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Director of Financial Aid discusses student loan debt averages at UNC Charlotte

by Lorenza Medley
Staff Writer

Photo of Popp Martin Student Union
by Niyathi Sulkunte

On average, UNC Charlotte students graduate with less student debt than other universities' graduates.

In the 2020-21 school year, student loans have decreased for Charlotte students primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic forcing schools to move to remote learning. Director of Financial Aid at UNC Charlotte, Bruce Blackmon, spoke with the Niner Times about this topic. "Students were off-campus, they were denied the meal plan, and without the meal plan, they were borrowing less," he said.

Blackmon has worked as the director of financial aid at the University since June 2014. He is in charge of supervising the administration of all federal, state, and institutional pay, which totals about \$250 million per year.

Relative to other higher education institutions, the average loan debt for UNC Charlotte graduates is low. "UNC Charlotte graduates have among the lowest student-loan debt of college graduates in North Carolina and across the nation," Aimee Hawkins, director of communications at the Office of the Provost, said in an article by Inside UNC Charlotte.

"Our default rate of 4.4%, and that's the lowest it's been in probably 15 years," Blackmon said. The default rate is the three-year

average that takes a percentage of students who have not paid back their loans based on students who have and have not graduated. According to Blackmon, the national default rate is about 11%. The University's low default rate shows that students find good-paying jobs after graduating.

"43.2 million student borrowers are in debt by an average of \$39,351 each," said Melanie Hanson of the Education Data Initiative. According to Hanson, the national student loan debt totals \$1.75 trillion.

Compared to other states, tuition in NC is fairly low because taxpayers subsidize it. The grants from the federal and state governments also help keep loan debt down. "They're getting money from the federal government, and they're getting money from the state government. So that additional grant aid often means that students don't have to borrow quite as much," Blackmon said.

According to Hanson, in 2020, the total national student loan debt increased by 8.28%. "3.2 million new federal student loan borrowers and a spike in unemployment fueled the largest increase in the total student loan debt balance since 2013," she said.

When students take out loans, they must fill out an annual student loan

acknowledgment stating they understand how much they are currently borrowing and how much they plan to borrow in the future. "That'll help students be mindful of what they're borrowing and in some cases maybe help them not borrow quite as much," Blackmon said.

Students' biggest obstacle when taking out loans is over-borrowing for unnecessary expenses. Blackmon suggests that students should not borrow to fund a lifestyle but instead pay for the essentials like housing and food. "If you don't need the most expensive apartment, don't take the most expensive apartment because there's a payday down the line, and you're going to have to pay that money back," he said.

There are many solutions for students to prevent over-borrowing on their student loans. The University's withdrawal policy has helped students avoid accumulating debt from unsuccessful attempts at completing a course. In addition, financial literacy courses help students understand how to manage their money to prevent over-borrowing and help them create habits to pay off their student loan debt successfully.

Some other factors are keeping loan debt down for the University's graduates, including the new financial literacy

program and advising on how to take out loans. The online training program works with students to help them with their finances as well as paying off and taking out loans.

One solution to over-borrowing is to research the average salary of the intended career path and make sure the money borrowed does not exceed the money earned. "You don't want to borrow \$50,000 if the average salary of your career is \$35,000," Blackmon said.

Blackmon says a student loan can and should be a good investment for students and can help them build their credit. Being aware of this can help students better manage the amount of money they borrow so it will not hurt them in the future.



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Returning to in-person classes

Niner Notice confirms the return to in-person instruction on Jan. 24

by Madison Dobrzanski
News Editor

Photo of on-campus sign
by Niyathi Sulkunte

Due to the increase in COVID-19 cases, UNC Charlotte announced on Dec. 31, 2021, that spring 2022 classes would be held virtually for the first two weeks of the semester. Through Niner Notices, UNC Charlotte has confirmed that in-person instruction will begin on Jan. 24.

In an article published by the Niner Times on Jan. 10, Dean of Students Christine Reed Davis says that Student Body President Dick Beekman is the best source of information for students regarding virtual instruction and the return to in-person instruction.

In an interview with the Niner Times, Beekman said he feels confident about the return to in-person instruction. “It was a plan made based on conversations with local health officials and emergency management personnel,” said Beekman. “The logistical concerns that forced us online in the first place, with the dissonance that we’ve gathered from holiday travel and the local county health officials thinking that Mecklenburg county has already reached its peak, I feel that we are capable of pulling off an in-person semester while avoiding being overwhelmed by massive outbreaks of COVID.”

On Friday, Jan. 14, a Niner Notice was sent out with additional details about the return to in-person instruction, including safety measures, move-in information and information regarding events, gatherings and athletics.

Safety measures include mask requirements, vaccine/booster guidelines and testing requirements.

Masks will be required on campus. The Niner Notice sent on Jan. 14 asks people to “wear a well-fitted mask that fits securely over both your nose and mouth and contains multiple layers. N95 or KN95 are the best choices, followed by surgical masks.” If people are unable to wear these masks, other masks can be enhanced by double masking or adding a filter.

Surgical masks will be available at the information desk in the Popp Martin Student Union, Atkins Library, Niner Central and the University Advising Center starting Jan. 24.

Vaccine guidelines are continuing in spring 2022, along with booster guidelines for all students and employees who are eligible. A booster shot is required to continue being exempt from on-campus testing requirements. Students can submit vaccine documentation through the Niner Nation Cares portal.

Vaccines and booster shots will be offered on Thursdays and Fridays. Appointments can be made here.

According to Jan. 14’s Niner Notice, re-entry testing will be conducted through Jan. 28 for faculty, staff and students not meeting vaccination guidelines. As mentioned in an article published by the Niner Times on Nov. 16, 2021, mitigation and wastewater-based testing will continue in spring 2022.

In-person events and activities will resume with in-person instruction. The Niner Notice says that they will have additional safety measures to help reduce the risk of the spread of the Omicron variant. Virtual events will remain an option when possible. In-person capacity will be limited to 30 people indoors and 50 people outdoors. Masks are required indoors, and groups should have substantial space for social distancing regardless of the location. Requests for exceptions to these requirements can be made through the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Office or the Provost’s Office.

Athletic events will have spectators. However, there will be a mask requirement for guests.

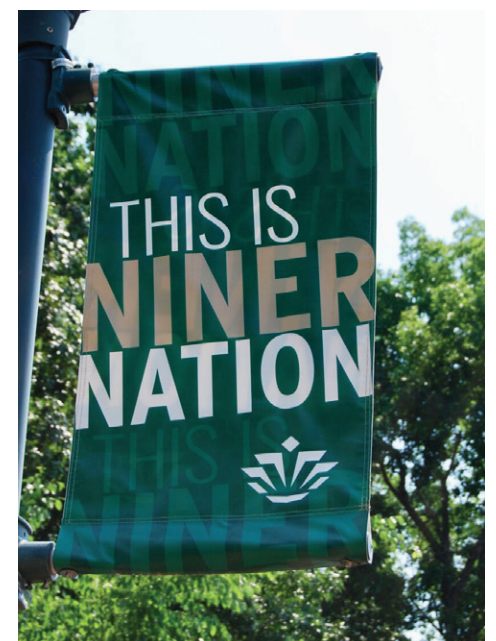
Move-in for the spring semester will occur Jan. 19-21, and any absences due to move-in will be excused.

Beekman was included in the decision-making process regarding the return

to in-person instruction. “I have been included in all major discussions and all topics that I want to be included in, whether they are major or not,” said Beekman. “Chancellor Gaber has been very transparent in communicating what her thoughts are, asking my thoughts, or ‘how will the student body react to this?’ and just really looking for the students’ stance on many different decisions to make a well-informed decision.”

With in-person instruction approaching, Beekman has advice for students: “Do not be complacent. While we are confident we can pull off an in-person semester, it is important to remember that we are still in a pandemic,” said Beekman.

“While public health experts think that we’re on the tail end of Omicron, it’s still important to not take any unnecessary risks. Go out and get the vaccine if you haven’t, get the booster if you’re eligible and haven’t gotten it, and abide by the mask mandate. All of those things are going to be important for ensuring that we are able to pull off this in-person semester.”



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Virtual Vengeance

Omicron could force students off campus indefinitely

by Hiral Patel and Isaac Naylor
Opinion Editor and Asst. Opinion Editor

The data in this article was recorded and finalized as of Jan. 16, 2022.

The University leadership has decided to host the first two weeks of class virtually after the previous semester was held in person. This decision was made due to the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, particularly the easily transmissible Omicron variant. With one week left of virtual instruction, many wonder whether this is a temporary change or the prelude to an all-virtual semester.

The popular consensus within the medical community suggests that the U.S. will reach its second spike this month after the holiday season has ended. According to WCNC, recently published research indicates that North Carolina is expected to be at or quickly approaching its peak for the Omicron variant. Christopher Ohl with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Hospital told WCNC, "We'll probably peak here in the next week."

Nevertheless, the Charlotte metropolitan area has a poor track record with the virus. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Mecklenburg County has had more than 216,517 cases since the pandemic began, more than any other county in the state. In addition, this month has seen an upward trend in COVID-19 infections.

Although, there are signs that this latest outbreak has lost some momen-

tum. According to the New York Times, Mecklenburg recorded a daily average of 232 cases per 100,000 residents last week, which could be the potential onset of a plateau. WCNC reports that the county's positivity rate for newly tested residents was 36% as of Jan. 11, down from 37.8% just two days earlier.

Unfortunately, that drop in new cases has yet to be reflected on this campus. The UNC Charlotte Dashboard documented 409 cases from Jan. 3 through Jan. 9, accounting for 20.8% of all the tests conducted that week. However, this statistic represents all students and employees regardless of whether they were on campus at the time of testing.

Charlotte has endured a sickly start to the new year, but this does not reflect all the data. Only 1.9% of all campus-related tests were positive. While total confirmed cases stand at 5,829 after July 2020, on-campus active cases are currently at 158.

Though cases are increasing daily on almost every campus, Charlotte's transition to virtual classes has helped the student body and faculty reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campus.

Other universities in the UNC system that are as populated as Charlotte have the complete opposite to say. For example, UNC, NC State and East Carolina started their semester in-person, and their positiv-

Laptop graphic by Zoya Zalevskiy
Photo of student with mask by Niyathi Sulkunte

ity rates sky-rocketed within the first week.

According to the UNC CV-19 Dashboard, the positivity rate among Chapel Hill students and faculty is currently 13.33%. About 800 students and faculty tested positive within the first week of classes from Jan. 10 to 14, with a total of 1,264 active cases.

Similarly, ECU has seen the same influx of positive cases with a positivity rate of 14% last week. According to East Carolina's Dashboard, the total number of open cases looms at 3,306, with 962 new positive cases between Jan. 10 to 14.

N.C. State's Dashboard charted 1,139

positive tests from Jan. 10 to 13, with 1,889 active cases. Not only is the positivity rate climbing, but the inability to carry out university safety protocols has become concerning.

The Director of Graduate Professional Development at N.C. State, Meagan Kittle Autry posted this tweet on the second day of class: "Update from Student Health: They are overwhelmed. They are seeing 500 positive tests per day (/3000). Campus can no longer handle isolation or quarantine in our buildings. Students are recommended to go home. Contact tracing is discontinued because they are stretched too thin."

N.C. State's inaction to this recent upsurge puts students and faculty at a higher risk. Temporary virtual learning is an ideal precaution when contact tracing becomes impractical.

Though the reentry processes are similar across the UNC system, Charlotte has taken an extra step to keep their students and faculty safe. Charlotte's two-week transition was a timely choice when factoring in the holiday surge in new cases. However, the uncertainty of the situation has inspired feelings of déjà vu back to March 2020. Hopefully, all students can resume in-person instruction on Jan. 24.

If students or staff are concerned about contracting the virus, the University is offering on-campus mitigation testing every weekday at the Student Union, the EPIC building and the top floor of South Village Crossing from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. until Jan. 28.

For more information, please visit: www.mobilevaccinationservices.com/uncweekly.





“Glass Slippers” FROM Ukraine

A review of the Ukrainian Ballet’s performance of Cinderella

By Julianna Peres
Staff Writer

Drawing of a glass slipper
Photo courtesy of Pixy.org

A forgotten slipper, a charming prince and a clock strike at midnight— who could read those words without thinking of “Cinderella”? I’ve seen a dozen iterations of this princess story, but each seems more sophisticated than the last. At the end of 2021, I had the unique opportunity to see a world-class Ukrainian ballet company’s rendition of this timeless classic. The curtains rose to reveal two snoring women clad in bright colors, tulle and heavy makeup. These “ugly stepsisters” played perfectly into what the stepsisters are meant to be: nuisances. One was tall and the other short, which created effective contrast between the pair. However, the snoring women weren’t alone on the stage. Cinderella was dressed simply, with no shoes on her feet, and stood cleaning up what the painted backdrop promised to be a cavernous, dusty and self-righteous mansion. After the comical stepsisters spent a few moments torturing Cinderella with their hijinks, the protagonist and soon-to-be princess was left alone on stage.

Without a ballet slipper in sight, Cinderella proceeded to dance around on pointe in bare feet. After returning, the stepsisters made something beautiful look clumsy and unpleasant even with their flawless technique, as they preened and prepped for the King’s ball. This ball rests at the very heart of the tale of orphaned, destitute Cinderella.

In almost every imagining of “Cinderella,” a beautiful young woman is left in the

hands of her cruel stepmother. She works day and night to look after her stepmother and stepsisters, but a fairy godmother descends upon the nightmare that is Cinderella’s life and makes Cinderella a gown. This dress, along with a pair of vastly impractical glass slippers, allows Cinderella to sneak into the King’s ball. There she meets the handsome prince, and they fall in love. But, at midnight, the fairy godmother’s magic is no longer potent, and Cinderella must rush home, leaving behind a single glass slipper. After the ball, the prince searches for Cinderella and whose foot fits the slipper. Eventually, he finds her, and they live happily ever after.

This particular stage production also featured a stylist whose goal was to make the stepsisters appear beautiful and refined as they tried to capture the prince’s attention. This dancer’s steps were so small and light that he made absolutely no sound on the stage. But his face was what captured my attention. Shocked by the stepsisters’ inadequacies, it seemed that his feet were moving independently from him. At this point of the story, the fairy godmother strode on stage, along with an army of women in blue. Following those ballerinas were four others, each wearing a different color: green, pink, yellowish-orange and cobalt. These sprites were most likely representations of the annual seasons. The fairy godmother herself wore a headpiece

with a length of fabric hanging from her delicate crown, which gave her the illusion of having wings. The sprites and fairies were beautiful to look at, but it felt as though they were filling up the time. It left me wondering where Cinderella could be.

Finally, Cinderella emerged from behind the stage, wearing a gold and white dress with a crown that made her look like the Swan Princess. The way Cinderella moved her arms as she danced towards the ball looked like satin unfurling. Just before Cinderella arrived at the ball, the prince flitted across the stage. His gazelle-like jumps were incredibly nimble, like a figure-skater spinning without any ice to land on. However, the prince’s makeup was much too white. He looked almost ghostly. But, regardless of his less-than-ideal foundation situation, he and Cinderella finally met one another on the dance floor. Around them, nearly two dozen other dancers lifted one another in unison. Their lifts were so seamless that it was easy to forget how impressive they were. In the background, the King made faces at the stepmother and stepsisters’ attempts to get his attention. His expressions led to some of the only genuine laughs I’d ever heard at the ballet.

Once Cinderella and the prince’s dance came to a close, the most pressing and overwhelming sequence began. The clock struck midnight, and Cinderella turned to leave. The other dancers kept her at bay, pushing

her away from the exit as the tempo grew in urgency. Eventually, Cinderella managed to slip away but was missing one shoe. The audience applauded as the prince found his princess, having forgotten, at least for a few hours, that we were in a theatre off of South Tryon Street on a random Wednesday.

Something so special for me was that the person sitting in the row ahead of me had brought with them a sketchbook. They drew ballerina after ballerina in almost total darkness. It’s the sort of art appreciating art that could never be recreated during quarantine. Seeing a person from North Carolina sketch a professional dancer from Ukraine made the world feel so small in the best possible way.

A few things to keep in mind if you ever attend this show is that, like many ballets, it features a smoke machine, strobe lights, and thunderous music. If you ever want to take a child to the ballet, this show is the perfect length for a little one’s attention span. Also, as the story of Cinderella is so vastly uncomplicated, it is perfect for ballet. I cannot recommend this show, or this incredible ballet company, enough.

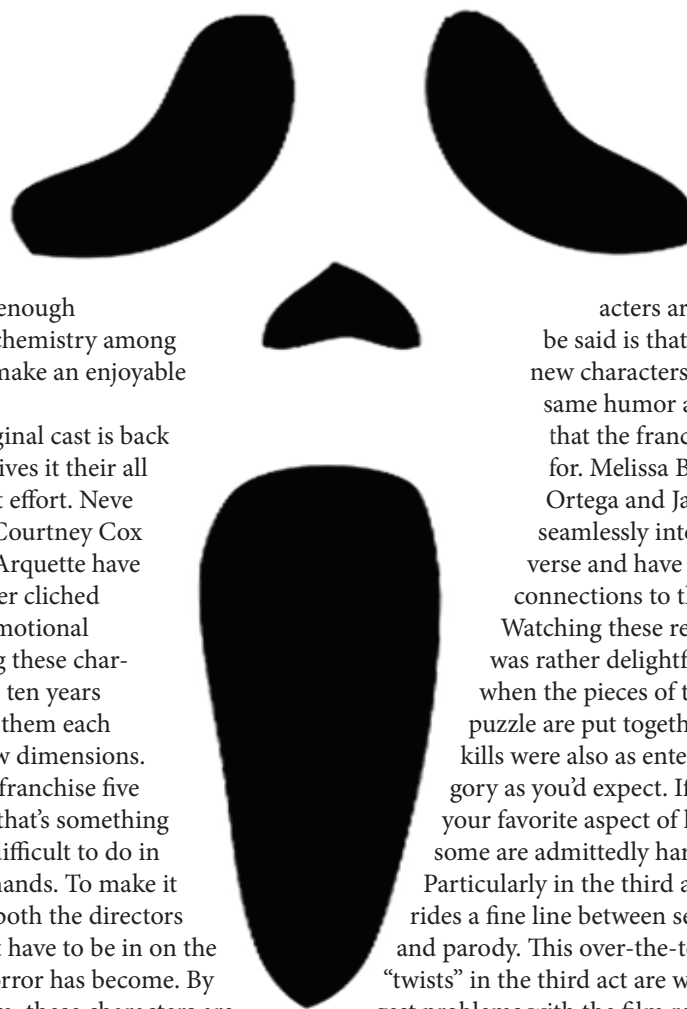
Rating: 9.5/10

FILM REVIEW: SCREAM

The rare Horror sequel that knows how to have fun

By Gabe Lapalombella
Staff Writer

Graphic by Sunnya Hadavi



Self-awareness in horror films is something that many films have attempted to portray in recent years. Films like “Final Destination” and “Cabin In The Woods” brought attention to how these sorts of stories follow certain rules. But many seem to forget how the first “Scream” from 1996 started the self-aware horror film craze. Five films later, the franchise still draws flocks of people to theaters for the latest thrills and chills fest. This latest installment continues the trend and makes this one of the best offerings in the franchise. Set 25 years after the first film, Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) is forced to return to her hometown of Woodsboro after a series of gruesome murders.

This latest follow-up in the “Scream” franchise has enough tricks up its sleeve to make it one of the better horror sequels. Thanks to directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett (“Ready or Not”), the film has a great sense of fun. What makes it so engaging is that, like the original, it acknowledges it’s a horror movie. Sequences that bring attention to classic clichés work as winks to the camera. If you’re a horror-lover, you’re going to love just how clever these winks are. But even if you’re

not, there’s enough humorous chemistry among the cast to make an enjoyable journey.

Our original cast is back and really gives it their all in this latest effort. Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox and David Arquette have turned rather clichéd roles into emotional ones. Seeing these characters again ten years later allows them each to bring new dimensions. In a horror franchise five films deep, that’s something incredibly difficult to do in the wrong hands. To make it successful, both the directors and the cast have to be in on the joke that horror has become. By this fifth film, these characters are given a chance to have real emotions, which was a pleasure to see. The same could be said for the new cast who can carve their place amongst these bigger-name actors.

To avoid spoilers, I will be as vague as possible with who most of these new char-

acters are. What can be said is that each of these new characters keeps the same humor and sharp wit that the franchise is known for. Melissa Barrera, Jenna Ortega and Jack Quaid fit seamlessly into this universe and have interesting connections to the legacy cast. Watching these reveals unfurl was rather delightful, especially when the pieces of the story’s puzzle are put together. Ghostface’s kills were also as entertaining and gory as you’d expect. If gore isn’t your favorite aspect of horror films, some are admittedly hard to stomach. Particularly in the third act, the gore rides a fine line between seriousness and parody. This over-the-top gore and “twists” in the third act are where the biggest problems with the film reside.

A franchise whose purpose is to subvert horror tropes gives us a certain expectation. Being five films deep, you’d hope they would not fall back on some of the genre’s ridiculous clichés. When the story acknowledges but then depicts the cliché

they’re making fun of, it feels contradictory. But the story had built up so much goodwill that the sillier “reveals” were easy to forgive. The journey is so entertaining that the resolution falls flat when it should be thrilling.

Even with a lackluster resolution, “Scream” is still one of the more fun times you can have at the theater. The great performances, gnarly kills and general self-aware nature of the story will keep you on the edge of your seat. If both this franchise or horror films, in general, aren’t your thing, “Scream” will do nothing to convince you to hop on board. Whereas if you’re a die-hard or even just a lukewarm fan, the rewards are vast. Ideally, this is the sort of corner of cinema that deserves to be seen on the big screen. If you’re at all uncomfortable going to a theater, it will be just as fun of a watch at home. Premiering on Paramount+ 45 days after its release in theaters, “Scream” is worth your time no matter where you watch it.

RATING: 8/10

the real life . Mystic Falls

Going to the filming location of “Vampire Diaries” in Covington, GA

By Jade Suszek
Staff Writer

All photos by Jade Suszek
Graphic by Sunnya Hadavi

Situated about four hours from Charlotte is the famed city of Covington, Ga. Known for its historical past and more notably for being the filming location for “The Vampire Diaries” series which ran for eight seasons on the CW Network from 2009 to 2017.

The town of Covington has been the

small town. Throughout the eight seasons, the rich history of the brothers, the town and its residents is unveiled.

The series developed by Julie Plec and Kevin Williamson has gained a large and loyal fan base for the supernatural drama. The series led to two spin-offs: “The Originals” and “The Legacies.” “The Legacies” is still airing on the CW and is currently filming in Covington, Ga.

I started “The Vampire Diaries” in 2020 during the first few months of lockdown. I have never finished a long television series so quickly. I grew to love and hate many of the characters. The character development was just one piece of the series that led it to become one of my favorite shows.

I live an hour and a half away from Covington, and I finally had the chance to see Mystic Falls in real life during winter break. For the entirety of the drive, my car radio blasted the show’s soundtrack.

As I drove up to the town square, endless scenes of love, loss and camaraderie filled my mind. I could quickly identify the scenes where I fell in love with the various characters. I felt transported into the show. The town embodies the definition of southern charm.

The first stop was the Mystic Grill, the main spot where the characters got together,

worked and ate. I sat outside, people watching and staring at the clock tower in disbelief that I was there. The clock tower’s sweet chimes reminded me I was not dreaming.

I had the chicken tenders with sweet potato fries. It was definitely one of the best meals I had had in a while. It was true southern cooking.

After the fantastic lunch, I went downstairs to the Alley Shop, which is somewhat of a museum that houses costumes and props used within the series. There was a door from the main character, Elena Gilbert’s, house which you could knock on for good luck. Of course, I knocked because who doesn’t need good luck going into 2022? The museum gave me had an eerie feeling, as it felt like the ghosts of the episodes were standing in front of me. I could not help but be in awe of it all.

The shop also sold type O “blood bags” and daylight rings which further immersed me into the world of “The Vampire Diaries.” The blood bags were filled with fruit punch in faux blood bags. In the show, daylight rings are how vampires can venture out during daylight. The shop had exact replicas of the ones used in the show. So I checked out with a blood bag and a daylight ring to live a day as if I were a vampire in Mystic Falls.

There are nods to the television series throughout the town, such as gift shops, tours, and the beautiful artistry that can be noticed on sides of walls documenting a piece of the show. I

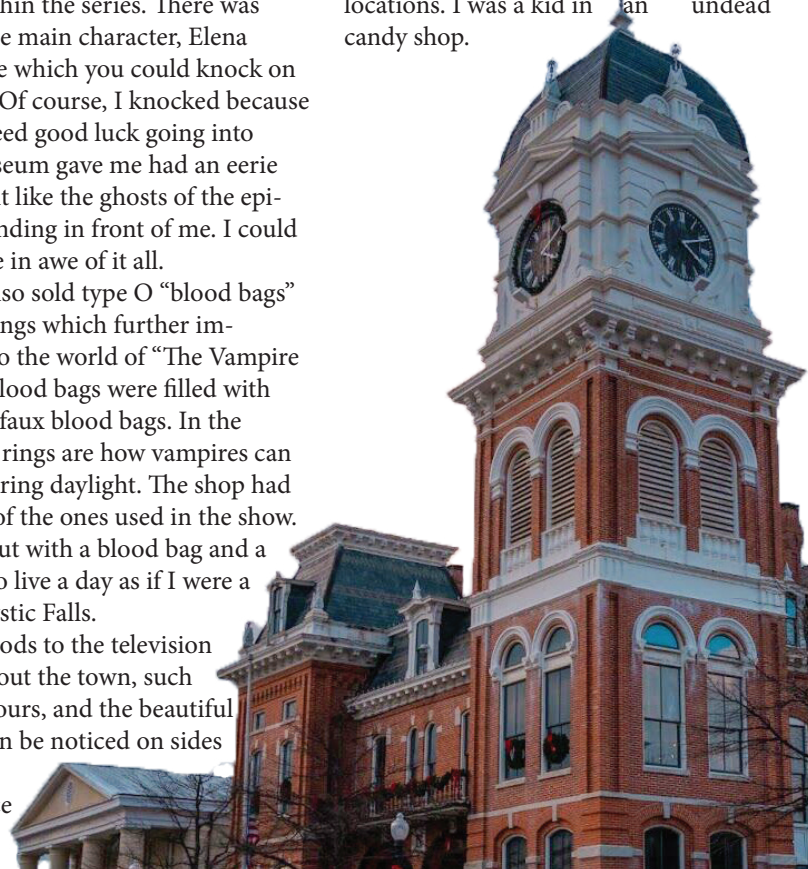
loved searching for the pavers dedicated to the show’s actors that are scattered throughout the town square. The pavers were very much like a spooky Hollywood Walk of Fame. I went on a hunt to find Ian Somerhalder’s paver specifically because I will always be on Team Damon.

Roaming through the town was unlike any experience I have ever had because I felt as though I could be living within the world of “The Vampire Diaries.” I want to go back to explore even more of the filming locations. I was a kid in an undead candy shop.



filming location for several other television series and movies such as “In the Heat of the Night,” “Sweet Magnolias,” “Remember the Titans” and “Footloose.” The town capitalizes on the popularity of these shows and films too, but they mainly attract fans of “The Vampire Diaries.”

The show follows vampire brothers Stefan and Damon Salvatore (Paul Wesley and Ian Somerhalder) in Mystic Falls, Va., and its residents’ lives, loves and dangers. As a teenage girl, Elena (Nina Dobrev) is divided between two vampire brothers, creatures of unfathomable evil lurking underneath the



Boykin

MAKES IT BO TIME

Mikayla Boykin is finding success on and off the court sparked by her NIL deal with Bojangles

By Juwan Watson
Staff Writer

Mikayla Boykin on and off the court
Photos by Bethany Ivan
and courtesy of Mikayla Boykin

The landscape of college athletics is changing, and this is due to NIL deals approved by the NCAA in 2021. College athletes can now earn money for their name, image and likeness (NIL), with numerous businesses and entities reaching out to student-athletes to help promote their brands.

One student-athlete that has benefited drastically here at Charlotte is none other than star women's basketball guard Mikayla Boykin. Boykin is a senior transfer from Duke, and she is accompanied by her NIL deals and her up-and-coming rap career. When news first broke about the NCAA allowing student-athletes to be able to profit off of their name and image, Boykin was ecstatic for opportunities to come.

"When it first broke out, my initial re-

action was that a lot of athletes were going to profit off of their name, and that's been one of the biggest things that has happened in college basketball," said Boykin. "I know that especially for the women's side, we needed that type of break for us to get our name out there even more, and I feel like the NIL helps us build our own brand and name through that."

Boykin is no stranger to the spotlight, as she was listed as the number one player in her recruiting class out of high school and as high number five by All-Star Girls Report. She received high praise and was able to take her game to the next level at Duke. Boykin feels that the new NIL deals will help up-and-coming high school stars with media coverage by putting their names out there at a younger age.

"The people in high school now get a lot of media coverage, and social media has played a big part in their success. When I was in high school, that was something that we lacked, and being able to get our name out there a lot," said Boykin. "I feel like my biggest success was being able to go to Duke. I'm more of a people person, so I can have these connections and be myself around people and through social media. That helped people's interests in wanting to work with me."

Boykin, plagued with injuries in her time as a Blue Devil, has fit right in and has been a vital part of the 49ers' success this season. She is currently averaging 12.7 points, 5.2 rebounds and 2.8 assists. Boykin has been the epitome of consistency and has a bright future with Charlotte.

Since the approval of NIL, Boykin has had multiple deals come her way due to her stellar play. The most notable has been with

the fast-food chain Bojangles where she has represented a brand that she grew up with. Boykin's relationship with Bojangles is strong and has already paid dividends for both parties.

"I have been working with Bojangles, which was the first deal that I got," said Boykin. "Bojangles and I have this really good relationship, and I have done three promotions for them, which hits home because it's a North Carolina fast-food chain. I grew up on Bojangles, so being able to secure that deal made me look deeper into NIL and made me change my perspective on how to use my brand."

Boykin's first promotion with Bojangles became a potential avenue that she will look to pursue after college. She got the chance to do a rap video with Bojangles, opening her eyes to pursuing, and has allowed her to reflect on the things she has gone through.

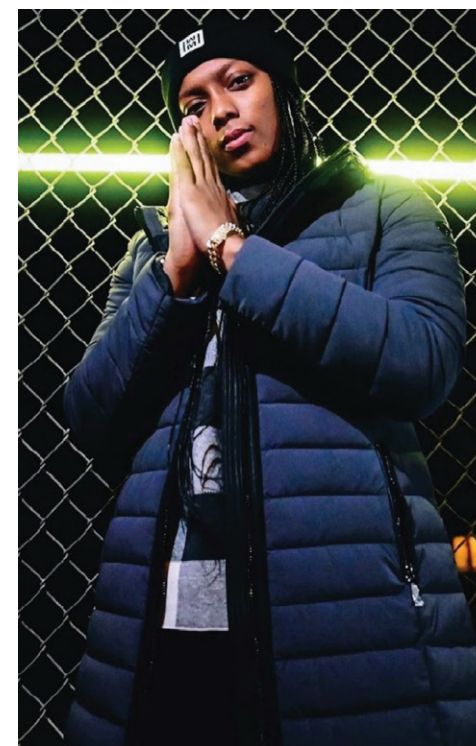
"I definitely want to pursue rap as a career," said Boykin. "I want to do that because being an athlete, I want to show anybody else who can learn from this that people need to go out and explore different things that don't involve sports. That took me a while to see because of the injuries, and I call it a blessing and a curse at the same time because I was able to sit back and reflect on just my life and different things that make me happy."

Boykin prides herself on the messages that she has portrayed in her music. Her music has given her an inner peace that has helped her throughout hardships in her life. Boykin speaks to fellow college athletes in her songs by focusing on topics relatable to everybody.

"Like a year and a half ago, I just dove into making music, and it has been my

inner peace and a place where I can just let out all of my emotions and things that I'm feeling," said Boykin. "I know that a lot of athletes struggle with mental health. I know I've struggled with it for a bit. So being able to share my story through music is something that I encourage many people to try, whether, through art, music or whatever else it may be that is something different and puts out your happiness."

Boykin defines what it means to be a NIL athlete, and she continues to find success on the court and off it with her rap career. She has battled through hardships to get where she is today, and it has formed her into the person she is today. Boykin and the 49ers have much more to accomplish in the rest of the season.



THE 49ERS BEST THE MINERS

Charlotte defeated UTEP 66-53 to open up Conference USA play

By Sam Perry
Staff Writer

Charlotte's Jackson Threadgill goes up for the dunk in a game against UTEP.
Photo by Chris Crews

The Charlotte men's basketball team defeated UTEP at Halton Arena 66-53 on Thursday, Jan. 13, to open up conference play. The 49ers didn't miss a beat in their first game since Dec. 22, beating Western Carolina 98-82. Head Coach Ron Sanchez preached bringing the energy, and he felt the team did just that in the contest.

"Today was a BYE game; bring your own energy," said Sanchez. "I think that the guys brought it. They played hard; they weren't as sharp, but that's expected, but they definitely brought the effort and intensity needed to have a great defensive performance to start out conference play 1-0."

Despite not playing for multiple weeks, the team had a solid performance all around, impressing on both the offensive and defensive ends of the ball. Sanchez was pleased to see the team have such a strong defensive presence in the contest.

"I think we were really connected defensively," said Sanchez. "We covered for one another. Our traps were sharp. We caused several turnovers; we were a little more aggressive."

The 49ers opened up Conference-USA (C-USA) play with the victory moving to 8-5 (1-0) while UTEP fell to 8-8 (0-1) on the season.

First Half:

Charlotte jumped out early to an 11-4 lead, with sophomore guard Jackson Threadgill leading the way with six points on the opening scoring run. The 49ers continued to grow their lead to double digits over the Miners, 22-9.

After a timeout, UTEP responded strongly, fighting back to claim

a one-point lead over Charlotte with 1:29 left in the half. The 49ers battled back to regain the lead with multiple jumpers from Threadgill and senior guard Austin Butler to make it a 32-29 lead for the team at halftime.

Second Half:

The 49ers came out of the half by ramping up defensive presence, making it hard for the Miners to get back into it as Charlotte didn't surrender the lead again. UTEP would cut the lead to two in the early first minute, but that would be the closest they'd get as they trailed 34-32.

Charlotte opened the contest with an 11-2 run to push their lead to 45-34 with 16:06 remaining in the game. After that, it

was smooth sailing for the 49ers as they never allowed the Miners to get within nine points. Charlotte went on to take by a score of 66-53.

Keys to the victory:

Rebounding was a major difference-maker in the game as Charlotte out-rebounded UTEP 43-30. The 43 rebounds exceeded Charlotte's average of 31; Sanchez made rebounding a point of emphasis in practice during their long hiatus.

"I think we rebounded the ball really, really well today," said Sanchez. "If you look at our rebounding numbers, we had so many guys who had ten rebounds a couple of guys one rebound short. Definitely pleased, not only with the defensive effort but finish-

ing with defensive possession."

Getting to the free-throw line was also a significant key to the 49ers' success over the Miners, as Charlotte made more free throws than UTEP attempted. The 49ers shot 17-22 from the line, which was one of the reasons for the outcome.

Players of the game:

Junior guard Jahmir Young had a terrific game for Charlotte, leading the team as he has done all season. Young recorded 17 points and 11 rebounds in the game while also dishing out five assists.

Threadgill got the last-minute start due to usual starting guard Clyde Trapp Jr. being named inactive before tip-off. Threadgill made the most of this opportunity,

kicking off the 49ers' offensive attack early while setting a career-high 15 points in the game, grabbing three rebounds and distributing two assists. Threadgill reflected on the mindset that he brought to the game.

"Being aggressive, having an aggressive mindset," said Threadgill. "In my opinion, I put in a lot of work. I know Clyde was out, so I would get his spot tonight and get more of his minutes. It's hard to fill his shoes which no one can do because he's really big for our team, but I just had an aggressive mindset."

Next Up:

Charlotte capped off the home-stand with a win over the UTSA Roadrunners on Saturday, Jan. 15. The 49ers will now hit the road to face the Florida Atlantic Owls in Boca Raton, FL, on Monday, Jan. 17, at 4 p.m. and the game will be broadcast on CUSAtv.



REYNOLDS RETURNS

Star Charlotte quarterback Chris Reynolds talks decision to come back for one more season

By Cameron Williams
Staff Writer

Chris Reynolds, starting quarterback for the 49ers, is returning for a sixth and final year at Charlotte. He made his announcement via a social media post on Dec. 20. Reynolds elected to return because he has unfinished business with the team.

"I didn't want to think about it during the season," Reynolds said. "I feel like I had a job to do at the time and goals to achieve. So, figuring out about that extra year and my future wasn't the right time to think about it."

The 49ers started 4-2 on the season and ended up 5-7, so this motivated Reynolds and fueled the hunger for him to come back and achieve the goal of not just making it to a bowl game but also winning one.

"After that loss to ODU, it obviously

built up a lot of emotion, disappointment; it really hurt," Reynolds said. "I wanted to make sure I could get away from the building and really make a logical decision."

Reynolds had conversations with his family and his coaches after taking time to think his decision over. Both coach Healy and coach Carney wanted Reynolds to do what was in his own best interest, and neither tried to push their agenda.

"They were very open and said, 'Hey Chris, whatever you do, we support you,'" Reynolds said.

Reynolds mentioned that even though he will have the opportunity to have a full-time job and start a family one day, but he only has one chance to play college football, so this was also a critical factor in

his decision.

"My goal is to play football at the next level," Reynolds said. "I want to play football for as long as I can, and by coming back, I have an opportunity to do that."

Once a scout team player, Reynolds has overcome the odds to get where he is today. He wants to go out on top in his final season to deliver for the program that has given him so much. Reynolds is excited about the challenge.

"In 2017, there wasn't a promise for me in the world," Reynolds said. "I wasn't supposed to play quarterback. I was supposed to be the walk-on scout team guy forever. I've been through a lot, so why not end it on a high note?"

Reynolds has become known as the

record breaker during his time at Charlotte. He holds multiple records, such as the single-game passing yards record with 448 against LA Tech this past season and the single-season passing yards record with 2,680 also this past season. He is atop the career passing yards list with 7,726 yards, which he achieved this last season as well, and the 49ers' four-year starter is the program's all-time touchdowns leader with 62.

With several seniors announcing they are returning, the ceiling is very high for the 49ers. With the right game plan and coaches in place, the 2022 season could be exceptional and having, as Healy called him, "the little engine that could" returning in the backfield for another year might be the key to a 49er bowl win.

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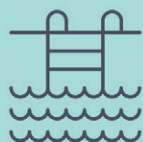
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