

Congress of the United States

Washington, D.C. 20515

March 1, 2023

Belle S. Wheelan, Ph.D.
President
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
1866 Southern Lane
Decatur, Georgia 30033

Dear Dr. Wheelan:

Earlier this year we read with interest of the 12-0 vote of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill approving a resolution requesting the university's administration to "accelerate its development of a School of Civic Life and Leadership."¹ Plans for the proposed school call for professors from across the ideological spectrum to be hired to teach in the departments of history, literature, philosophy, political science, religion, and potentially other departments.² This resolution is but one step in the process to develop the school. We write to express our concerns about recent public comments attributed to you.

Board Chairman David Boliek spoke of the desire to provide a balance of viewpoints to help equip students to be future leaders who are able to engage in thoughtful, intellectual discourse even where they may disagree.³ The idea is to end "political constraints on what can be taught in university classes."⁴ Indeed, the underpinnings of the school reflect the free speech principles of the Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago (often referred to as the "Chicago Statement" or "Chicago Principles").⁵ The Board of Governors of the UNC System affirmed those principles in December 2017.⁶

More recently, Jenna A. Robinson, President of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, wrote that you made a presentation to the Governor's Commission on the Governance of Public Universities in North Carolina ("Commission") on February 7, 2023, during which you contended that "UNC-Chapel Hill's board is going to get a letter because of a news article that

¹ Editorial, *UNC Takes on the University Echo Chamber*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, January 26, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/university-of-north-carolina-school-of-civic-life-and-leadership-board-of-trustees-11674773696?mod=Searchresults_pos6&page=1; see also Resolution of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, https://bot.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/160/2023/01/Resolution-in-Support-of-School-of-Civic-Life-and-Leadership_Final.pdf.

² See Editorial, *UNC Takes on the University Echo Chamber*.

³ Interview with David Boliek, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, Fox News (January 28, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6319418361112>.

⁴ See Editorial, *UNC Takes on the University Echo Chamber*.

⁵ See <https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>.

⁶ See <https://www.northcarolina.edu/apps/policy/doc.php?type=pdf&id=139>.

came out that said that the board, without input from the administration or faculty, had decided they were going to put in this new curriculum offering . . . that's kind of not the way we do business."⁷ Robinson's article further quoted you as stating that you will talk to the UNC Board of Trustees and "help them understand it and either get them to change it, or the institution will be on warning with [the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)], I'm sure."⁸

In response, Chairman Boliek stated, "We haven't received a letter from SACS[COC] and haven't heard anything from them about our request to the administration to accelerate the development of a [S]chool of Civic Life and Leadership."⁹

President Robinson also wrote that on the day after your presentation to the Commission, you told board member Marty Kotis "[i]t's just a letter of inquiry" and "[n]othing's wrong yet";¹⁰ you noted SACSCOC has a policy of sending letters to colleges and universities in response to media reports that might involve compliance matters.¹¹ While we appreciate your subsequent comments that SACSCOC makes no decisions without first gathering information, we are concerned by your initial remarks to the Commission, which appear to put the institution on warning before fully understanding the Board's action.

As members of the North Carolina congressional delegation, we expect accreditors not to pre-judge actions of governing boards, follow normal processes, be attentive to such matters of public importance, and act in accord with federal and state law. We further expect SACSCOC to keep central to its decision-making the need to ensure public university campuses remain a marketplace of ideas.

To help us better understand your statements, please respond in writing to the following questions and requests (instructions attached) no later than 14 calendar days after receipt of this letter:

1. Did you, or anyone at SACSCOC, or anyone on behalf of SACSCOC, send the above referenced letter or any other written communication to the UNC-Chapel Hill? If so, please provide us with copies of such a letter(s) and communication(s).
2. Please explain in detail the basis of your stated and unstated concern(s) and explain with specificity your analysis, including any SACSCOC standards relied upon in your analysis.
3. Please explain in detail your "unsolicited information policy" (see footnote 11) and the required evidentiary basis for sending a letter of inquiry.

⁷ <https://www.jamesmartin.center/2023/02/gov-coopers-unc-commission-shows-its-hand/>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* Wheelan stated, "We have a policy called an unsolicited information policy. When anything hits the media and looks like it may put the college out of compliance with our standards, we send a letter saying 'hey, we've seen this . . .so tell us what's going on.'"

4. Please explain what, if anything, SACSCOC does to verify media reports before sending a letter of inquiry?

We appreciate your timely response to these requests.

Sincerely,



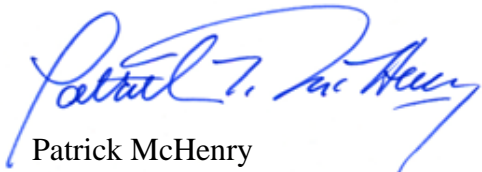
Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce



Thom Tillis
United State Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator



Patrick McHenry
Member of Congress



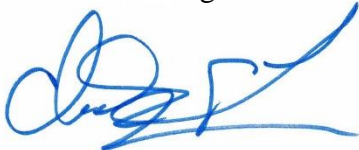
Richard Hudson
Member of Congress



David Rouzer
Member of Congress



Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.
Member of Congress



Chuck Edwards
Member of Congress