

Editorial

GWU crisis an opportunity to learn

To The Editor:

The statement released on Sept. 27 by Tommy Hardin claims that the controversy of the past two weeks has taken our focus off education. It also encourages us to learn from our mistakes.

At Gardner-Webb University, we encourage our students to develop critical thinking skills. Students learn to ask probing questions and are encouraged to form their own opinions.

The current crisis presents an educational opportunity. Our foundational values and principles are at stake, and recent events have challenged us to identify where we stand and to give reasons for our position. I encourage students and other interested parties to read the Hallman report to the trustees and the response by Dr. Phil Williams and decide for themselves which voice seems closer to the core values GWU claims to represent.

I would like to limit my remarks to the statement made by Hardin following the meeting of the board of trustees on Sept. 27. If we apply principles of critical thinking to Hardin's statement, what might we uncover? What lessons can be learned?

1) "Dr. White did not direct any change in any student's grade."

How can a student's grade point average change unless a student's grades are changed? Did not Dr. White's memo result in the change of a cheating F to a non-cheating F?

2) "While the action took place nearly two years ago, it did not become public until a special meeting of the faculty was hastily called on Sept. 10, after a story appeared in the Shelby newspaper."

How can an action become public at a special meeting of the faculty if it has already been reported in the newspaper? The impression left is that the faculty is to blame for the public furor.

3) "But forgiveness was not in the hearts of many of the faculty present, and the majority of those present voted no confidence in the President."

Who can say what was in

the hearts of the faculty on Sept. 10? And why is lack of confidence in a person's leadership equated here with lack of a forgiving spirit?

4) Notice the language used in the statement. Whereas White's actions are described

as a "judgment error" and "a lapse of judgment," actions of the faculty are labeled as "serious ethical violations," "unethical conduct that rips apart the

Christian principals of fairness and integrity for which this University is known," "breaches of ethical behavior," "vindictive behavior and mean spiritedness...a lapse of daily living and demonstration of the ethical behavior Christian educators and leaders should continually display on and off campus."

Is there balance or fairness in this picture? The statement claims that White "did not violate school policy." Nowhere in the statement is there any indication that the trustees addressed the issue of whether or not White's action was ethical.

5) The statement notes "confusion over the existing code."

I have spoken with faculty involved in writing the code, with other faculty and with students. Some faculty and students were unaware of the policy, but in NO case did I find confusion over the policy. Neither did the President, in his statement to the faculty on Sept. 10, indicate confusion over policy as a factor in his decision to order the change in the calculation of the grade. Let the reader judge for her/himself. Here is the statement as it appeared in the Student Handbook at the time of the incident: "Students are

allowed to retake courses that they fail due to academic dishonesty; however, the course hours attempted will continue to be calculated in figuring the student's grade point average."

6) "Dr. White...did not violate school policy."

If there was no "confusion over the existing code" (see point #5), White's action was a violation of school policy. The procedure for calculation of a failing F is contained in the Student Handbook (see point #5 above). I have spoken with many faculty members and students about the Student

Handbook statement. Everyone with whom I have spoken has said that the statement seems clear and unambiguous to them. Thus, despite the claim by Hardin and the trustees that White did not violate school policy, the perception of many is that he did.

Hardin's statement did not address another area where many believe White's action violated University policy. Gil Blackburn has stated that one reason he denied the various appeals that were presented to him concerning Carlos Webb's cheating F was that he did not consider the appeals to be legitimate. They did not follow the proper procedures outlined for the appeals process. The University Catalog states that "the student must make all appeals in writing on his/her own behalf....Appeals should not be made on behalf of the student by another party (faculty or official of the institution). Appeals proffered by anyone other than the student whose program is in question will be dismissed." Since Webb never submitted a written appeal of the Academic Judicial Board's decision, and since the appeal brought to White was from University athletic staff, how can the trustees claim that White's actions are not a violation of school policy?

Although Ed Hallman was informed of this apparent policy violation and states on p. 7 of his report under A Findings of Fact that the student did not contest "his professor's allegation of cheating," I could find no explanation in the "Conclusions" section for why one should not conclude White violated school policy at this point.

7) "Dr. White's motivation was to help a student whom he believed had received erroneous advice from a faculty member concerning course selection following a cheating incident."

Was the advice really erroneous? The advice was given on the basis of information provided by the student. The GWU Catalog states that "the student bears the final responsibility for the selection of a program of study and adherence to all published regulations and requirements of the University, including the preceding requirements for graduation" (p. 68 of 2000-2001 edition). The Student

"Is the problem with the President's action that there was ambiguity?"

Handbook (2000-2001 edition) states on p. 10: "Your advisor and others can assist you, but you will suffer the negative consequences if correct policies and procedures are not followed."

8) "Dr. White determined that the average should be calculated as if the F was not for academic dishonesty."

On what basis was the determination made? Do other students who have cheating Fs on their transcripts now have the right to come back to the University and have them changed to non-cheating Fs?

9) The statement by Mr. Hardin claims that "University policy...requires seven days advance notice" for special faculty meetings. The actual wording of the Faculty Constitution

is as follows: "Normally, seven days written notice shall be given."

10) "Our school has been embarrassed and unjustly criticized in the news media."

Yes, we have been embarrassed. But where has criticism been unjust? Have the basic facts in the matter been inaccurately reported?

11) "Our students, alumni, faculty and friends have been confused and angered because of the way the events unfolded."

Did trustees consider the possibility that the primary reason students, alumni, faculty and friends have been confused and angered may not have been because of the way events unfolded but rather because of the event which triggered everything else, i.e., White's order to have a student's transcript changed?

12) "Dr. White acted in accordance with his authority."

If unilateral action to change a student's transcript and GPA is not outside the authority of a university president, is there ANY action which could be construed as being outside his authority? If there are constraints on the authority of the President of GWU, what are they? Does GWU operate on the basis of a shared leadership model, or an imperial leadership model?

13) In relation to the proposal for a "special task force" commissioned to "perform a complete review of our codes and processes involving behavioral issues," the statement declares that "there should not be any ambiguity in the language or tolerance for unethical behavior."

Is the problem with the President's action that there was ambiguity? Or is it that policy and guidelines in place were ignored? The last part of the quoted sentence is particularly ironic; does the action taken by the board indicate its willingness to tolerate unethical behavior?

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