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President reprimanded in grading controversy

By Tony Cartledge and Steve DeVane

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (ABP) -- Trustees of Gardner-Webb University privately reprimanded President Chris White for his role in helping a star basketball player remain eligible to play in 2000-2001, sources say.

Chairman Tommy Hardin earlier reported that trustees affirmed White's continued leadership Sept. 27 and said he acted within his authority in telling the school's registrar to recalculate Carlos Webb's grade-point average in a way that allowed him to play basketball.

With White struggling to keep his job amid increasing calls for his resignation, however, Hardin now says trustees didn't publicize actions against White because they considered it a personnel matter.

"The president did not get off scot-free, even though it appears that way," he told the Biblical Recorder newspaper. "Trustees placed stipulations on him as to things he would and would not do."

A trustee requesting anonymity described the action as a vote to reprimand White.

Trustees drew criticism after demoting two administrators for improper actions related to a faculty no-confidence vote against White. Both continue to teach at the Baptist-affiliated school in Boiling Springs, N.C.

Hardin said trustees demoted Gil Blackburn, vice president and academic dean, and Phil Williams, his assistant, for their role in displaying Webb's transcript at a faculty meeting Sept. 10.

Hardin said the university had reported the action as a possible violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Williams disputed the trustees' report in a statement published by the Shelby (N.C.) star, a local newspaper that broke the grade-tampering controversy in a news story Sept. 10.

Williams said private parties have no right to action under the federal law, and that White had already revealed the most confidential information about Webb's transcript before its display at a faculty meeting. He also said the transcript as displayed was illegible except for the grade-point average.

Trustee Doris Walters told the Recorder that board votes to demote Blackburn and Williams were "far from unanimous."

Three professors have resigned over the dispute, including John Gardner, a professor of law and grandson of the university's namesake, former Gov. O. Max Gardner. The professor, a former superior court judge, was expected to be instrumental in GWU's efforts to establish a law school.

Stephen Perry, interim business dean, also stepped down. In his resignation letter, Perry said the trustees who supported White "have committed a serious mistake, which is likely to have far-reaching consequences."

Chris Parsons, instructor of communication studies in theatre and technical director of theatre, resigned Oct. 2, saying he could no longer work for White after four years at GWU.

Students protested Blackburn's and Williams' demotions outside the school's administration building on Oct. 2-3.

Gene Washburn, a retired physician who rotated off the board of trustees last year, said he has gotten numerous phone calls and letters about the controversy. He said that 98 percent of them are opposed to the trustees' action to affirm White and demote Blackburn and Williams. A "large majority" thinks White should resign, he said.

Washburn, who served as the trustee chairman for about six of the last 10 years, said he has strongly supported White in the past, but he thinks the president will have a tough time leading the school after all the controversy.

"I think for the good of the school, and his own good to preserve a legacy built up over 16 years, he could do it better by resigning," Washburn said. "But I think it should be his decision, and I hate to think anyone would pressure him."

White said he used poor judgment in intervening on the student's behalf but shouldn't lose his job. He said Webb got bad advice from an adviser who didn't tell him a failing grade he received for cheating would remain on his transcript if he retook the class and passed it. White ordered the "F" removed from Webb's record, making him academically eligible to play basketball.

White, who canceled an interview with the Biblical Recorder because of a family illness, has been quoted as describing the controversy as "an attempted coup."

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Operation Blessing grant raises ire of Bush critics

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A religious charity run by Pat Robertson is among the first to receive a grant from a fund controlled by the Bush administration, prompting criticism that the president is both trying to implement his "faith-based" initiative without approval from Congress and rewarding political allies with federal funds.

Operation Blessing -- a large charity run by Christian Coalition founder Robertson -- received a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in the first round of distributions from what the Bush administration calls the "Compassion Capital Fund."

The first \$24.8 million in grants went out Oct. 3. The money will provide "technical assistance" to educate small, faith-based organizations in how to apply for government and corporate grants. But some grants are for larger "intermediary" organizations, like Operation Blessing, which will use them to issue "sub-awards" for startup, operation and expansion of smaller community and faith-based organizations.

Dan Katz, legislative director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, called the intermediary grants "a huge loophole" that could allow federal dollars to subsidize proselytizing, violating the separation of church and state.

"This whole thing is about allowing money to flow out of the government's control," he said. "The whole thing is designed to result in unconstitutional activity."

Katz accused the administration of using the grant fund "as a back-door way" of implementing Bush's faith-based plan, which passed the House of Representatives but stalled in the Senate.

He said lawmakers were clear in passing an appropriations bill this year that the grants not be used for day-to-day operations of religious organizations.

Deborah Bensen, director of government relations for Operation Blessing, based in Virginia Beach, Va., said internal guidelines of the organization would ensure that federal funds it passes through to smaller hunger-relief organizations are not used for sectarian purposes.

"We have the same kinds of auditing and reporting processes that the federal government requires" of other grantees, Bensen said. "The dollars that are actually being funneled to them through the grant will be used for the specific purpose, which is hunger relief."

Katz said that since religious organizations are exempt from laws that forbid employers from discriminating on the basis of religion and sexual orientation, that giving Compassion Capital Funds to such groups amounts to using tax dollars to discriminate.

Bensen acknowledged that Operation Blessing partner agencies may discriminate in hiring, but added, "When we distribute food to the end recipients, we're not discriminating against anyone."

Katz also accused Bush of using the grants to return political favors. In addition to Robertson, who supported Bush's election, he cited Harold Ray, a Florida pastor who had criticized Bush for not delivering on money he promised to faith-based welfare programs among African Americans.

An organization that Ray runs, the National Center for Faith-Based Initiative, received a \$700,000 grant from the Compassion Capital Fund.

"'Show me the money!' was essentially what the churches and the ministries were saying, and this is Bush showing them the money," Katz said. "This is a total twisting of what Congress was allowing this money to be used for."

Officials with the Department of Health and Human Services did not return a reporter's phone calls for comment in time for this story's deadline. Ray's organization did not reply to an e-mail.

President Bush first proposed the Compassion Capital Fund in 2001. Congress included the grants in an appropriations bill this year.

The president's faith-based plan would expand programs that allow "pervasively sectarian" organizations, like churches, to receive federal money for faith-based social services. President Clinton signed a welfare-reform measure in 1996 opening the door to such programs, commonly called "charitable choice." Bush has fought for their expansion since taking office.

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