
Subject: Response to UNCSCA alumni lawsuit

Date: Monday, October 4, 2021 at 6:50:19 PM Eastern Daylight Time

From: Chancellor Cole

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

Dear UNCSCA Community,

On Friday, we learned that seven of our former students and alumni have filed a lawsuit against UNCSCA and seven former administrators and faculty members. The complaint, which we received this morning, alleges sexual abuse of minor students by faculty members in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as concerns about how UNCSCA responded to reports of abuse made at that time.

The UNCSCA community cares deeply about the safety and welfare of our students and alumni. The words in this letter feel inadequate to express the extent of our distress. Simply stated, we are horrified by the allegations of sexual abuse and are appalled by the concept that sexual abuse could happen under the guise of artistic training. We recognize that the words here are only a start — it is our actions that will most clearly communicate the strength of our commitment.

The allegations in the complaint are deeply disturbing and run counter to UNCSCA's institutional values. While they have been raised in the context of a lawsuit against UNCSCA, it is our intent to respond to this litigation in a manner consistent with our institutional values — to listen to the accounts with openness; to appreciate the courage it took for our former students and alumni to share their experiences, especially given the long-term impacts of trauma many have described; and to take steps to acknowledge and address any historical sexual misconduct with candor and compassion.

Some of the reports in the current lawsuit surfaced in 1995. In response, the UNC Board of Governors formed an independent commission of North Carolina citizens to review and respond to the concerns vocalized at the time about culture, climate and potential abuse. The commission took steps to investigate the allegations and create a report which found no widespread sexual misconduct at UNCSA. The report, which was delivered to the Board of Governors, resulted in policy changes across the UNC System.

The records from the time of the reported abuse and the commission are sparse, both in terms of what may have been reported to the university contemporaneously as well as how the university responded. We do not know enough about the commission to comment on its approach, its comprehensiveness, or how it would be viewed from today's standards. Over the past few months, we have been working to research and learn more about the historical context. We have also been working to share information openly and candidly with the media in response to their public records requests and our shared commitment to shining a light on these issues that are often hidden in society.

What we do know is that all of the recommendations from the commission are in place now. UNCSA adopted the UNC Board of Governors Policy for Improper Relationships between students and employees in 1996. UNCSA later implemented its own more restrictive Improper Relations Policy, which prohibits all amorous relationships between faculty and students. UNCSA also implemented the recommendations for: a network of trusted employees to receive reports of misconduct; realignment of the power differential between students and faculty; a more visible involvement by the deans and chancellor; establishment of a division of student affairs; protections from retaliation; clear distinctions between artistic freedom and misconduct; and a better understanding of the high school experience.

In the decades following the time of this reported misconduct, society's understanding of child sexual abuse, of the impact of power imbalances in the educational context, and the ways in which institutions can best protect minors and create a safe learning environment have evolved significantly. None of that excuses the type of conduct alleged; however, it may provide some contextual understanding around institutional responses at the time.

Make no mistake about it. UNCSA is not the same institution today that it was in the 1970s and 1980s. UNCSA has invested in and implemented an infrastructure to protect its community against abuse of any kind. We have: established a Division of Institutional Integrity with a full-time director of Title IX and chief compliance officer; instituted a policy prohibiting relationships between students and faculty or staff; established clear systems for reporting and accessing supportive resources; provided expanded prevention and education programming; and expanded available counseling resources. In addition, all UNCSA employees who learn about potential sexual misconduct are required to share that information with the Title IX office so that the Title IX coordinator can conduct outreach, offer supportive measures, evaluate the appropriate resolution, and take action to maintain an environment free from sexual and gender-based harassment and violence. And when reported conduct involves suspected abuse or neglect of a minor, the conduct must be reported to child protective services.

Protection of minors requires vigilance and sustained efforts. All faculty members are required to complete criminal background checks, receive training about maintaining professional boundaries, and to uphold their mandatory reporting obligations.

We encourage all students, staff and faculty to share concerns about sexual or gender-based harassment and violence to the University or to local law enforcement. Here are some of the departments available to report instances of sexual misconduct internally:

- **UNCSA Title IX**
- **UNCSA Campus Police**
- **UNCSA Student Conduct**

Counselors are available for students through our **Counseling Center**. The after-hours Healthlink number is 1-888-267-3675. Faculty and staff may access the state's 24/7 **Employee Assistance Program** administered by ComPysch by calling 1-888-311-4237. In addition, here is a **list of community resources** available for support outside of our campus.

Students, staff, and faculty can also report suspected abuse or sexual and gender-based violence to local law enforcement, to the **Forsyth County Department of Social Services** or the **North Carolina Department of Health**

and Human Services.

UNCSA stands with all survivors of abuse of any kind and remains committed to the values of trust and integrity on our campus and beyond.

Sincerely,



Brian Cole
Chancellor



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