

Hicks said Grambling found nothing improper, but is tightening its grade policy. He said grade changes might have been liberal because the school admits anyone with a high school diploma or GED. "Sometimes I think professors may go the extra mile to help students."

Questions about bogus degrees surfaced in June when Shreveport resident Keisha Wright filed suit against the school and the University of Louisiana System, alleging that she had been allowed to study the previous four years for a degree that did not exist. The degree, in applied mathematics-statistics, was discontinued in 1980 but still is listed in the school's catalog as a valid undergraduate program.

Wright's attorney, Edward Henderson of Ruston, said his client was not told about problems with her major until she applied for graduation last spring. Despite completing all course requirements listed in the school catalog with a 3.2 grade-point average, she was not allowed to graduate, he said. Wright declined to be interviewed.

School officials denied Wright's allegation and insisted to

legislators that Grambling had not awarded such a degree in years.

State legislators then produced a diploma given to another student in the same program in May 1995.

Hicks said the mix-up was caused by an error in ordering one student's diploma.

He acknowledged that the school catalog lists course requirements for 15 degree programs, including more than 50 degree specialties, that the school is not authorized to give. But he said students were warned last year that the catalog was faulty and that it is being revised.

Brun and other legislators accused school officials of lying and declared in July that the officials would have to testify under oath at all future legislative hearings.

Hicks said the charge was unfounded and smacked of racism.

"I know he would never call the president of a white college a liar," he said. "There are alums

and grads that are thinking about filing ... a federal lawsuit because of this. (They're asking), 'Why are they picking on Grambling?'"

Many students arriving for the fall semester say they have paid little attention to the investigations. More than half of Grambling's students are from out of state, and many say they have not kept up with events that rocked the school during the summer.

But on campus, feelings among some have run so high that one student was surrounded and chastised by about a dozen others after she stood at a recent news conference and repeatedly asked the president to meet with students and explain the inquiries.

"Students are defensive," said the student, Tammie Bowers, who also voices the widespread belief that Grambling's current woes are rooted in racism. "We need to know what's going on. We've just been told bits and pieces."

— By Langston Wertz Jr.

Black College Classics in October

• Red River Classic: Arkansas Pine-Bluff at Grambling, Oct. 19

• Magic City Classic: Alabama A&M vs. Alabama State, Birmingham, Ala., Oct. 26

Classic Moves:

In a change that removes a scheduling conflict with the Division I-AA playoffs, the Florida Classic — the Florida A&M vs. Bethune-Cookman College game traditionally played in Tampa on

Thanksgiving weekend — has been moved up a week to Nov. 23.

In past years, the game was played too late for either team to be available for the playoffs. Last year, FAMU was 6-0 in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference and ranked 17th in I-AA, but could not participate in the playoffs because of its obligation to play in the Florida Classic. The MEAC has applied for an automatic bid for the playoffs this year.