

Opinion

The Pilot
Gardner-Webb University

www.gwupilot.com

Box: 6165
Phone: 3533

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Mike Shade

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Letters to the editor must be signed, but names can be withheld if requested by the author

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Founders' grandson voices concern

To The Editor:

The members of the board of trustees of Gardner Webb University have materially and fundamentally breached their fiduciary duties and obligations to the University, to the faculty, to the alumni, to the students, and to the supporters by their secret vote to in effect "white wash the Chris White affair." This decision is so fundamentally inconsistent with the mission and purpose of the University that it will have long-range and far-reaching negative consequences. In short, it is a disaster of monumental proportions. It reflects the CEO model of dealing with what is good and bad by simply adopting the rule that a "chief executive can do no wrong." In this model the Trustees, many of whom were hand-picked and selected by White, are expected to give White a blank check and question nothing, including the manipulation of the grade point average of his star athlete, while the helpless faculty, alumni and supporters look on in disbelief as the moral fabric of the University is destroyed.

Now that we know in light of Enron, WorldCom and all the rest that this model of CEO accountability was and is a sham, you would think that the trustees of Gardner Webb University might want to revisit their fiduciary and ethical responsibilities. But instead of adopting a new and fresh approach, the trustees have devoted themselves to following a discredited modus operandi more slavishly than ever, even as they prepare to fight a "life or death" investigation of White and the University by the NCAA. "There is a fine line between arrogance and self-confidence," said the former CEO of General Electric in his memoir entitled "Jack: Straight From the Gut." "Arrogance" said Jack Welch, "is a killer." And it is. Arrogance can bring down the high and the mighty along with everything they have built. Chris White and the trustees around him seem as oblivious to this maxim as the CEO who coined it.

The chairman of the board

of trustees has argued that White and his team of high-end, well-dressed and highly-paid Atlanta lawyers presented a compelling case to retain White and fully cleanse his misdeeds. The so-called investigation by White's lawyers may have been compelling but it was clearly biased and one-sided. The eight faculty members who spoke out against the actions of White were not even allowed to present their case to the trustees. And what did two of these faculty members receive for blowing the whistle on White—demotions and punitive sanctions. So much for "academic freedom" at Gardner Webb University. With all of that said, it is hard to believe that the entire board of "yes-sir Mr. White trustees" was bamboozled, hoodwinked and so easily duped by what many lawyers today refer to as the O.J. Simpson-Bill Clinton defense strategy. This strategy is two-pronged and is really quite simple.

Under the first prong, the defendant's lawyers first seek to divert as much attention as possible from the underlying wrongful act—i.e., forget about the double murder, if the glove don't fit you must acquit. Simultaneously, they launch a direct attack on the credibility of your accusers—i.e., the primary witness in the Simpson case was a racist.

The purpose and goal of this defense strategy is to divert as much attention as possible from the underlying wrongful act. In this case, the undisputed facts established that White's number one star basketball player received an F for cheating on one of all things a religious exam, that the basketball player then took the course again during the summer and presumably without cheating was given a D, that the player himself did not appeal anything, and that each and every member of the administration refused to drop the F grade for cheating with the sole exception of White. In fact, the cheating F grade made it all the way through the system without any changes whatsoever until it hit White's desk. Then, all of the sudden, the F was deleted,

removed, and extinguished by a single "lapse in judgment," or to be more precise a catastrophic and premeditated act that exhibited a complete absence of morals, ethics and responsibilities. This episode will certainly not be used as an example of "profiles in courage" at the Chris White Divinity School.

Rather than focus the inquiry on these fundamental, uncontroverted, and extremely troubling facts, White and his Atlanta lawyers made every effort to refocus the inquiry on such things as the "no confidence" faculty meeting that was called without proper notice, without due process to White, without properly recording the votes and the minutes, etc. They then proceeded to launch an all-out personal attack on the credibility and conduct of Dr. Gil Blackburn and Dr. Phil Williams, two of the most distinguished members of the Gardner Webb faculty. For example, they alleged that Dr. Blackburn and Dr. Williams violated the rights of the star basketball player by disclosing his grades, that they should have disclosed what they knew about White's misconduct sooner, and that they acted improperly in calling and organizing the faculty meeting.

Under the second prong of this strategy, the goal is to "fuzz-up" the facts, to try and disassociate the fiction they want to create from what really happened, and to generally create a state of uncertainty. A good example is Bill Clinton's now famous attempts to avoid a perjury charge by saying "well it all depends on what you meant by 'it'." In this case, White's Atlanta lawyers made the argument that White did not "actually change a student's grade." While this may be literally true, it all depends on what you mean by the word "change." If the word means removing and deleting a grade of F, then White did in fact change a student's grade. In any event, the Atlanta lawyers' 138-page "investigative report" contended that since White did not "actually change a grade" he did not violate the honor code or University policy. The University policy must

therefore provide that the President must do whatever it takes to maintain the academic eligibility of his all-star franchise athletes.

The real inquiry, of course, should have been directed on such issues as whether or not White changed the grade point average of a star basketball player in an effort to preserve his eligibility. He did. He has admitted it. He has never denied it. He has given a half-hearted apology for doing it. And, of course, by removing the cheating F, White caused the player's grade point average to go up just enough for the player to meet the bare minimum NCAA standards. Without this change, the player would not have been allowed to play basketball and Gardner-Webb would not have won the National Christian College Athletic Association championship the following season.

We live in a world where disinformation has become a universal way of doing both public and private business. It's when such disinformation and dishonesty extends to an institution like Gardner-Webb, though, that we all must express our grave concerns. The past cannot be undone. The damage will be permanent. But, if White really and truly cares more for the University than he does for his own ego and arrogance, he will resign. He will do it now. He will not continue to hold the entire University hostage to his own self-centered crusade to retain his power and position. He will apologize in a more forthright and truthful tone. He will leave. And hopefully the University will be able to move on and to begin the hard and difficult work of rebuilding its stature and reclaiming its credibility as a place of moral leadership.

— O. Max Gardner III

O. Max Gardner III is the grandson of North Carolina Governor O. Max Gardner and his wife, Fay Webb Gardner. The University is named in honor of the Gardner and Webb families.