

Dear Members of the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill Board of Trustees:

We are former senior appointees of the U.S. Department of Education, under two administrations, with decades of experience in federal postsecondary education policy. We would like to take this opportunity to commend you on your resolution recommending the development of a School of Civic Life and Leadership at UNC. We welcome these plans for an academic unit devoted to cultivating skills of civil discourse, dialogue, and deliberation.

We also write to voice our objection to the [arbitrary and impromptu threat](#) issued against UNC by Belle Wheelan, President of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Although she admits that she has not even read your resolution, she has threatened to put UNC on “warning” status due to your effort to provide guidance to your university on matters related to the academic program and curriculum. You are democratically accountable and duly sworn trustees of the university, responsible for its flourishing and service to the public, yet Wheelan demands of you, “Eyes on, hands off.” She proposes for you the role of mere spectators at the university entrusted by the legislature and North Carolina law to your stewardship.

We urge you to reject this false and unacceptable understanding of board governance, which if followed would allow no genuine reform or board leadership at our nation’s public universities. As the sole constituency on campus with a fiduciary duty to the public, not only is your board’s active engagement in university governance permissible: it is in fact your duty.

Trustees, as the primary liaison between campuses and elected officials, are charged with ensuring that the academic programs offered by the university meet the needs of the public in concert with the institution’s mission. Nothing could be more consistent with the traditional role of a governing board than recognizing the need for a new school within the university. Far from dictating classroom content, the board’s resolution provides helpful guidance to university administrators as to the needs of the public that the institution serves.

We also note that your accreditor has a [well-documented history](#) of arbitrary and ideological intrusions into proper university governance. Your accreditor’s actions have led the State of Florida to effectively [mandate by law](#) that all public universities in the state end their association with SACSCOC. So serious have been SACSCOC’s abuses of power that we anticipate efforts to terminate their status as a Department-recognized accreditor in a future administration.

The undersigned commend your resolve to demonstrate leadership in higher education at a time when it is most desperately needed by the public.

Sincerely,

Mitchell M. Zais, Ph.D.
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U.S. Department of Education

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Former Chief of Staff to the Secretary
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