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For Immediate Release

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Drake Group Honors UNC Administrator for Defending Academic Integrity

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WEST HAVEN, CONN. --- A former reading specialist for the academic support program for athletes at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill who exposed special treatment for athletes will be awarded the Drake Group's highest honor on Thursday, April 18 at 12:10 p.m.

Mary Willingham, who exposed that UNC athletes were enrolled in more than 50 no-show classes so they could maintain their athletic eligibility at UNC, will be presented with the Robert Maynard Hutchins Award at Trillium Room at the William and Ida Friday Conference Center at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

The award is given annually by the Drake Group, based at the University of New Haven, to faculty or staff members who take a courageous stand to defend academic integrity at their institutions, often risking job security in doing so.

Hutchins was the president of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1951 and opposed the rampant commercialization of college football which, in his view, undermined the core values of higher learning. He was a strong advocate for academic integrity. He died in 1977.

"Mary Willingham has demonstrated courageous behavior in standing up for what is right," said Allen Sack, president of the Drake Group. A professor of sports management at the University of New Haven, Sack noted that what Willingham did was not easy.

"The Drake Group is well aware that critics of commercial college sport have sometimes been targets of direct or indirect pressure for merely upholding basic academic principles," he said.

“It is the mission of the Drake Group to defend people like Mary Willingham and to recognize their fortitude.”

Willingham reported for years that she met athletes who told her they had never read a book and didn't know what a paragraph was. She said she saw diagnostic tests that showed they were unable to do college-level work, even though they stayed eligible to play sports. She said the academic support system provided improper help and tolerated plagiarism.

Willingham, who still works at the university but not with athletes, said she lodged complaints at least two years before UNC's academic problems erupted into scandal. She wrote a thesis for her master's degree on the corrupting influence of big-money sports on university academics.

Eventually, her allegations led to four investigations, including one led by former North Carolina Gov. Jim Martin. An investigation by the NCAA resulted in broad sanctions imposed last year against UNC Chapel Hill's football program - including the loss of a bowl appearance and scholarships.

The announcement from the NCAA Committee on Infractions capped a two-year probe of alleged academic misconduct, alleged unethical conduct by an assistant coach, and allegations that players got perks from professional sports agents.

The NCAA said the school is responsible for multiple violations, including academic fraud, impermissible agent benefits, ineligible participation, and a failure to monitor its football program.

The Drake Group was founded in 1999 at Drake University to defend academic integrity in higher education from the coercive effects of commercial college sports and to ensure a quality education for college athletes.

The University of New Haven is a private, top-tier comprehensive institution recognized as a national leader in experiential education. Founded in 1920 on the campus of Yale University in cooperation with Northeastern University, UNH moved to its current West Haven campus in 1960. The University operates a satellite campus in Tuscany, Italy, and offers programs at several locations throughout Connecticut and in New Mexico and California. UNH provides its students with a unique combination of a solid liberal arts education and real-world, hands-on career and research opportunities. The University enrolls approximately 6,400 students, including nearly 1,800 graduate students and more than 4,600 undergraduates – the majority of whom reside in University housing. Through its College of Arts and Sciences, College of Business, Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Sciences, Tagliatela College of Engineering, and College of Lifelong & eLearning, UNH offers 75 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. UNH students have access to more than 50 study abroad programs worldwide and its student-athletes compete in 16 varsity sports in the NCAA Division II's highly competitive Northeast-10 Conference.