

## Alpha Chi Honor on the Line

*In a very public showdown over academic integrity,  
honor society students triumph in North Carolina*

By June Hadden Hobbs

A journalist in Raleigh, North Carolina, called them the “champs in Boiling Springs.” He wasn’t referring to the basketball team. Instead, he praised those who were called to action during one of the worst crises in the history of Gardner-Webb University, a small Baptist institution in a town that boasts stop lights at only one intersection. The 1,400 or so students on campus sometimes jokingly refer to Boiling Springs as “Boring Springs” because nothing much ever happens. All that changed in the fall of 2002, and the champions who emerged included the leadership and members of Alpha Chi’s North Carolina Zeta chapter, who responded with courage and integrity. This is the story of three Alpha Chi members who put the honor into “honor society.”

AX vice president and Student Government Association president Patrick Woody remembers his shock at seeing the front page of the Shelby Star on his way to the SGA office on September 10, 2002. The lead story broke the news that Gardner-Webb’s president, M. Christopher White, had changed the way a star basketball player’s grade point average was computed. An academic dishonesty hearing had found the student guilty of cheating on his final exam in a religion class during the fall of 1999 and assigned him a “cheating F,” one that cannot be replaced if the student retakes the class for a better grade. With the student’s eligibility on the line, President White ordered the school registrar to replace the cheating F with a slightly better grade the young man made upon retaking the class and to refigure the grade point average. As a result, the player’s eligibility was ensured and the Gardner-Webb Bulldogs went on to win the National Christian College Athletic Association championship for 2000. An NCAA investigation was imminent.

Patrick recalls his anger upon reading the article: “Many of the younger members of the student body did not know exactly how to feel about the situation. However, the changing of the grade incensed the older members. My friends and I felt that we had worked for nothing if someone else could get his grade changed because he was more athletic than we were.” Patrick recalls that the initial impact of the story was to divide the student body into those supporting athletics and those supporting academics. But he quickly realized that the real issue was not jocks versus the world, “but a question of whether academic integrity applies to all people.”

Alpha Chi president Christina Parkins interpreted the president’s actions as an assault upon the school’s honor code, which new students are asked to sign. A framed copy of the code then hung in every classroom at Gardner-Webb University. Its first line was an updated Shakespeare quote: “My honor is my life.” As AX president, Christina was automatically a member of the academic dishonesty board, which hears cases such as the one involving the athlete at the heart of the crisis. Learning what happened was a call to action for her: “I saw the honor society as one of the highest positions on campus. If we were not willing to uphold the honor code that we had to abide by, then why even have it? And I think as Alpha Chi president, it hit me even harder with having to sit on academic dishonesty boards.”

### THE CONTROVERSY BREWS

For the most part, the 120 or so members of the faculty agreed with Patrick and Christina. That afternoon, the faculty canceled classes and gathered to address the crisis. President White justified his

actions to the stunned professors by saying that he felt the basketball player had gotten bad advice when a university official told him he could replace the F on his transcript if he retook the class and earned a better grade. The official had been unaware that the F in his religion class was the result of academic dishonesty, information available only to the student, his official advisor, and the registrar. After several agonizing hours of debate, two-thirds of the faculty gave the president a vote of no confidence. A few days later, the executive committee of the Board of Trustees met, announced their full support for President White, and promised to investigate the allegations against him.

On September 13 the school newspaper, the Pilot, communicated details of the scandal to the Gardner-Webb community with a series of articles. Editor-in-chief and Alpha Chi member Erin Boyd kept her staff on task although she admits being torn by the nature of the controversy: “As a member of a national honor society and leader on campus, I felt I had been charged with the responsibility of upholding the integrity of my university, which, by my senior year, had become my home.” Despite her desire to speak out for academic integrity, however, she decided “to accept that what I was doing in investigating, processing and providing information to the community was of more importance than outwardly voicing my personal frustration. . . . I knew the best I could do was cover the controversy as in-depth and objectively as possible and let the students decide for themselves.”

The Pilot’s lead story focused on the NCAA investigation and quoted Dr. White’s rationale for his action at length. Other articles balanced the views of White’s supporters with the opinions of others. Among those interviewed were members of the “Group of Eight” who, led by the vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Gil Blackburn, had investigated the charges against Dr. White before bringing them to the faculty as a whole. These eight professors—including two winners of the prestigious Fleming-White award for excellence in teaching, the chair of the religious studies department, the dean of the graduate school, and the faculty athletic representative—had come under intense scrutiny the moment the story broke. Most poignant, perhaps, was a cartoon by AX member Charlie Baber showing a struggling figure labeled “student body” trying to put a bandage on a copy of the honor code rent from top to bottom. In a bubble coming from the figure’s mouth were the words “Let the healing begin with us.”

Over the next seventeen days, a team of lawyers from Atlanta, Georgia, working on behalf of the trustees, grilled the “Group of Eight” and met with students, including several Alpha Chi members. The students were assured that their voices would be heard in the matter although none was allowed to speak directly to the trustees. The law firm published several versions of their findings. All of them exonerated the president and condemned his accusers. Late on September 27, after an all-day meeting, a weary spokesman announced on the late-night news that the Board of Trustees fully supported President White and was demoting two members of the Group of Eight, Dr. Blackburn and assistant vice president for academic affairs Dr. Phil Williams. Williams, a lawyer and business professor, had issued a stinging rebuttal to the Georgia lawyers’ report.

The next morning all hell broke loose. One member of the Group of Eight, a business professor with an endowed chair, returned the literal chair symbolic of his position with his resignation taped to it. John Gardner, another business professor and grandson of the eponymous O. Max and Faye Webb Gardner—whose money and influence saved the school during hard times in the early 1940’s—resigned in protest as did a communications professor. An alumnus in nearby Shelby, North Carolina, returned his diploma with a letter asking that his name be removed from an endowed scholarship he had founded. Local citizens deluged the Shelby Star with opinions on both sides of the controversy, and the newspaper devoted many of its pages to following the story. The New York Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education sent reporters who wrote and published articles about a school most Americans never knew existed.

The Alpha Chi president and vice president, however, stayed focused on the issue of academic integrity. Christina and Patrick saw what had happened as a death blow for the honor code, and Christina fretted about how embarrassed she would feel when journalists picked up the story. In fact, a

local radio talk show host not long afterward jokingly put the Gardner-Webb honor code on a list of the ten items most likely to be used as filler for a sink hole that had recently opened in Hickory, North Carolina. Christina told Patrick, half in jest, that perhaps they should “mourn our honor code.” As she put it, “breast cancer has pink ribbons, and AIDS has red ribbons; what if we wore black ribbons to show our sadness for what has come upon our campus?”

The idea captured their imagination, and that night Christina drafted another AX member, Michael Rakes, to visit the Wal-Marts in nearby Shelby and Gaffney, South Carolina. They bought out all the narrow black grosgrain ribbon available, cut over 200 symbols of mourning, and distributed them with pins in the name of Alpha Chi the next day. Just as the protest caught fire, however, a staff member loyal to Dr. White reinterpreted it as a sign of support for Dr. Blackburn, leader of the Group of Eight, rather than as a symbol of mourning for the honor code. When this staffer began wearing a white ribbon to show where his loyalties lay, faculty members and students feared that the campaign would trivialize the issue by making it a battle of personalities. Support waned, and the black-ribbon campaign fizzled.

The students were not defeated, however. On Monday morning after the Board of Trustees’ announcement, two music majors, Jondra Harmon and Elizabeth Lawson, asked their friends to meet at another student’s apartment to decide how to proceed. Around twenty students, including Patrick and Christina, arrived with the Atlanta attorneys’ report in their hands. A focus of their discussion was the lack of student voice in the proceedings. Patrick verbalized the concern that “the lawyers’ meeting with the students was not included in the report, nor were the statements made by the students placed in the report. Therefore the trustees based their decision on biased and incomplete information.” Christina worried that the degree she planned to complete by May would be worthless and felt that she “deserved a voice” in what happened. The students decided the only option available was public protests of “the decision [to exclude student opinions], the demotions, and the lack of respect for the honor code.”

Before the group disbanded for the night, they compiled a list of rules for themselves. Above all, they would cooperate with the chief of Campus Police, Barry Johnson, to make sure the demonstrations were peaceful. Patrick met with Chief Johnson the next morning, and together they drew up a list of rules detailing where the students could stand and what they could do. The student organizers also decided it was imperative to focus on policy decisions rather than on individual personalities and, in Patrick’s words, to “make sure the athletes knew the demonstration was not directed toward them.” Patrick describes the group’s decision to act in terms of their Christian values: “If someone spoke offensively or acted in such a manner toward us, we would thank them for their opinion and not respond in like [manner].” Finally, the student group agreed, as a sign of their support for the faculty, to share the responsibility for keeping the protest going so that no one would miss classes.

## ON WITH THE PROTEST

The protests began on Wednesday, October 2, when around fifty students gathered in the fog at the O. Max Gardner Music Building for prayer, Bible reading, and a discussion of the protest guidelines. The students then walked together to the main intersection of town in front of Webb Hall, which houses the school’s administrative offices, including the president’s office. The local media had been informed, and many North Carolinians watched clips of the protest that night on the 6:00 news. The group swelled to as many as a hundred students at times during the day. Most of the students carried home-made signs. One read, “Markers: \$1.97; Poster Board: \$.76; Being heard: Priceless.” Another student used duct tape to cover her mouth and to create a large “X” on a framed copy of the honor code.

Patrick Woody stayed with the students most of the day to maintain order and act as a liaison between the students and those in the administration building. Townspeople honked when they passed the students and gave them a thumbs up; the horns were deafening at times. Patrick remembers that “at noon, Dr. White came out to be interviewed by the media. During the interview, he said that he had done nothing wrong and that he would allow us to protest because it was our right. This denial of wrongdoing only encouraged us to continue.” As the day wore on, the students—wearing black as a sign

of mourning—began to flag in the typically muggy heat of early fall in the North Carolina foothills. Late in the afternoon, after some passing athletes “verbally accosted one of the protesting girls,” Patrick and the others decided no one would be left alone on the corner. The students stood firm until 5:00 p.m.

The next day they did it again. And the next. And the next. Chief Johnson stopped by every hour to check on the students and brought them apples, but students soon learned the price of activism. Passing professors found one young woman trembling with exhaustion several days into the protest and insisted she go home to rest. Other students earned miserable sunburns, and some were frightened by athletes yelling obscenities. Christina was saddened to learn that a coach had threatened to keep a member of the track team from running in any track meets—and, thus, losing his scholarship—if he continued to protest. As mid-term exams approached, other scholarships may have been on the line as well. One Alpha Chi member simply said she was sacrificing her A’s for her principles. By this time, the weather had also changed, to a cold miserable rain that prompted security to borrow tents for the students and supporters to provide hot chocolate. The students hung tight, 8:00 to 5:00 every day, never leaving their post unattended.

Several days into the protest, the townspeople were transformed by the students’ persistence and began bringing them food and supplies after the students held up a posterboard listing things they needed. Patrick says that members of Boiling Springs Baptist Church “assigned days for people in the church to bring us food and other materials.” Christina recalls getting everything from homemade biscuits, sandwiches, brownies, and cookies to quilts when it turned cold. When the students began talking of having a web site concerning the crisis, a man appeared within thirty minutes and handed them the fifty dollars they needed as start-up money.

Many of the townspeople who helped the students were descendants of those who supported the institution when Gardner-Webb was founded as a boarding high school in 1905. The church and school had become estranged during Dr. White’s presidency, but the student protests began to heal the breach as community members saw they could separate the president from the student body. A local trucking company, for example, hung professional banners on two sides of their building that proclaimed “We support Dr. Gil Blackburn and his integrity!” Among the company’s owners and workers were members of a family whom Dr. White had angered by tearing down their family homestead, given to the university with the understanding that it would be maintained and used for school purposes. Boiling Springs Baptist Church organized a prayer meeting for the GWU community that focused on the welfare of the school rather than on either side of the turmoil. Within a few days, a group of community leaders, many of whom had made significant financial donations to the school, published an open letter to the trustees in the Shelby Star asking for President White’s resignation. One of those who signed said privately that the student protests made it clear White could not remain.

Meanwhile, on the other side of campus, Erin Boyd was trying to keep her staff going while, as she put it, “balancing our personal, educational, spiritual, and professional lives.” The Pilot editor recognized her vulnerability. On the night of a football game, during which her staff handed out their first issue about the crisis, President White sent a message asking the newspaper advisor to put a stop to it. The advisor respectfully asked the president to reconsider, and was told he could continue but that he “had made a very bad decision.” An admissions counselor confronted Erin in a restaurant and said that his staff did not want visiting prospective students to see the Pilot. She learned that “the admissions staff hid or threw away newspapers on several occasions” when they were left out for distribution in public places. Various administrators threw up roadblocks to accurate reporting by lying to Pilot staff members. One told a staff photographer that “it’s all part of the job, man—it’s all part of the job.”

And there were other disconcerting events. One day while Erin was crossing the campus, a mysterious woman shoved an envelope containing minutes of a secret trustee executive committee meeting into her hand but wouldn't say who had sent them. The minutes described Dr. White's characterization of the faculty's no-confidence vote to the trustees as "an attempted coup" conducted "in the name of religious zealotry." They also revealed that White had personally retained the Atlanta lawyers to investigate the matter before the trustees even met. Erin knew that publishing such explosive material would bring harsh criticism, but she wrote the article herself. She became the target of wrath from White supporters such as the influential trustee who engaged her in a "heated" conversation when he was escorting Dr. White around campus for supposedly conciliatory dorm meetings with students.

Erin got little rest during the month of September; she and several other staffers pulled some all-nighters. What kept her going was a sense of responsibility: "We were the only voice of the students. We were the only means for students to get information, and sometimes, we were the only way for professors to get information as well. Also, remaining completely objective was a challenge! I had to constantly push my own feelings aside and try to weigh information without bias." Erin and her editorial staff "didn't encourage staff members to get overly involved in the protests, etc., because we didn't want to give anyone the opportunity to point fingers at our 'agenda.'" She insisted the editorial staff be scrupulous in fact checking. She also helped staffers unwind with some "chill times" (parties), and she implemented a philosophy of "Ement," short for "encouragement."

Eventually, the students who endured the costs of social activism and the newspaper that kept the story in the public eye changed the course of history for Gardner-Webb. Around 2:00 on the afternoon of October 11, 2002, President White announced his resignation. Students, staff, and faculty members gathered around televisions in the campus center to hear the trustee chair's announcement on a local channel. As the news filtered across campus to the protesters, students put down their signs to embrace faculty members and each other. The Pilot noted that some students were "weeping openly." Clearly, the student protests had turned the tide, but Patrick, Christina, and others did not gloat. Most acknowledged that the resignation was not a time for celebration, and many pledged to keep fighting for restoration of the demoted deans.

## THE PICTURE TODAY

A year has now passed. The athlete left the school without graduating and is today a fading memory on campus. Dr. White has recently accepted a position as interim president of another Baptist college. Neither Dr. Blackburn nor Dr. Williams has been reinstated, but Dr. Blackburn continues to teach and implement special programs such as ROTC. Many regard him as a martyr in a noble cause. Dr. Williams has taken a job at another college. Gardner-Webb has begun the search for a new president while waiting for the NCAA report. The community appears to be stabilizing, but the students themselves will never be the same.

Patrick Woody had planned to go to law school, but instead will be pursuing a doctorate in political science and history. He explains that "the people who were my greatest encouragement during this crisis and instilled the value of honor and integrity in my education were the professors. . . . I want to carry on their legacy of what it means to be a great teacher."

Christina Parkins has begun graduate school at the University of Kentucky's prestigious Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce. She says she has "learned that honesty, integrity, and morality are dying virtues in our society, and if a few of us don't stand up for them they will soon be extinct." She told the story of the student protests during her graduate school interview, and the interviewers cited both her fine academic record and her outstanding character as bases for acceptance to the program.

Erin Boyd is spending this year in San Jose, Costa Rica, as an independent missionary at Sojourn Academy teaching English and history to 7th through 12th graders whose parents are learning Spanish for mission work among Latin Americans. But her heart is still in journalism. Erin believes that her involvement with the Gardner-Webb crisis helped secure a summer internship at the Salisbury Post, and she will seriously consider a future in journalism “if God so chooses.” Erin’s assessment is that the crisis “made me a more professional journalist, a better writer, and a bolder person. I learned to put aside fears of rejection to stand up for the truth.”

In the fall of 2002, many predicted gloomily that the school would never recover from the scandal. Those predictions were not fulfilled. The freshman retention rate from the 2002-03 school year is 70 percent, the highest in Gardner-Webb history, and the 2003-04 year started with every dorm room filled. Perhaps students and parents want to belong to a community where the students themselves make sacrifices in the name of academic integrity. True academic achievement—the kind that membership in Alpha Chi honors—recognizes the interdependent nature of intellectual excellence and exemplary character. The champs in Boiling Springs raised the bar for all of us.

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