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Cheated: The UNC Scandal, the Education of Athletes, and the Future of Big-Time College Sports

By Jay M. Smith & Mary Willingham. Published 2015 by Potomac Books, Lincoln, NE. (280 pages).

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In the early morning hours of May 29th, 2010, University of North Carolina (UNC) star defensive lineman Marvin Austin took to social media bragging about his experience at a Miami, Florida nightclub. Little did Austin know his “tweet heard round the world” (Sports Illustrated, 2011) would lead to one of the most extensive investigations of rules violations in the history of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). *Cheated*, as written by UNC professor of history Jay Smith and former UNC athletics department employee Mary Willingham, argues the success of the athletic program, specifically men’s basketball and football, was the result of initial “subtle compromises” that eventually led to full blown corruption in University academic departments and athletic administration. Such compromises included admitting academically ill-prepared student athletes to the University then creating pathways for academic eligibility and, therefore, athletic eligibility. Moreover, Smith and Willingham detail the athletic and academic scandal in an effort to bring awareness to the purpose of, and need for, athletic reform in higher education. This book also offers a provocative, if not accusatory, commentary on the how a prestigious university fell victim to the pressures of a multi-billion dollar athletic industry and failed to uphold the “promise” of a college education to a generation of student athletes.

Cheated is written as two distinct yet interrelated narratives – the contextual framework of the scandal (chapters 1, 2, 7 and 8) and the attempted cover up by UNC officials (chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6). Smith and Willingham detail the academic scandal through the recollection of personal experiences as employees; extensive interviews and conversations with former UNC faculty, administrators, and students; and, data pertaining to advising, curriculum, grading, and graduation rates. While Smith is a faculty member, Willingham worked seven years providing academic assistance student athletes; thus, she offers unique insight to the student athlete academic experience. Moreover, Willingham had access to student athlete academic records and documents that reflected over 30 years of fraudulent “paper classes” as well as complicit professors and academic departments, academic and athletic administrators, coaches, and staff members.

Chapters 1 and 2 explain the foundations of academic fraud at UNC through the formation of “paper classes” in the African and African-American (AFRI/AFAM) studies department, leadership failures, and questionable relationships between faculty members and athletic personnel. It is within these chapters the infamous transcript of Julius Peppers is used as an example of how an academic department created fraudulent courses and the manner in which athletic advisors knowingly funneled student athletes into such courses.

In chapter 3, the reader begins to gain insight in to how University officials became aware of and subsequently attempted to cover up unethical academic practices by faculty. Internal investigations by UNC revealed concerning relationships between student athletes and tutors. A study hall monitor was fired after reporting a tutor was providing improper writing assistance to a student athlete. There were also additional failures of academic staff to report plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty. A probe by the NCAA into the academic record of football star Michael McAdoo only exemplified the widespread dishonesty between tutors and student athletes and the complicit behavior of athletic academic advisors. Chapters 4 and 5 detail University responses to internal and NCAA investigations. The Hartlyn-Andrews report detailed in chapter 4 began to raise the suspicion of UNC faculty members familiar with the NCAA investigation, but unaware of the widespread academic fraud in the AFAM department. Faculty insisted on further investigation, which resulted in an honest attempt to find truth in a dishonest system. Despite findings of suspect courses and questionable student athlete academic performance in the faculty report and areas of concern from the NCAA, the NCAA deemed UNC free from any rules violations. Thus, UNC athletic and academic administration had successfully convinced the NCAA “no systematic academic problems could be traced to the athletic program or to a pattern of misconduct” (p. 114) by athletic or academic personnel. Despite being cleared by the NCAA, state officials began an independent review of academic improprieties in the AFRI/AFAM department as outlined in Chapter 6. The review led to a re-investigation of the manner in which under-prepared student athletes were admitted to UNC and the subsequent academic support they received while on campus. Willingham went on the record to discuss her concerns of academic dishonesty made possible by an academic department, professors, and athletic staff. Once again, the state investigation – under the direction of the North Carolina Governor – found the athletic department and academic personnel not responsible for academic misconduct.

Chapters 7 and 8 return the reader to the systemic issues undergirding the UNC academic and athletic scandal. The reader is introduced to concerning athletic recruiting practices, lax (if not negligent) admissions standards, and the “promise” of a college education. Smith and Willingham return to the concept of a system founded on the promise of a valuable college education, yet broken by the pressure of athletic success that cultivates desperation of coaches, staff, and administrators.

Not only does *Cheated* offer a thought-provoking case study on the responsibility of academic institutions, the book integrates important social issues including race, socio-economic status, and access to education. It also offers a sobering perspective on how subtle practices designed to support student athlete eligibility can quickly devolve into a system of corruption and fraud. Moreover, the systemic academic fraud detailed by *Cheated* is jaw-dropping at times,

yet head-shakingly disappointing in the confirmation of what many perceive to be an active practice at many NCAA Division I colleges and universities. Smith and Willingham bring awareness to the notion that when academic institutions create, support, and sustain unethical endeavors to ensure athletes are eligible for athletic competition, such endeavors exploit student athletes and are often at the expense of a quality education. While *Cheated* explores issues of academic integrity at the University of North Carolina, it should be a cautionary tale to all colleges and universities, faculty, and academic and athletic administration.