

NINERTIMES

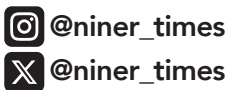
Student-driven news since 1947 November 12, 2025

BALL IS BACK

Bradford's
breakout
propels
Charlotte
past Indi-
ana in state
opener

MORE ON
PAGE 11





EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Davis Cuffe
editor@ninerimes.com

MANAGERIAL BOARD
Wes Packham WRITING MANAGING
Emmanuel Perkins MULTIMEDIA MANAGING
Clare Grealey COPY
Ivory Galloway NETWORK MANAGING

EDITORIAL
Sofia DiStefano NEWS
Emsley Jackson OPINION
Madeline Andrews ARTS & CULTURE
Megan Bentley PHOTO
Trace Smith PODCASTING
Ava Weaver LAYOUT

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Ava Harris ASST. OPINION
Evan Campos ASST. SPORTS
Mareska Chettiar ASST. COPY
Megan Khor ASST. LAYOUT
Giselle Jemez Del Carmen ASST. NEWS

CONTRIBUTING STAFF
Emily Schenkel, Sunnya Hadavi,
Shree Bhagalia, Shane Reese, Max Alexander,
Annie Waskey, Hobart Jones, Kaitlyn Fankboner,
Ahmed Ahmed, Wyatt Bullock,
Skyler Nyutu & Rachael Nguyen

LAYOUTS
Cover photo: Basketball graphic
Images by Emmanuel Perkins
Cover layout by Ava Weaver
Interior layouts by Megan Khor, Ava Weaver,
Gunisha Dhurve & Jasmine Taliaferro

MARKETING DIRECTOR
Madison Lewis
mktdirector@charlotte.edu

NINER MEDIA STAFF
Kelly Merges MEDIA ADVISER
Justin Paprocki MEDIA ADVISER
Laurie Cuddy BUSINESS MANAGER
Bianca Fruscello MARKETING COORDINATOR

The Niner Times is UNC Charlotte's student-run news publication founded in 1947 and has received both state and national recognition.

We cover campus happenings, news and events in the city of Charlotte and North Carolina and topics that are important to students.

CONTACT INFORMATION
9201 University City Blvd. SU 042
Charlotte, NC 28223
Phone: 704-687-7148
Email: editor@ninerimes.com



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

UNC Charlotte event calendar

Fall 2025 Dance Concert
Robinson Hall
Nov. 13-16, Times vary

AutoHaven AutoFair
49th Acre
Nov. 14, 6-9 P.M.

Thanksgiving Break - No Classes
November 26-29

Football vs UTSA
Jerry Richardson Stadium
Nov. 15, noon

**Men's Soccer American
Conference Championship**
Charlotte Soccer Field
Nov. 15, 6 P.M.

Lip Sync Showdown
Cone University Center
Nov. 18, 6 P.M.

From the Charlotte police logs (10/25 - 11/6)

Giselle Jimenez Del-Carmen | Asst.
News Editor

The following are some incidents in the UNC Charlotte campus police logs from Oct. 25 - Nov. 6, 2025.

Nov. 3 Investigate

An officer met a student at PPS about a domestic violence protective order involving another student. Both individuals will receive No Contact Orders, and a SIM report was completed there.

Nov. 5 Investigate

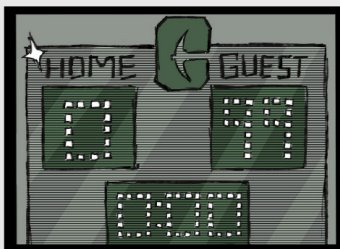
Officers responded to Laurel Hall after a report of three females smoking marijuana under the bridge. They searched the area but found no one, and no further action was required.

Nov. 6 Injured/Ill Subject

Officers met an upset student in the Smith Building who lost her TI-84 calculator. They helped her locate it, offered resources, and completed a Maxient report documenting the assistance provided.

Niner's Comics: Bad investment

Skyler Nyutu | Staff illustrator



‘Something is better than nothing’: Amid SNAP benefit uncertainty, students rely on campus food pantry

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

As second-year student Alyssa Griffin grabbed a can off the shelf, she shook her head at the thought of people nearing the holidays with no Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

With the Jamil Niner Student Pantry just off the edge of campus, Griffin has access to food on a weekly basis and has been using the pantry's resources since her first year at UNC Charlotte.

But Griffin knows that this alone puts her in a better position than most who are also dependent on SNAP benefits.

“I feel even more sorry for those who really need the help. I say that we should all just pray,” Griffin said.

For some students, the Jamil Niner Student Pantry is a lifeline; for others, keeping it stocked is a mission of compassion. And as SNAP benefits are slashed nationwide, both say the pantry has become more than a resource; it's a reminder that no one should face hunger alone.

What cuts are SNAP benefits facing?

At the beginning of 2025, food banks across the United States saw a \$1 billion freeze in money that helped buy food directly from farmers. And in August, President Donald Trump signed the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” into law, which takes aim at SNAP.

SNAP is the largest food assistance program in the nation, and since 1964, the federally funded program has supported almost 42 million people with limited income.

A part of that 42 million people are 1.4 million North Carolinians, of these 1.4 million are 580,000 children. The average benefits for the state are about \$200 per person and \$373 per household each month.

On Nov. 1, full SNAP funding was paused as the government shutdown reached one month.

Two judges issued rulings on Nov. 3 requiring the Trump administration to sign off on partially funding SNAP, and just three days later, on Nov. 6, a federal judge in Rhode Island ordered the Trump administration to release full funding for the month by Nov. 7.

Following the federal judge's ruling on Nov. 6, some states began to issue the full monthly SNAP benefits on Nov. 7.

However, on the evening of Nov. 8, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson froze the federal order that was requiring the Trump administration to distribute full SNAP funding.

As of Nov. 9, there is no clear answer about what will happen to SNAP benefit distributions in future months.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services announced that more than

586,000 North Carolina households received partial November benefits, following guidance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

These families were given about 65% of their usual maximum allotment. The agency also confirmed that around 190,000 households received \$16 or less on their EBT cards on Nov. 7.

UNC Charlotte community resources

For those like Griffin who recently applied and received SNAP benefits due to the high cost of living, receiving any sort of aid through SNAP and having access to the Jamil Niner Student Pantry are what get her through.

Griffin was willing to share with the Niner Times that she currently receives the maximum SNAP benefits, totaling \$292 per month.

“It's still new to me, but being that we do have these resources, I'm only kind of worried about it, because I can just still go to the food pantry. Something is better than nothing,” Griffin said.

UNC Charlotte's Jamil Niner Student Pantry has been a welcoming haven for students for over 10 years.

When they opened their doors in October of 2014, the impact on the campus community was instant. The pantry specifically saw an uptick in aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, distributing over 150 packed food bags per week to students on- and off-campus experiencing food insecurity.

According to the Jamil Niner Student intern, Theo Palermo, the pantry has been preparing for a higher influx of shoppers as they have already begun to see more trickle in.

With the holiday season approaching, Palermo shared that the pantry already gets busier and shelves are a little low; however, the pantry is working not only with Nourish Up but also with various campus departments and organizations to help with donation drives.

Increased demand for supplies has put a strain on some food suppliers who provide assistance to pantries such as the Jamil Niner Student Pantry. With thousands of shelves to stock and shoppers needing more in response to SNAP benefit losses, keeping up with everything has become a challenge.

Palermo hopes people will continue to donate and spread awareness of how to help those in need, because a love of helping others is what led them to volunteer at the pantry.

“It's important so people know that help is there. I think having a reliable resource to go to is the most important thing when you're struggling. It doesn't matter if it's the most complex thing, as long as it's there and it continues to be there,” Palermo said.

“I think having that kind of shoulder to lean on is great and a way to connect yourself and feel not as isolated in the situation that some of these students are in.”

The Jamil Niner Student Pantry has shared that they will continue to do all that they can to help those in need. The pantry recently updated its hours of operation and is open Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11 a.m. - 4:45 p.m. via appointment and available walk-ins from 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. on Wednesdays.

Charlotte's program director of Basic Needs, Joshua Boyd, who works directly with the Jamil Niner Student Pantry, emphasized the focus on supporting the needs of the UNC Charlotte community and advocating for aid and change.

“I would like to see stigmas related to food insecurity decrease because food is a basic need for all people,” Boyd said. “I would like to see our UNC Charlotte community continue to rally and come together to support the pantry through volunteering and donations. We recognize that many of our students come to campus for class and to participate in campus life, but they may not live on or near campus in Mecklenburg County. On our website, students can search for local food pantries where they live, and we are always available to help people out via email [at] ninerpantry@charlotte.edu.”

SNAP benefit eligibility

SNAP helps individuals and families with limited income buy food. To qualify, applicants must meet certain income, residency and household requirements.

Eligibility requirements:

1. Must be a U.S. citizen, legal permanent resident or have an eligible immigration status.
2. Must live in North Carolina and meet state residency requirements.
3. Household monthly gross income must be at or below the limit for the household size: \$2,610 for one person, increasing with each additional member.
4. Eligibility is also based on household composition, citizenship status and available resources.
5. Students aged 18–51 enrolled at least half-time must meet one of several exceptions, such as: Working at least 20 hours per week, participating in a federal or state work-study program, caring for a child under six or being a single parent with a child.



What to know after Election Day in Charlotte

Emily Schenkel | Staff Writer

On Nov. 4, Vi Lyles secured her fifth term as mayor, the city of Charlotte chose its representatives for all seven districts, passed a new transit tax and remained a blue city.

Here is everything you need to know about the results from Election Day.

Mayor of Charlotte

Democrat Vi Lyles is now entering her fifth term as mayor of Charlotte, with her top priorities including affordable housing, improving transportation infrastructure and enhancing public safety throughout the city.

Lyles is also planning to work towards stronger racial equity initiatives, greater support for small- and minority-owned businesses and the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for Charlotte.

Lyles was first elected mayor of Charlotte in 2017, becoming Charlotte's first-ever Black woman mayor.

Her largest achievements during her first four terms as mayor include the expansion of the Charlotte Transit System, positioning Charlotte as a leader in sustainability with The Sustainable and Resilient Charlotte by 2050 Resolution, launching the Racial Equity Initiative, investments in the Corridors of Opportunity, city-wide economic development, the creation of The Alternatives to Violence plan and the SAFE Charlotte plan.

Before serving as mayor of Charlotte, Lyles served on the City Council and worked as an employee of the city, where she established Charlotte's first capital budget.

Charlotte City Council

The Charlotte City Council at-Large had four seats up for election. Four Democrats were elected: Dimple Ajmera, James Mitchell, LaWana Slack-Mayfield and Victoria Watlington.

Ajmera's main goals as part of the council are to build a safe Charlotte regardless of one's zip code, expand affordable housing, create economic opportunities across Charlotte and champion sustainable infrastructure and a resilient future.

Mitchell's main goals as part of the council fall into three categories: affordable housing, economic development and public safety.

Specifically, Mitchell is planning to focus on developing a rent assistance voucher, plan for affordable housing alongside transit corridors, develop new funding sources for start-up businesses, support funding for Corridors of Opportunity, implement an Upward Mobility Program, emphasize de-escalation trainings for police officers, promote police station developments and empower non-profits to commit to violent behavior prevention.

Slack-Mayfield's main goals as part of the council include affordable housing, economic development, ending racial and gender bias in large-city systems and ensuring strong access to upward mobility.

Watlington's main goals as part of the council include ensuring safe, stable neighborhoods and housing, prioritizing public safety, supporting infrastructure growth and improving overall affordability.

The city of Charlotte is divided into seven districts. District 4 specifically represents University City and UNC Charlotte.

Democrat Renee Perkins Johnson was re-elected as the Charlotte City Council District 4 representative.

The most important issues Johnson sees facing District 4 include public safety and violent crime, traffic safety, transit con-

gestion, infrastructure, affordable housing and displacement.

Johnson plans to combat violent crime and improve overall public safety by advocating for enhanced mental health and wellness resources for officers, investing in violence prevention and intervention programs for youth, expanding community-based public safety programs and supporting improvements in officer retention and morale.

Johnson plans to work toward fewer traffic accidents, fatalities and transit congestion through targeted enforcement in higher-risk areas, support infrastructure improvements to prioritize the safety of cyclists and pedestrians, push for clear safety benchmarks across Charlotte and lead multimodal solutions such as improved bus services.

Tackling the rapid displacement of Charlotteans by expanding affordable housing options along growth corridors and transit lines, requiring deeper community engagement and advocating to preserve the affordable housing units that already exist within District 4 and the Charlotte area are also among Johnson's goals.

District 4 is the dominant district for University City and includes the immediate area around UNC Charlotte's campus and the campus itself. Johnson has not publicly expressed any plans or changes that would affect the University.

Approved referendums

Mecklenburg County voters approved the 1% sales tax referendum increase for transit project funding. The county's sales tax will now increase from 7.25% to 8.25%, aiming to generate approximately \$19 billion within the next three decades.

This tax increase is expected to cost the average Charlotte household about \$240 extra per year. 42% of this tax increase will come from Mecklen-

burg County residents, and the remaining 58% will come from purchases made by commuters, tourists and businesses within the county.

This money will go towards funding transit expansion and road improvements, with approximately 40% going to rail transit, 40% to roads, bike lanes and sidewalks and 20% to buses and other forms of micro transit. The Red Line commuter rail, going from Uptown to Iredell County, is planned to be a large priority with the funds.

The Red Line, Mecklenburg County's first commuter rail, would start at Gateway Station, just northwest of Uptown Charlotte. It would travel over 20 miles to Davidson, with many stops along the way. There would be stops for riders to get off in Huntersville and Cornelius. It would run approximately every 30-60 minutes, seven days a week.

The Red Line is projected to take about 10 years to plan, design and build.

There is also a plan for a new Silver Line. This line would run from Charlotte Douglas International Airport to the town of Matthews, with key stops at the Bojangles Coliseum, Bank of America Stadium, Central Piedmont Community College main and Levine campuses and more.

This is the second sales tax increase dedicated to transit in Mecklenburg County.

A previous tax passed in 1998 funded the Lynx Blue Line and bus system. That revenue ended roughly 15 years ago, leading to the new tax.

As Charlotte looks toward the next decade of growth, city leaders face the challenge of balancing expansion with equity and affordability.

With Lyles' renewed leadership, residents await progress on the city's ambitious transit and housing goals.



Richard Nuzzo/Niner Times File
Niyathi Sulkunte/Niner Times File

UNC Charlotte international students face restrictive health insurance requirements following new UNC System policy

Sunnya Hadavi | Lead Writer

Starting in spring 2026, a change in UNC System policy will require all current and incoming international students at UNC Charlotte to use the UNC System-provided health insurance.

This change restricts students' choice to use third-party insurance and raises larger concerns about affordability and international students' acceptance in UNC System universities.

What is the new health insurance policy?

In an attempt to ensure all international students have insurance, the UNC System changed its policies on Sept. 19. This new policy requires all international students with F-1 or J-1 non-immigrant statuses to enroll in the UNC System Student Health Insurance Plan (SHIP).

There are 1,894 international students enrolled at UNC Charlotte as of fall 2025. They represent approximately 5.8% of the total student population and include both F-1 and J-1 visa holders. F-1 visa holders are authorized to study full-time in the United States, while J-1 holders are permitted to remain in the country only for an approved exchange visitor program.

International students across all of North Carolina's 16 public universities are affected. Being under the UNC System means that universities are governed by the Board of Governors and bound by its policies.

As an institution under the UNC System, UNC Charlotte is required to adopt the new insurance policy. They are unable to make adjustments for their own students.

"The UNC System Student Health Insurance Plan is a System-level policy that applies to all UNC campuses. This means the decision was made by the System and then communicated to universities," UNC Charlotte's Deputy Chief Communications Officer Christy Jackson said in a statement to the Niner Times. "It also means we cannot, except in very limited circumstances, change or waive the requirement."

Concerns from students and faculty

UNC Charlotte has the second-largest population of international students across North Carolina public universities, second only to North Carolina State University.

"We understand this is a big change and the concerns it raises for affected students. Those concerns were also shared by the University with the System," Jackson said. "UNC Charlotte remains dedicated to the well-being of our international student community and will offer as much support as students need to guide them through the process. This includes working through SGA [Student Government Association] with the UNC System's Association of Student Governments."

UNC Charlotte's Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG) drafted an open letter to the UNC System about student concerns across North Carolina universities. Originally dated Oct. 21, the letter is a living document and is being updated regularly with revisions, student perspectives and additional sources.

"We wrote this letter because many of our closest friends, GPSG Leadership Teammates and academic colleagues are international students, and we've seen firsthand the unique challenges they already face—financial, legal and emotional—on top of the everyday pressures of graduate study," 2025-26 GPSG President S.L. Ivey said. "When this policy was announced, many of them felt devastated, angry and uncertain about their ability to continue their education. More than anything, they felt unwelcome in a system they've worked so hard to be part of."

In addition to affordability concerns, the letter highlights the potential impact this change may have on international student enrollment at UNC System institutions.

"This policy, communicated suddenly and without clear prior consultation, represents a step backward for equity, transparency and student well-being within the UNC System," reads the introduction of the letter. "More critically, this change threatens to make pursuing a degree within the UNC

System financially unattainable for many international students, undermining the welcoming and inclusive values our universities have long stood for. Such unaffordability risks driving talented international students to other institutions, ultimately reducing overall enrollment and long-term revenue for UNC campuses."

Costs increase for international students

According to the information in the GPSG open letter, international students typically use private insurance like the ISO Silver Plan. These plans cost approximately \$31-60 per month, which totals to a difference of \$1,200 to \$1,800 per semester in savings in comparison to what SHIP and Student Blue plans require.

For undergraduate students, Student Blue costs between \$1,226.80 for the value plan and \$1,583.50 for the premium plan per semester. Graduate students have to pay either \$1,396.54 or \$1,802.92, respectively.

International students are unable to opt out of the new policy unless they meet one of the exceptions. Students who already have an approved fall 2025 waiver that covers the entire academic year do not need to get Student Blue for the spring semester, but would need to enroll for fall 2026.

"For many international students, waivers allowing the use of affordable, reliable external insurance plans are not simply a matter of preference—they are a financial necessity that enables them to continue studying in the U.S.," reads the letter. "Losing that option will place a substantial, and for some insurmountable, financial strain on this population."

UNC Charlotte estimates 2025-26 tuition for both undergraduate and graduate international students to cost around \$25,000, with graduate students paying additional thousands for tuition increment

based on their program. Cost estimates increase to around \$50,000 when including housing, health insurance, meals and other indirect costs.

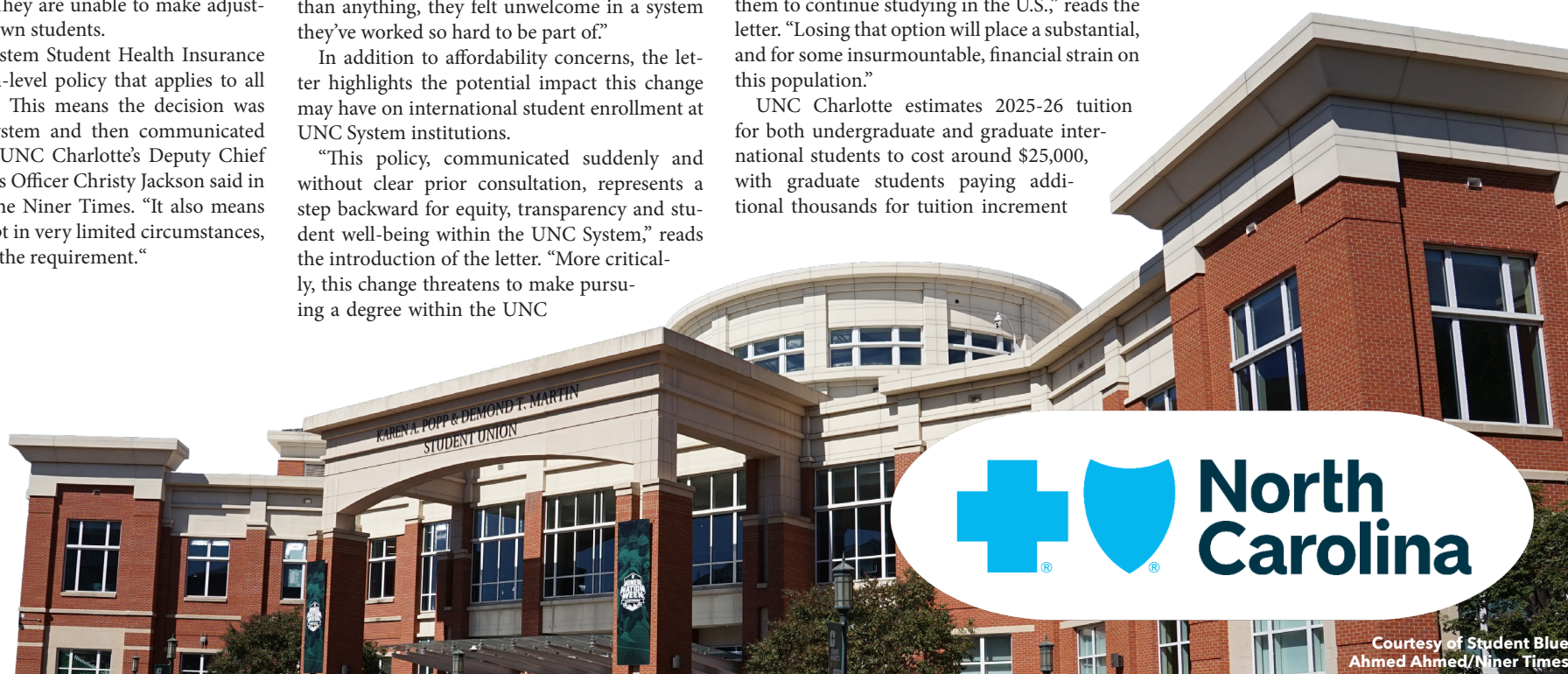
While assistantships exist, opportunities for master's students do not cover most of the tuition for international students. Master's student assistantships typically pay between \$12,000 and \$15,000 per academic year, which does not cover the \$25,000 for tuition alone.

Targets of UNC System and federal policy

In 2025, international students and visa holders have been the focus of multiple federal changes. In April, six international student visas at UNC Charlotte were terminated by the federal government and then later restored.

On the UNC System-level, the Board of Governors has passed a series of controversial policies for its institutions regarding diversity. These include cutting diversity and inclusion-related programs, offices and courses, as well as regulating student protests. Recent policy changes like these align with pushes made by the federal government.

The UNC System has not publicly announced the insurance changes or shared the reasoning behind them, leaving it to the system institutions to communicate with their students. Regardless, this change has left international students forced to find a way to secure insurance and pay high costs to continue their education.



Basketball's opening night in Halton Arena

After rebuilding rosters in the previous offseason, both Charlotte basketball teams have started the season strong as of Nov. 9. Through their first two matchups, the men's team sits at 2-0 and looks competitive. The women's team is 2-1 and fell in a competitive battle opening night to Auburn University. Both teams will be programs to take note of this winter.



Emmanuel Perkins,
Kaitlyn Fankboner &
Wyatt Bullock/
Niner Times

Charlotte starts hot as Bradford's breakout propels 49ers past Indiana State in opener

Max Alexander | Staff Writer

The Halton Arena crowd didn't need much time to realize something special was going on Monday night. Behind a stunning 31-point performance from sophomore guard Ben Bradford, the Charlotte men's basketball team opened its 2025-26 campaign in convincing style with a 92-76 victory over Indiana State University.

The win showcased the 49ers' new identity—one molded through hard work, defensive focus and a commitment to team basketball. But more than anything, it showed the emergence of a young and promising star.

From a role player to a leader

Just last season, Bradford averaged only 2.5 points per game and shot 15% from three-point range. On Nov. 3, he looked like a completely different player: confident, efficient and relentless. The sophomore shot 4-of-6 from beyond the arc, displaying both range and poise while carrying Charlotte's offense for key stretches.

His journey from bench contributor to breakout scorer wasn't by accident. In the postgame press conference, Bradford credited a clear roadmap set by Head Coach Aaron Fearne after last season.

"As soon as the season ended last year, Coach Fearne told me I had to have a great spring, summer and fall," said Bradford. "I came in every day, trusted it and worked hard. This is the result."

To that, Fearne hailed Bradford's transformation. "His work rate and effort this offseason have been some of the best I've seen in a long time," Fearne said. "He earned it and deserves it. Now, the challenge is to keep doing it."

Team depth and balance shone through

The 49ers' victory was not a one-man show. All five Charlotte starters scored in double figures, reflecting the team's balance. Senior guards Major Freeman and Dezayne Mingo chipped in with 17 points each as their seasoned presence combined with poise under pressure.

Meanwhile, 7-foot-2 center Anton Bonke controlled the paint and finished with a double-double of 10 points and 14 rebounds. His presence also helped Charlotte post an overall rebounding advantage of 45-24, which nullified the Sycamores' second-chance opportunities.

Fearne surmised that such a balance was crucial as his program's success depends on unselfish play.

"I want us to play team basketball," Fearne

said. "We can't depend on one guy to do everything—that's not successful basketball. And tonight, we shared it better, but we can still improve."

Charlotte finished the night shooting 47% from the field and 47% from three-point range, numbers that underline both efficiency and patience within Fearne's new system.

Fearne's vision

In his second full season as coach, Fearne's fingerprints are clear. It shows he strives for structured toughness, emotional discipline and constant development within the program. He spoke about the "three levels of toughness" he drills into his players daily, which come across the board as mental, emotional and physical.

"I talk to them all the time about those three levels," Fearne said. "I try to kick their butt every day in practice because when you get into a game and things get tough, that's when you need to lean on all three."

The results were clear against the potent Sycamores that relied on perimeter shooting and offensive flow. Charlotte's defensive rotations were on point, making it difficult for shots and limiting Indiana State's three-point efficiency.

Scott impressive for Indiana State despite defeat

Even in defeat, graduate forward Ian Scott was unstoppable for the Sycamores, scoring 24 points on 9-of-10 shooting and recording 11 rebounds. Fearne credited Scott's play, but praised his freshman forward Jarne Elouna Eyenga, who battled the veteran all night in his collegiate debut.

"Jarne was excellent," Fearne said. "He's a freshman going against an experienced, talented player, and he held his own. That's the kind of growth we want to see."

Building chemistry and confidence

For Charlotte, the road to cohesion is ongoing, but early signs are pointing up. The team's chemistry has increased substantially since summer workouts, according to Bradford.

"The first two weeks were rough," Bradford said. "But by the end of summer, we'd made huge progress. Then once we got tested in scrimmages, you could see the growth really jump."

Their efforts definitely showed, as the 49ers dominated North Carolina Wesleyan University 85-51 on Oct. 22, proving Charlotte's energy had been rejuvenated.

Fearne echoed that view, stating the team's ability to play together will continue to improve through experience and shared adversity. "We've got a team of players who are still learning from each other," Fearne said. "They've got to grade out well in practice and perform in games. Nothing is given—they have to earn it."

Reflecting on opening night

Charlotte's convincing win signals a strong start, but also a glimpse of what Fearne's evolving roster could become this season.

With emerging stars like Bradford, a rejuvenated Bonke and steady senior leadership, the 49ers appear poised to make noise in the American Conference—a conference they could shake up following the news of being ranked dead last in the Preseason Coaches' Poll.

"We did some really good things against a tough team tonight," Fearne concluded. "It's a good start, and there's a lot to keep improving on. But I'm proud of how we competed."

As fans filed out of Halton Arena, the message was clear: this isn't the same 49ers team from last season. It's faster, tougher and hungrier—just the way Fearne envisioned.

After a win against Tennessee Tech University in their second game of the season on Nov. 7, the 49ers are 2-0 through their first two matchups. After a 2024-2025 season in which the 49ers went 3-15 in conference play, the 49ers are off to a promising start this year.



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times



Third time's the charm for

HARLEE HEAD

Shree Bhagalia | Staff Writer

Wyatt Bullock/Niner Times

For Charlotte's redshirt junior goalkeeper Harlee Head, every match begins with the exact same ritual—a good playlist, braiding the teams' hair and a pack of Welch's fruit snacks alongside a pack of Cheez-It's.

Starting her collegiate soccer career in Pepperdine, Calif., then transferring to Mississippi State University (MSU) and finally finding her home in the Queen City, Head's journey has been filled with determination, balance and a thrill for competition.

How it all began

"I've been playing soccer since I was four or five, but didn't start taking it seriously until I started playing travel soccer," Head said. It was then she realized that she was "kinda good at this."

What started out as a fun hobby quickly became an integral part of her life. As practices grew longer and competition tougher, her love for the sport only deepened. Soccer became more than just a game—it was the journey that would ultimately shape her college career.

It was the pregame adrenaline rush and the postgame victories that consumed her, fueling her motivation to pursue greatness.

Head's positive outlook on life has been a key factor throughout her journey. "I started the recruitment process when I was about 14 or 15," she said.

Head, a Castle Rock, Colo. native, started out her collegiate soccer career at Pepperdine University on the West Coast. She appeared in four matches as a freshman in 2022, recording four

saves and three solo shutouts. The following season, she played in six games and tallied six saves, but soon realized Pepperdine wasn't the right fit.

She then transferred to Mississippi State, and there, Head says, she grew drastically. Although she didn't see game action with the Bulldogs, Head was named to the 2023-24 First Year SEC Academic Honor Roll. That transition taught her patience, consistency and technique, lessons that would prepare her for the next opportunity.

Finding the right fit

The third time proved to be the charm for Head as she made her way to Charlotte, but the only difference was that she was not sure about her career as a soccer player.

"It was killing me mentally," Head admitted. "But the coaching staff here showed they wanted me to be here. They were willing to take a chance on me, and that's what drew me in."

Earlier this season, the team traveled to Texas for matchups against the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and the University of North Texas, finishing with a 1-1 tie and a 3-2 win. What felt like two wins for the 49ers only left the team with more drive and motivation for the future.

The night against UTSA was filled with energy and grit as the Charlotte women's soccer team played in an intense match that kept fans on the edge of their seats until the final minutes.

Charlotte came out aggressive, with multiple shots from senior forward Naroa Domenech and senior forward Megan Bradley. That persistence paid off when Bradley buried a shot, assisted by

sophomore midfielder Grace Keighley, giving the 49ers a 1-0 lead in the 26th minute.

Head collected five saves to help Charlotte hold the lead late in the match. But in the final minutes, tension was at its highest. After a wave of fouls, including yellow cards on both teams, UTSA got a penalty kick.

"In those high-pressure moments when it's just you and the opponent, that really gets you mentally," Head said. "You have to be continuously locked in."

Head made a crucial diving save to the right, but was defenseless when a rebound tied the game 1-1 in the last minute of the match.

Being a goalkeeper is more than just blocking shots. It is also about being the steady backbone of the team. Head's composure under pressure and quick reflexes have given her a steady presence as a 49er.

"No matter what, you will always get everyone's effort," Head said.

That same level of perseverance and determination has helped her reach new heights as a 49er. She remains focused on helping her team get 1% better every day. Every moment she stands tall between posts is another chance to keep her team in the game.

A team on the rise

The 49ers have built a strong platform for the 2025-26 season. With an overall record of 10-6-2 and a 6-2-2 mark in American Conference matches, Charlotte has bounced back in a big way and earned the No. 2 seed in the conference tournament.

On Nov. 3, the American Conference Championship kicked off at the Premier Sports Complex in Lakeland Ranch, Fla. Charlotte battled the No. 7-seeded University of South Florida Bulls, but fell 3-0 in the opening round.

Despite the setback, the program's foundation remains solid under the new leadership of Head Coach Sinead Byrne, who was officially announced as head coach on Oct. 17 after serving as interim since April.

"This isn't just a job," Byrne said to Charlotte Athletics. "It's a mission. We're here to raise the standard, compete at the highest level and bring championships home to Charlotte."

With Byrne officially leading the team, Charlotte looks to key contributors like Head, whose play and mindset have anchored the team's success.

Head has twice been named as the Goalkeeper of the Week in the American and ranks among the best in goals against average and save percentage. As Charlotte looks toward postseason success, her presence gives the program a push-forward with confidence under Coach Byrne's direction.

For younger athletes dreaming of a future in soccer, Head offers advice rooted directly in her own experiences. She reminds them to celebrate the progress, no matter how big or small. "Take the small moments as wins," she said. "Be proud of how far you've come."

Her story stands as a reminder that growth and perseverance, both on and off the field, are what define the 49er legacy.

Column: Charlotte women's basketball has fans—but scheduling matters

Shane Reese | Staff Writer

WNBA stars Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese and others have helped transform college women's basketball, changing how fans view the sport. Yet at Halton Arena, most fans still only pack the stands for the men's games.

Competition has tightened across NCAA women's basketball, including in the American Conference, where parity has replaced dominance.

Fans talk about women's basketball more than ever, both online and in person. Despite that growth, Charlotte's women's team still struggles to draw crowds like the men's program. Why?

It's because the most important fans are often preoccupied with being students when the games start.

Scheduling issues

Charlotte students say women's basketball games often start as classes are ending, making it difficult to attend. That was the case for the 49ers' first home game, which tipped off at 5:30 p.m. as many students were still finishing evening lectures.

Charlotte's upcoming matchup against Wofford College is set for 2 p.m. on Nov. 22, a time when many sports fans are watching college football.

Competing with football's national audience hurts attendance,

as fans are more likely to stay home or tune in elsewhere.

College football is the NCAA's most popular sport in both viewership and attendance. Scheduling games on the same day as major football broadcasts puts Charlotte women's basketball at a clear disadvantage. The same issue applies to Sunday games, when the NFL dominates the sports landscape.

A look at both basketball schedules shows that Charlotte's women's team plays more weekend games than the men's team, likely an intentional move to draw more students to men's matchups.

Favor the students

Students make up the heart of the crowd, so both teams would benefit from schedules that better accommodate those with evening classes. For many, basketball is the last thing on their minds after leaving class at 5:30 p.m.

The student section brings the energy that defines college sports, whether it's chants, big-screen moments or Charlotte's signature "Picks up!" gesture. That energy creates a true home-court advantage, something alumni and other fans simply can't replicate.

Many students, myself included, support both Charlotte basketball programs, but often have to choose which team to

watch. It's frustrating because both squads consistently deliver high-effort performances at home, regardless of the opponent.

The competition is there

After Charlotte women's basketball's performance in its season opener, it's hard to say the attendance gap between the men's and women's teams is about competition.

The 49ers pushed Auburn University, a program with a far more established athletics reputation, to overtime. Even in defeat, their effort made for an exciting, hard-fought game that fans should appreciate.

Men's basketball also opened its season with a win, but that outcome was widely expected based on its opponent. When facing a team like Auburn, few expect a close contest, yet Charlotte battled back in the fourth quarter to force overtime. That kind of resilience deserves recognition.

Make the effort

Students don't control when games are scheduled, but the players still deserve support.

We're not the ones leaving everything on the court; they are. The women's basketball players deserve to compete in front of fans who cheer them on as they fight to bring home a win for Charlotte.



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

From end zones to roof zones: Damiere Byrd builds a new kind of legacy

Kelli Blackburn | Sports Editor

For many chasing NFL dreams, life moves fast—then retirement arrives even faster.

For those who reach the National Football League (NFL), the experience can feel surreal until suddenly, it's over.

When that chapter closes, some players feel lost. Some feel sad. And many are left wondering who they are beyond the game that once defined them.

But for former Carolina Panthers wide

receiver Damiere Byrd, life after football became an opportunity to discover new passions—including owning his own roofing company.

From Gamecock to Panther

Byrd may not have been the biggest name on the field, but his consistency and work ethic spoke louder than any spotlight could.

Signed as an undrafted free agent out of the University of South Carolina (USC) in 2015, Byrd admits he never imagined he'd make it to the NFL. But once he did, he made every moment count.

A native of New Jersey, Byrd found his way to USC and became a steady presence in the Gamecocks' offense. When the NFL Draft arrived, he wasn't selected—yet opportunity still found him.

Byrd's former quarterback invited him to a Panthers workout, a session he almost skipped.

"Initially, I didn't want to do it, because it was, you know, ego and pride, right? It's not my workout. I'm just going to go out there and run for cardio for somebody else. It ended up [that] I had a good workout, and I ended up getting on their radar. It worked out, and it was probably the best move that I made."

The tryout earned him a contract as a preferred free agent, launching his NFL career just down the road from where he'd played in college.

Learning from legends

Byrd's rookie season in 2015 became one of the most memorable years among the Panthers' organization. Carolina went 15-1 in the regular season, captured the NFC Championship and reached Super Bowl .

Although they fell 24-10 against the Denver Broncos, and Byrd spent the season inactive, the experience shaped him early on.

He was surrounded by many greats, including Pro Football Hall of Famer Jared Allen, quarterback 'Superman' Cam Newton and defensive stars linebacker Luke Kuechly, defensive end Charles Johnson and outside linebacker Thomas Davis Sr.

"To be around that locker room, to have an opportunity to mature and grow and develop as a player, right?" Byrd said. "There wasn't really any pressure for me to perform right away, because we had so many great people ahead of me that there was no way how great I played anyway, that I wasn't going to play regardless. So, I had enough time to really hone my craft and develop."

Byrd studied their preparation and leadership. He learned from wide receivers like Jericho Cotchery and Ted Ginn Jr., players

who modeled professionalism and perseverance.

In 2017, Byrd got the word, and he caught his first NFL pass on New Year's Day. By the next season, he returned a kickoff 103 yards for a touchdown against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Christmas Eve—setting a franchise record for longest kickoff return that still stands.

With friends, family and his girlfriend (now wife) in the crowd, it brought a little more holiday magic to Bank of America Stadium in the 22-19 victory.

"That was still a time where I was still trying to create a role and an impact there," Byrd emphasized. "I had a four-game stretch of opportunity to start at receiver. I was also a returner. At that time, I was just trying to do anything that I could to show everybody that I can play. It was just one of those games where everything kind of came together and [I] had an opportunity."

With the latest kickoff and return rules set in the NFL, Byrd's franchise record is even more impressive.

"Now, they [have] changed the kicking rules. So, you're probably not going to see another return that long anymore, especially in franchise history at least," Byrd added.

The road between teams

After the 2018 season, Byrd was a free agent and continued his career with stints in Arizona, New England and Chicago, before finishing his playing days in Atlanta.

By 2023, age and injuries began to catch up, and Byrd started to think about what came next. Watching other players manage life beyond football gave him perspective.

Byrd recalls guys like Panthers' Johnson as someone in the NFL who had his life together outside of the sport—balancing his foundation and his family life. There was also Larry Fitzgerald, whom he remembers had the chance to sit beside in team meetings with the Cardinals.

"Anytime we had a break, he [Larry] was on his laptop, answering emails, looking at business deals, investments, things like that. Those are the two [Charles and Larry] that jump out of my mind and [made me] like, 'Wow. I need to get on my game. I need to figure it out. What can I do to continue this?'"

He admired how those players built futures beyond football—creating stability, opportunity and community impact. Byrd wanted to do the same.

He knew he wanted to own his own company, but investing money into real estate or startups wasn't the safest option. What seemed in the cards was franchising.



Courtesy of Carolina Panthers

A new playbook

Franchising offered room for learning and also served as a cushion in case any problems fell through the cracks. A consultant introduced him to home services, and soon after, Bumble Roofing entered the picture.

"You don't necessarily need a warehouse or a building, and you don't have to worry about rent or anything like that," Byrd affirmed. "It's just kind of, you [have a] truck, equipment, whoever you hire, and you go out and do the work."

Byrd opened Charlotte's first Bumble Roofing franchise in April 2025, joining a growing company founded in 2019. With the city's booming housing market and older neighborhoods in need of upgrades, Byrd's company came in at what he called "perfect timing."

He quickly learned the trade, drawing parallels between construction, customer service and football.

"I think when a roof is done, as you can imagine with construction, there are always so many variables. It's a stressful environment, much like football. When we do that final walk-through and see the homeowners happy and surprised it went so smoothly—I think that's the best part."

Byrd's communication skills, built through years of media interviews and locker room relationships, became one

of his strongest tools in customer service.

His team's work earned early praise with 30 five-star Google Reviews, with customers highlighting his professionalism, honesty and attention to detail.

"I recently had my roof done by Bumble Roofing Company, and I couldn't be happier with the results," Tony Vy, a customer, said. "Damiere and his team were professional, honest and easy to work with from start to finish. They showed up on time, communicated clearly and made sure every detail was handled perfectly. The quality of their work is top-notch—my roof looks amazing, and they left the property spotless after the job. It's clear that Damiere truly cares about his customers and takes pride in what he does."

Purpose after the play

Though the bright lights of the NFL and the roar of the crowd are now be-

hind him, Byrd says the lessons he learned on the field continue to shape him every day.

"I think just being consistent," he said. "Knowing that the opportunities that I was going to get would be small and few, far in between. So every opportunity had to be consistent, and it had to be right. I think that goes on off the field as well, just being the same person every day, being the same person around your family, friends; attitude, how you react to people, how you treat people. It's all about consistency, even when you don't feel like it, even when the day's not going well."

The shoulder pads may be gone, but Byrd's competitive edge remains. Each completed project carries the same satisfaction as crossing a goal line—proof that heart and hard work still drive results.

Now, instead of moving from city to city for the next contract, Byrd is building something lasting in Charlotte—one roof, one relationship and one satisfied customer at a time.

“

"It's a stressful environment, much like football. When we do that final walk-through and see the homeowners happy and surprised it went so smoothly—I think that's the best part."

- Damiere Byrd



Courtesy of Damiere Byrd

Loftis steadies Charlotte in loss to ECU as 49ers push through a grueling season

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Lacing up his cleats before kick-off, quarterback Grayson Loftis knew it'd be on him to decide the game.

A win always takes a team effort, but facing East Carolina University's (ECU) top-ranked run defense, points would have to come through the air.

Last season against the Pirates, Charlotte won by 31 points, making them 2-0 against their rival. After that loss, ECU set up a countdown clock in its locker room tracking the days, hours and minutes until the rematch with Charlotte.

"We don't like them, they don't like us," redshirt junior Loftis said in the press conference before the matchup.

Loftis really isn't supposed to be in this position, leading the 49ers into Greenville, N.C., to face ECU. But after a season-ending injury to starting quarterback Conner Harrell in Week 3, there Loftis was, once the backup, now behind center in front of a homecoming crowd of 39,096 booing ECU fans on Saturday.

In his time at starter, Loftis has flashed talent. While the 49ers fell to North Texas in the game prior, for three quarters, it looked like a Loftis-led

passing attack would lead Charlotte to its second win all season.

Against ECU, there were similar moments.

A deep completion to redshirt junior receiver Javen Nicholas got Charlotte their first

points on fourth down. But the play came long after the Loftis that Charlotte fans typically take to social media to complain about had played.

Charlotte's first two drives resulted in punts and a total gain of two yards between the two drives. A stifled run game left Loftis without room to work and sacked for a loss of eight yards on the first drive.

On the other side of the field, ECU scored on its first two drives, making it 14-0.

After a turnover on downs ended ECU's third drive, Charlotte had the ball at nearly midfield with a chance to make it a one-score game.

Starting the drive in shotgun formation, Loftis stood behind center, reading the field before receiving the snap. In what should've been a quick play to pick up roughly eight yards, Loftis sent the ball sailing to an out-breaking receiver, but it was underthrown and intercepted. With just Loftis to beat, the ECU defender dashed down the sideline and into the end zone as the crowd erupted.

The play echoed their Week 7 loss to Temple, when Loftis threw a pick-six while trailing by one score, and the 49ers never recovered. While the 49ers didn't win against ECU either, falling 48-22, Charlotte Head Coach Tim Albin said he thought his team responded better to the interception return against ECU.

"You throw a pick-six and that's a lot on a quarterback, but we scored the last two possessions in the second quarter through the air," Albin said in the postgame press conference. "I'm very proud of him."

The scoreboard didn't do Charlotte any favors, but after the interception, Loftis settled in and looked alright. He finished the game with 279 yards and three touchdowns.

"There's a lot of positives," Albin said regarding Loftis' performance. "We've got to find a running game for him, that's where he's gonna be at his best."

The performance wasn't enough, as Charlotte broke its two-year streak of defeating ECU, but it is a silver lining in what has been a rough season for the 49ers.

The 49ers started the season hopeful under the winds of a new direction from first-year Charlotte Coach Albin. Still, a campaign marked by season-ending injuries to two of their five captains, the firing of Charlotte's athletic director and a few too

many poor plays, like Loftis' first-half interception, has left the 49ers 1-8.

With matchups against the universities of Texas at San Antonio, Tulane and the top-ranked Georgia Bulldogs, those silver linings may be harder to come by. All three future opponents have won more than the 49ers this season.

There's no hiding what's ahead.

ECU was a 28.5-point favorite, and the margins won't get any kinder as the season winds down.

Even so, Loftis and Albin will suit up again, staring down opponents expected to beat them as they wrap up a season that has offered no soft landings. What they take from these last few weeks may matter more than the scores.



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times



Talent outside of the classroom: Department of Music takes the stage in Faculty Spotlight performances

Annie Waskey | Staff Writer

The lights of the recital hall dimmed, and the audience grew quiet as the lone piano on the stage waited for an occupant. As performers filled Rowe's Recital Hall with sound, the evening unfolded into a collage of musical talent presented by faculty members from UNC Charlotte's Department of Music.

The concert

Tuesday evening was just one of many concerts under the Faculty and Friends series that will be held over the course of the 2025-2026 school year. This concert was a Faculty Spotlight, featuring a variety of music performed by members of UNC Charlotte's Department of Music. There were 11 performers, and the night consisted of both soloists and small ensembles performing pieces from a collection of genres.

Associate Professor of Trumpet Eric Millard performed Nicole Piunno's "Trumpet Sonata No. 1" with pianist Claudio Olivera.

"We use these opportunities for the faculty to showcase their performance and express themselves artistically and musically," Millard said.

Over the summer, pieces were carefully selected by faculty members who were interested in performing, and the musicians have since been collaborating on the pieces.

"I'm excited to bring the sonata to life. The movement I'm doing is very reflective and introspective, so hopefully people can kind of just let

their minds wander and be in a peaceful space," Millard said.

The selected pieces were inspired by emotional connections felt by faculty members, and the audience listened in awe.

"I was inspired to perform this evening because I really wanted to share this new piece of contemporary work for us," Associate Professor of Voice Sequina DuBose said.

Accompanied by cellist Mira Frisch, DuBose sang "Loisaida, My Love" by Jessie Montgomery, a piece adapted from a poem by Bimbo Rivas expressing his love for the Lower East Side. Designed to be a fusion of musical genres, DuBose conveyed the work's conflicted emotions of the famous New York City neighborhood as she sang the piece in soprano.

From the lecture hall to the recital hall

"I think one of the things we can really brag about is that not only do we offer high-quality education, but we have faculty that come from professional experiences and that are doing notable things in the field," DuBose explained.

This concert allowed students to watch live as their instructors practice their professions, an important experience for any aspiring musician.

"I think it's impactful for students to see their teachers actually go through the process that we ask them to go through because it humanizes it," Kevin Dugat said.

Dugat is a visiting lecturer of low brass and performed "A la manière de Schumann" by Jean-Michel Defaye with Olivera on piano.

Professors know that they are human, just like their students. They find it valuable to show them that musicianship goes beyond what they are taught in the classroom.

Academic careers in the department offer professional musicians a balance between teaching and playing. Professors in the music department have the advantage of showing their students what they teach through concerts like these.

"I think it's always really wonderful for our students to hear their teachers perform and see us not just as the person sitting next to them in their lessons, but as someone who's also actively making music," Millard said.

Creating a collaborative space for music

The concert enabled a dynamic mix of faculty members to perform in unity. Regardless of background, experience or instrument, music professionals share their passion for music, and many enjoy working with musicians who specialize in different musical mediums.

"Most of my time is spent when I'm practicing, just playing by myself in my office. It's really exciting to actually be in the moment making music and interacting with each other," Millard said.

This year is Assistant Professor of Voice Susan Gouthro's first at Charlotte. She took advantage of the opportunity to play with her new colleagues, performing "Parto, parto, ma tu, ben mio" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart alongside Olivera and clarinetist Jessica Lindsey and Richard Strauss's "Morgen!" with Olivera and violinist David Russell.

"It's really special as a woodwind player to collaborate with a vocalist, so that was a really fun part of putting my piece together tonight," Lindsey said.

Finding fellowship in musical expression

"It was just nice, the camaraderie and the feeling of having everyone listen to the faculty and the students hear their professors," Professor of Applied Flute Jennifer Dior said.

Dior performed two solo pieces, "Danza de la Mariposa" by Valerie Coleman and "Tango Études" by Astor Piazzolla.

Music is a widely used outlet for self-expression. It creates a tangible space where people can experiment and feel emotions through sound.

"I love playing live, and I just love expressing myself through the music," Professor of Piano Dylan Savage said.



Ahmed Ahmed/ Niner Times

Letter to the Editor: Open letter to the UNC System administration regarding the upcoming mandatory health insurance policy for international students

S.L. Ivey

Dear UNC System Leadership,

We, the undersigned graduate and professional student representatives, write to express our deep concern and disappointment regarding the recent announcement that, beginning in Spring 2026, all international students across the UNC System will be required to enroll in the university's Student Blue health insurance plan, with significantly restricted waiver options.

This policy, communicated suddenly and without prior consultation, represents a step backward for transparency and student well-being within the UNC System. More critically, it risks making higher education within the UNC System financially unattainable for many international students—effectively discouraging their enrollment.

While we understand this change is part of a larger, multi-step plan to make student health insurance more affordable systemwide, we find the logic behind this implementation deeply flawed. The UNC System has indicated that previous steps included dividing the Student Blue plan into separate Value and Premium tiers, as well as creating different plan structures for undergraduate and graduate students. The next step—requiring all international students to enroll—has been presented as a way to “reduce overall premiums by increasing enrollment.”

However, if increased enrollment truly lowers costs, it raises a key question: why is this policy targeting only international students, who already make up a small percentage of the total student population and face the highest financial barriers? If the intent is affordability through expanded participation, the logical step would be to encourage broader student enrollment, not isolate one group.

Moreover, the System has suggested that some international student insurance plans are inadequate or fail to provide sufficient coverage, which could justify a more standardized policy. Yet, current waiver requirements already mandate that private insurance plans meet or exceed Student Blue's coverage standards. If certain plans are indeed insufficient, the System should clarify and publish those requirements publicly, alongside examples of acceptable “good” private insurance options that meet compliance. This would ensure student safety and compliance without creating unnecessary financial hardship.

The presence of a strong international student community contributes directly to institutional excellence, academic innovation, and research competitiveness across the UNC System. As Chancellor Lee Roberts of UNC-Chapel Hill, who recently sat with you on the Board of Governors, stated himself, “Our international students [at UNC Chapel Hill] make up 10% of

our student body. They are crucial to the health, well-being and success of the Carolina community. We want them to feel supported, welcomed and encouraged.”

Here are our three major points of concern:

1. Lack of Transparency and Professional Communication
 - The timing and communication surrounding this decision have been inconsiderate to the affected student population. According to multiple International Student and Scholar Offices (ISSOs) across other UNC system campuses, neither they nor system Student Health Centers were involved in the decision-making process, and they only received information after the policy was finalized.
 - The absence of advance notice, open dialogue or clear rationale has left international students anxious, confused and uncertain about how to plan financially for upcoming semesters. Such a major policy shift should have been preceded by consultation with student governments, ISSOs and faculty leadership, as well as a transparent rollout of rationale and implementation timelines.
2. Financial Impact and Unequal Treatment

This policy disproportionately harms international students who already face significant financial and structural barriers:

 - At UNC Charlotte, international Graduate Assistants (GAs) still pay over \$20,000 per year in tuition, as the university does not cover out-of-state tuition for master's-level GAs—a policy uncommon among peer institutions.
 - Students without assistantships face even higher costs, paying over \$26,000 per year, including insurance.
 - Student Blue premiums currently range from \$1,396 to \$1,803 per semester for graduate students, and \$1,226 to \$1,583 for undergraduates.
 - In contrast, international students using comparable private insurance, such as the ISO Silver Plan, pay approximately \$31-60 per month, a difference of \$1,200 to \$1,800 per semester in savings.
 - Beyond cost, coverage differences also matter: for example, the Student Blue emergency room copay is \$500, not including additional hospital or provider charges.

For many international students, waivers allowing the use of affordable, reliable external insurance plans are not simply a matter of preference—they are a financial necessity that enables them to continue studying in the U.S. Losing that option will place a substantial, and for some

insurmountable, financial strain on this population.

Beyond the personal hardship this creates, the broader implications are significant. By making education less financially accessible and fostering a perception that international students are unwelcome or undervalued, the UNC System risks a measurable decline in international student enrollment. In turn, this would lead to a loss of tuition revenue and diminish the rich cultural and academic diversity that strengthens UNC campuses.

It is also important to note that health insurance premiums are expected to increase significantly in the coming year due to federal and state-level changes. This will further amplify the disproportionate financial impact on international students. In the long term, such unaffordable policy changes risk reducing the number of international students enrolling in UNC System schools, as they may choose institutions with more equitable and financially sustainable options.

While this policy disproportionately affects international students, it will also have indirect consequences for domestic students and the broader academic community. Declining international enrollment may weaken existing exchange programs and partnerships that many campuses rely on to send domestic students abroad. With international exchange participation already declining due to rising costs, administrative hurdles and safety concerns, this policy may further inhibit opportunities for cultural exchange and global engagement that enrich the UNC System as a whole.

3. The decision also raises concerns about proportional fairness and institutional autonomy.
 - If part of the UNC System's rationale for restricting waivers is related to stabilizing insurance costs or spreading risk, the policy should be applied consistently across all students—not selectively toward international students.
 - International students already pay higher tuition rates, have limited access to financial aid and are legally restricted in their work options. Many contribute to the North Carolina economy through taxes, yet remain ineligible for in-state tuition. This new insurance mandate, without flexibility, compounds those financial pressures.
 - We recognize the value of reliable, standardized healthcare coverage. However, the blanket removal of waivers unfairly penalizes students who already meet established coverage standards through approved private providers.

We Call for Immediate Action

We urge the UNC System Administration to:

1. Reconsider the mandatory nature of this policy and restore meaningful waiver options for international students who can demonstrate comparable health insurance coverage—particularly for Spring 2026, as implementing this mid-academic year would cause unnecessary financial and administrative hardship.
2. Reevaluate this policy during the upcoming bidding process for a new UNC System-wide health insurance provider, ensuring that international student needs, campus autonomy and financial feasibility are taken into account.
3. Clarify and publish insurance adequacy requirements so that international students can make informed decisions about coverage and ensure compliance without financial strain.
4. Provide transparency about the long-term affordability plan, including specific data on how increased enrollment in Student Blue is expected to lower costs, and why only international students are being required to participate.
5. Engage directly with campus leaders and international student representatives before finalizing or implementing future policy changes.
6. Provide a guidance for UNC System Universities to lessen the impact of this policy on international students.
7. Implement financial assistance options for those most affected, particularly students with Graduate Assistantships that do not cover full tuition or insurance cost and long-term North Carolina residents.

The lack of clear communication and consultation has created widespread frustration and mistrust across campuses. We believe the UNC System can and should do better—by prioritizing fairness, inclusion and transparency in its policymaking.

The UNC System has long prided itself on its global outlook and academic excellence. Maintaining that standard requires listening to those most impacted by its policies. We hope this letter serves as an opportunity for reflection and collaboration to ensure international students are treated with the fairness and respect they deserve.

Sincerely,
S.L. Ivey

2025-2026 Graduate & Professional Student Government | President

Opinion: Be pretentious

Hobart Jones | Staff Writer

Most of us have encountered a certain type of character during our schooling career. The type of person who asks completely off-topic questions that have nothing to do with class. The type of person who tries to have a battle of wits with the professor. The easiest way to describe these annoying creatures is with one word: pretentious.

The standard definition of the word pretentious is as follows: “attempting to impress by affecting greater importance, talent, culture, etc., than is actually possessed.” By that definition, a pretentious person is someone snobbish, acting bigger than their britches. No one wants to be around pretentious people nor themselves be labeled as pretentious.

It insists upon itself

One of the most common fields liable to the criticism of being pretentious is that of the arts. Whether it's an abstract painting or a three-hour dramatic movie, art and pretentiousness seem to be intertwined.

In a viral clip from the show “Family Guy,” the main character, Peter Griffin, claims that he dislikes Francis Ford Coppola's renowned film “The Godfather.” When pressed on his reasoning, Peter eventually says the phrase, “It insists upon itself.”

There is a purpose in art that is created; every single piece of art was made for a reason. Whether it was to entertain, educate or a million other reasons, there is a purpose. These purposes are a part of what provides the deeper meaning to seemingly shallow works.

This criticism is usually levied when the piece of art is not able to connect with the audience members. There is nothing wrong with disliking something someone made, no matter how acclaimed. However, at a certain point, the criticism ceases to be about what the art says, but rather that it is trying to say anything at all.

Why are the curtains blue?

For many of us throughout our time in school, we have been tasked with literary analysis. Trying to find the deeper meaning in stories, why an author wrote what they wrote. For a lot, the answer is: who cares?

A blog post by Robyn Hill details this succinctly: “I despise looking for meaning. Maybe the author didn't have a deeper meaning. Maybe the blue curtains really are just blue because that's what she was thinking of at the time,” Hill wrote.

Is it necessarily wrong not to care what an author might be trying to convey in their writing, one might ask? Yes, dear reader, it is indeed. It is an important part of literature and, by extension, all of art to engage with the intended purpose and message of the work.

Anti-intellectualism

Teens are reading less than ever before. Phones and social media are the common boogymen to blame. While they certainly have made things worse, this has been a trend since the 1990s. Alongside reading, literacy skills are declining as well.

These sentiments of a lack of interest in art's deeper meaning have not appeared out of nowhere. This rise in anti-intellectualism has been nurtured for decades. Former President Ronald Reagan built his first campaign in 1966 for governor of California on demagoguing higher education for indoctrinating the California youth.

Almost 60 years have passed since then, and the attacks continue. With COVID-19 hampering a generation of schoolkids and the federal government's ongoing attacks on public schools and education, the lack of interest in literary analysis and engaging in art is a symptom of decades of damage to education.

To strive

The word pretentious ties back to this larger trend. There are plenty of cases where a person is reversing the term; there are many that are not. The word is thrown around now to label something unlikely, someone trying to achieve something. A musician trying to redefine their genre or a movie director experimenting with all conventions of the art form. If it does not land, it is pretentious. If there are hiccups along the way, it is pretentious. Blah blah blah, “I did not like it, it's pretentious.”

“On one hand, you're aspiring to really do something and on the other hand you're not allowed to be pretentious.”

Art has been the medium most used as an example, but this applies to anything in life. If you go and give something in this nonchalant pandemic, you must be ready for backlash.

What is the fix to the current pandemic affecting the arts and our culture at large? How do we tear down these self-imposed limits? The best fix, of course, is to...

Be pretentious

“And finally you say ‘fuck it!’ I don't care if I'm pretentious or not pretentious.”

The un-cited quotes laced throughout this article all come from a clip of the previously mentioned director of “The Godfather” franchise, Francis Ford Coppola. They come from the documentary “Hearts of Darkness.”

The documentary details the process of Coppola making, what some consider (including me), one of the greatest films of all time, “Apocalypse Now.” The movie is set in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and was filmed over the course of several months in the jungles of the Philippines.

It's a film that shoots for the stars and, like many Coppola movies, is labeled by detractors as pretentious. Do not be afraid to be dissed when you put your all in something. The only true way to do something great is by first aiming at such a target.



Rachael Nguyen/Niner Times

Self-described ‘artist’ shares immersive Day of the Dead experience with students

Wes Packham | Writing Managing Editor

Next to a brightly painted art truck parked outside Storrs Hall on Oct. 31 stood Rosalia Torres-Weiner, donning skeletal face paint and a traditional floral dress.

“My name is Rosalia Torres-Weiner, and I call myself an artist because I have combined my activism with my art,” Torres-Weiner said.

She was there to bring her art truck to cam-

pus, after an invitation from Professor of Physical Theatre Carlos Cruz and Emily Gunzburger Makaš, co-director of the Center for Community, Heritage, and the Arts (CHArt). The truck gave an immersive experience meant to share the culture and experiences of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) with students on campus.

The experience

Visitors were greeted with the smell of copal, a burning aromatic tree resin, and a taste of pan de muerto, a type of sweet bread eaten during the Day of the Dead, before entering the truck for a four-minute film detailing the celebration.

“You’ll smell the copal, you’ll eat the bread, the food, you’ll hear the music.

That’s what I wanted to transmit with this project,” Torres-Weiner said.

Inside the truck was an altar decorated with the four essential elements that make up an ofrenda. Candles represent fire, drinks represent water, food and flowers represent earth, and papel picado, a Mexican decorative craft made of tissue paper, represents wind.

The film guided listeners through the traditional celebrations of Day of the Dead, describing the streets and homes of Mexico as filled with thousands of candles, colorful papel picado and sugar skulls. It invited anyone to celebrate the Day of the Dead, stressing that the celebration is for anyone who wants to welcome and remember their loved ones who have passed, describing the holiday as being about “love and memory.”

Professors Cruz and Makaš, who were already familiar with Torres-Weiner’s work, thought it would be a great opportunity to bring to campus, both for students to learn more and to help further CHArt’s mission of blending the arts with community and heritage.

“We thought, ‘Hey, can you bring that to campus?’ and she said, ‘I can, and also I have this exhibit about Day of the Dead.’ I think it was a nice mix between uplifting Latinx heritage in the tail end of Latinx Heritage Month,” Cruz said.

The artist behind it

As a commercial artist of over 20 years, Torres-Weiner is a muralist, painter and activist. While she primarily worked for

higher-profile clients throughout the early 2000s, painting murals for NASCAR drivers and other wealthy individuals in Charlotte, when she found herself with no job during the 2008 financial crisis, she wanted to shift her focus towards her local Latino community.

“I saw families being separated by deportations, kids being left behind. This is when I redirected my art from commercial art to activism,” Torres-Weiner said. “Ever since I’ve been doing that, my work is based on immigration and social justice, access to education, and I basically document our Latino stories through art.”

She’s used these murals to connect more deeply with her culture, tell the stories of Latino people in Charlotte, share Mexico’s culture and bring her message to the Queen City.

Transitioning to the multimedia format from murals represents new territory for Torres-Weiner. She recalls a time when she had a residency at the McColl Center in Charlotte, regularly creating new pieces of work she wanted to share with others.

“I thought my people would come, my Latino people, and I’m talking about working people, and they didn’t come. So I thought, what about if I come to them? So I got my truck, an art truck, and I bring the art truck to their apartment, to laundromats, and I offer art workshops for free,” Torres-Weiner said.

Her central message is to continue her mission combining art and activism. Living in an ever-evolving world, Torres-Weiner adapts to changes in technology and uses it to strengthen her activism and cultural education in her work.

“I live in the intersection of technology and art. My husband is in technology, my son is in technology, so when I have a crazy idea, I know that I can come with them, they can make it happen,” Torres-Weiner said.

Over the years, Torres-Weiner has had her work displayed in various exhibits, including the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum, and has been exhibited in venues such as the Mint Museum and the Mexican Cultural Institute at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C.

The experience on campus let Torres-Weiner connect with students, and help inspire Gunzburger Makaš to create a similar concept herself as part of CHArt.

“In our research center, we’re developing our own sort of mobile outreach studio that is a work in progress,” Gunzburger Makaš said. “It’s just a shell right now, but we’re also using this as an opportunity to brainstorm what we can do with our truck that we’re still outfitting.”



Wes Packham/Niner Times