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# UNMASKED

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# NINERTIMES

Student-driven news since 1947

April 15, 2026



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Cover photo: Emmanuel Perkins  
Cover layout by Ava Weaver  
Interior layouts by Ava Weaver, Megan Khor, Ali Thiam & Aisha Karim

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Madison Lewis  
mktdirector@charlotte.edu

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Kelly Merges MEDIA ADVISER  
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Mareska Chettiar/Niner Times

## UNC Charlotte events calendar

**Women's Soccer v. South Carolina**  
April 18, 1 p.m.  
Jen Gaber Field

**Track and Field Charlotte Invitational**  
April 24 - 25  
Irwin Belk Track and Field Center

**Gallery Reception: BFA Graphic Design**  
April 21, 6 - 8 p.m.  
Storrs, Lamba Gallery

**2026 CoAAPalooza**  
April 23, 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.  
Arts Quad

**Last day of classes**  
April 29

**Jazz Ensemble and Jazz Combos**  
April 21, 7:30 p.m.  
Robinson Hall, Anne R. Belk Theater

## Niner's Comics: Dance Battle

Bryan Chen | Staff Illustrator



## NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

# Happiness is a butterfly

Emsley Jackson | Opinion Editor

I've been seeing a lot of butterflies recently. These beautiful creatures have found me while out walking, eating lunch near a sunny window, and even sitting at a red light. Every time I see one, thoughts of "What a great mascot for change in spring," and concurrently, "Wow, I love butterflies," solidify in my mind.

Spring is a natural season of movement where big steps are taken. Sometimes these things fall into place and gracefully float by your window. My class schedule next semester fits like a glove. I got everything I wanted. Other

times these moves are awkward or downright scary. Last week, I was questioned very intensely about my future, and every "I don't know" I threw on the pile made the pressure of the conversation worse. What do I know?

Returning home from that world-shattering conversation, I looked around my bedroom. There were butterflies everywhere. I have butterflies depicted in art on my walls, as the pattern on my pencil pouch, on the decorative hook that holds my keys, even as the night-light in my bathroom. So what I do know is

that I may not know everything right now, but I don't need to. Neither do you. You'll figure it out, and the next season will smooth everything out, whether you've found the answers or not.

Who we are and what we love never leaves us, and never strays so far that we can't find it again. Sometimes you just need a reminder. As they say, "Happiness is a butterfly, which when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you."

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@ninertimes.com

# Niner Nation Gives raises over \$5 million, boosting student organizations and campus programs

Sofia DiStefano | News Editor

This year's Niner Nation Gives saw campus come alive, with student organization tabling and University emails buzzing with requests for donations. The effort resulted in \$5 million in total donations.

The University's annual giving campaign first launched in 2015, as a single-day event aimed at rallying alumni, faculty, students and supporters.

That inaugural effort brought in \$132,456 from 715 donors.

By 2018, donations had reached \$265,244, more than doubling the original total. Participation also grew, with donor counts rising from hundreds into the thousands.

Still, the most dramatic shift came in 2019 and 2020, when contributions surged from \$681,728 to more than \$2 million in just one year, a 201% increase.

Since then, the growth has continued at a rapid pace. In 2022, Niner Nation Gives brought in \$2.6 million, followed by \$3.18 million in 2023, \$4.62 million in 2024 and \$4.96 million in 2025. The most recent campaign in 2026 set a new record, raising \$5,283,362 from 7,634 individual donations.

2026's total represents a 4,000% increase in donations compared to 2015.

Participation has mirrored that upward trend. According to the University, donor numbers have steadily increased from 715 in 2015 to more than 7,000 in 2026.

The campaign itself has also evolved, expanding from a 24-hour event into a 49-hour fundraising push designed to maximize attention and giving opportunities.

## Distribution of donations

Funds raised during Niner Nation Gives are distributed across a wide range of programs, departments and initiatives.

Each college within the University receives support, along with student organizations, scholarships, research initiatives and campus resources.

Donors can designate where their contributions go, selecting from hundreds of participating groups listed on the campaign's website.

In 2026, several donors made contributions to match or multiply donations for certain participating programs/departments.

During the 2026 Niner Nation Gives, which took place April 1 - 2, alumnus Gene Johnson '73 generously matched each donation made to a group, multiplying it by three.

As a result of the 2026 Niner Nation Gives, more than 300 areas across campus benefited from the event. These include academic departments, student support services, Greek Life, sport club programs, special initiatives.

Some funds are directed toward scholarships that help offset tuition costs, while others support experiential learning opportunities such as internships, study abroad programs or research projects.

## Looking into the specifics

There are seven different scholarships from alumni engagement alone that receive funding during Niner Nation Gives.

Those scholarships include:

- 49er Alumni Campus Employee Scholarship Fund
- Alumni Book Scholarship Fund
- Bank of America Scholarship Fund
- Dr. Yvette M. Huet Sí Se Puede Scholarship
- Black Alumni Chapter Scholarship
- Betty M. Stancil Scholarship
- 49er Legacy Family Scholarship Fund

Other groups involved that receive significant amounts of donations made include:

- J. Murrey Atkins Library
- Belk College of Business
- Cato College of Education
- Charlotte Athletics
- College of Arts + Architecture
- College of Computing and Informatics
- College of Health and Human Services
- College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences
- Honors College
- Klein College of Science
- Levine Scholars Program
- Charlotte Global School of Professional Studies
- Division of Student Affairs
- The Graduate School
- William States Lee College of Engineering

During the 2026 Niner Nation Gives,

Charlotte 49er Athletics raised over \$2.2 million from 1,897 donations. Among individual teams, Track & Field/Cross Country led in donations, receiving a \$5,000 bonus from Gene and Vickie Johnson.

Among the donor affiliation board, alumni were the leading donors, with 1,079 donors during the 2026 Niner Nation Gives.

Following alumni were faculty and staff at 1,063 donors, current students with 1,058 donors, friends with 463 donors, parents of students with 313 donors, alumni campus employees with 125 donors and former student athletes with 115 donors.

In an effort to incentivize participation, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Jennifer Troyer awarded bonus funding to the three campus areas that saw the largest percentage growth in giving compared to last year.

The College of Computing and Informatics led the way with a 69.61% increase, earning the top prize of \$2,500 after surpassing its goal with 173 contributions.

University College & Undergraduate Education followed with a 61.70% increase, receiving \$1,500, while the College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences secured third place with a 52.11% increase and a \$1,000 award.

## Student participation and perceptions

Student organizations are also frequent beneficiaries, and for many, the impact goes beyond just funding.

Among all student organizations, Mock Trial led with over 107 donations, earning additional funds for earning first place. Charlotte Lifters Club and the American Medical Women's Association rounded out the top three with 89 and 74 gifts respectively.

Third-year student Jewett Benjamin-Bullock participated in tabling for Niner Nation Gives and described the experience as both engaging and beneficial for outreach.

"My experience tabling for [Niner Nation Gives] was a lot of fun," Benjamin-Bullock said. "It was amazing getting to represent my club, Lady Lifters, while also getting to meet so many new people. It was my first year experiencing it, and I'm excited for the future."

Bullock added that while the event can be valuable for visibility and recruitment, there is still some uncertainty about how donations are distributed.

"I do feel like they don't give an in-detail explanation," Benjamin-Bullock said. "I feel as if you're not a sports officer, you're not 100% sure where the money goes. You just know you're donating money to a sports club or club on campus."

Despite those concerns, she emphasized that the campaign still provides tangible benefits to student organizations.

"I feel like it really does help my student org on campus," Benjamin-Bullock said. "Even if we aren't able to get a lot of money from people, we do get a lot of exposure on campus and are able to recruit more students for our club."

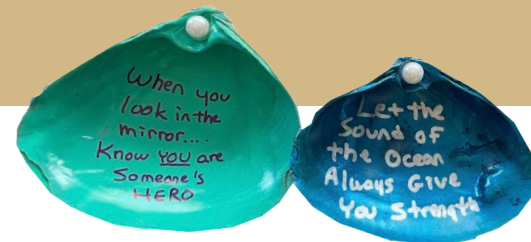




# More time for Jerry Lecomte

Davis Cuffe | Editor-in-Chief

Courtesy of Judy Lecomte



People don't rush when they talk about Jerry Lecomte.

They slow down, think a bit and often, they smile.

Speaking from his office on the second floor of UNC Charlotte's police station, Police Chief Jeffrey Baker took a moment to glance down at a notepad on his desk before talking about Lecomte.

"I want to make sure I'm not missing anything because I wrote down a few things ... he is a gentleman, kind-hearted, understands the importance of protecting our students first and providing the highest levels of outreach. He exudes that," Baker said. "He helps anybody."

## Slowing down

Baker joined UNC Charlotte's police force

in 2009, two years after Lecomte was hired as a police officer.

In 2011, Lecomte was promoted to community policing coordinator, where he focused on campus outreach. Baker says he wanted Lecomte in the role almost as soon as he met him.

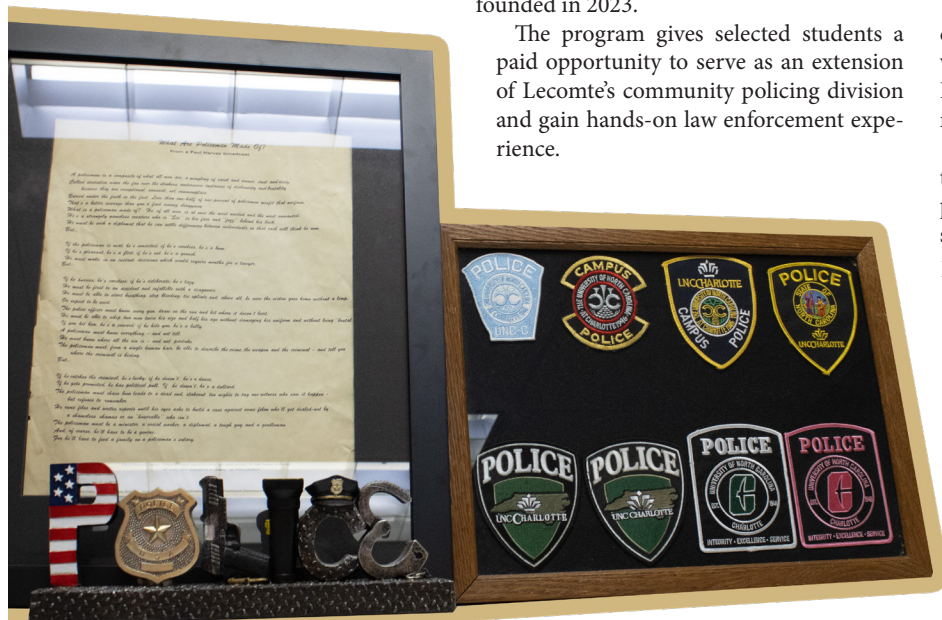
Lecomte's first assignment as community policing coordinator was to station himself at the information desk in the Popp-Martin Student Union, which had just opened in 2009. Initially, staff were worried about the optics of an armed police officer in their shiny new student hub.

"Within about two or three years, those concerns were gone," Baker said. "They loved Jerry."

Lecomte no longer hangs out at the student union; now, his days are different.

He has more of a hand in oversight; setting up events, planning programming and helping out with the Student Ranger Program he founded in 2023.

The program gives selected students a paid opportunity to serve as an extension of Lecomte's community policing division and gain hands-on law enforcement experience.



"It's given me a good first step," fourth-year and student ranger Jordan Phillips said regarding his experience with the program. "I had a passion for law enforcement, but didn't really know where to get started. This has been that jumping off point for me."

Student rangers like Phillips could have easily earned the same reputation that the student hall monitors in your elementary school might have: nosy, entitled, annoying. Phillips said he's sure those feelings still exist for some students, but he's seen campus take well to his presence and that of other student rangers.

"Compared to going to a cop, you probably go to someone who looks like you," Phillips said. "Like 'yeah, there's something that's going on. Let me go to this guy; he looks like he would be in my class.'"

While working under Lecomte as a ranger, Phillips has formed a relationship with the sergeant.

"He really seemed to care. He asked me questions about how my family was doing, what was going on in my life, schoolwork," Phillips said. "Eventually, I was like, 'This is more than a boss.'"

For Baker, Phillips and campus police, the ranger program has been a success. The program has created a rare opportunity for students, worked to better support campus police and helped bridge the gap between student and cop.

But could it be better? The success came while the program's founder, Lecomte, was limited. The success came while Lecomte was fighting cancer.

## Doctors and diagnoses

In September of 2019, four years before the ranger program was established, Lecomte began experiencing some health issues. Lecomte was still relatively young; but after his health

worsened, he went in and got looked at by a doctor.

The doctor's check revealed a small mass in Lecomte's body. Lecomte had stage three cancer.

Right away, Lecomte started on radiation treatments. In January, Lecomte underwent surgery to remove the mass and missed almost a full year's work to recover from the surgery, returning in September of 2020.

Treatment and recovery were difficult — as was being away from his work, but after a nearly year-long battle, doctors declared victory. Scans were done, surgeons had given their opinions and Lecomte was told he was cancer-free.

Months after he was determined free from the disease that had taken a year of his life, Lecomte's doctors told him they were wrong. In December of 2020, Lecomte was told the cancer had spread to his liver and had progressed to stage four.

"It's like you get an A on an exam, and you see a C," Lecomte said. "But the fact I'm still here in 2026 to complain about it, I feel pretty good about it."

A C isn't something you pin on your fridge, but it's still a passing grade. Lecomte's diagnosis was much more grim.

At stage four, liver cancer can spread to your blood, bones and lungs and is virtually incurable. Doctors gave Lecomte two years to live with treatment.

For the past six years, Lecomte has continued treatment. He's had radioactive beads in his veins, done multiple rounds of radiation therapy and taken chemotherapy pills that caused his skin to peel. In February, he began a new clinical trial that's shown promising results in other countries.

"I think my new identity, is going to be to grow fur and a short, stubby tail with pointed ears — kind of like a guinea pig," Lecomte joked.

During treatments, Lecomte has continued to come into work. Six years after doctors gave Lecomte two years to live, you can still catch him tabling on campus and working at the police department.

"I mean, I don't want to abuse a word like 'saint,' but you almost wonder; is that what a saint looks like?" Baker said regarding Lecomte's continued work.

### 'A hell of a guy'

During treatment, Lecomte continues to find ways to help others. While walking on the beach with his wife, Judy, Lecomte would stop to pick up shells and write encouraging messages on them to later give to others receiving treatment.

"The patients there loved them, because it was a little piece of something that you could hold in your hand and read it over and over again," Judy said.

Judy said she first saw Lecomte while sitting with a friend, flipping through her friend's wedding album. After pointing out the cute guy in the album to her friend, plans were made for Judy and Lecomte to meet.

Unbeknownst to Judy until after the fact, she and Lecomte would bowl at the same alley later that week. While bowling, Judy caught Lecomte's eye and he asked a friend about her but didn't approach her. Plans for the two to meet were formalized.

Their first date occurred on Feb. 24, 1998. During dinner, Judy recalls, Lecomte accidentally shot lemon juice into his own eye.

"I tried not to laugh. I even tried to look away, but I just started laughing," Judy said. "And the fact that he laughed with me, and he didn't get upset, told me a lot about him. It told me that he was a good person, that he could laugh at himself and didn't take things seriously, and that meant a lot to me."

The two got married in 2001 and haven't grown apart since that fateful lemon shot in 1998.

Lecomte can get on Judy's nerves in the small, familiar ways that often come with being married. Lecomte swears he sees the number 1111 everywhere and said it didn't count when Judy set an alarm to tell Lecomte she had seen it. Sometimes Judy has to walk away from the full-fledged conversations Le-

comte gets into with strangers. But Judy says he makes her bad days good.

"He is the most incredible person I've ever met," Judy said. "I've had the honor to marry him, and I've had the honor to know him. He's just a hell of a guy."

### 35 years

When Lecomte met Judy 27 years ago, he was fairly early in his law enforcement career. He started his professional life in banking, where he worked in adjustment investigations. A merger early in his banking career turned Lecomte off of banking, and after a short search for something that could provide him with more consistency and opportunity to help people, he landed in law enforcement.

In 1992 and at age 22, Lecomte started in dispatch, where he said he had to take on situations "most people wouldn't go towards."

Three decades later, Lecomte is far removed from the technology he once described as almost primitive while taking 911 calls as a dispatcher in the 1990s. Now approaching his 35th year in law enforcement, he's spent time in his home state of New Jersey working in smaller police departments and will celebrate his 19th year with UNC Charlotte in 2026.

In 2012, Lecomte took home the Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service, one of the highest honors a state employee can receive.

"I still like going out, making a difference. I still like making contact with as many people as possible," Lecomte said. "The awards are amazing, many were completely unexpected, but going out and making those relationships helped tremendously."

To his family, the long career in law enforcement came as a surprise. Lecomte's father worked in banking, and the switch to a career that struggled to maintain a positive identity from one that ran in the family shocked some family members.

Unsurprised by the switch was his sister LaurieAnn, who Lecomte described as his "twin four years apart."

### Borrowed time

LaurieAnn says she was told that when

her mother was pregnant with her, Lecomte insisted he was getting a sister despite his mother's reminders that "it could be a boy too."

"He was so excited when they brought me home," LaurieAnn said.

Growing up, the two had a four year age gap, so they often didn't attend the same school, but Lecomte still looked after his little sister.

"When someone was bothering me at school, he would talk to them, not like he was gonna go down there and beat him up, but they'd have a conversation," LaurieAnn laughed.

As kids, LaurieAnn says the two were inseparable; they spent every day growing up in New Jersey seeing friends, riding bikes and fishing. Together, they took on the renovation of several cars, including a 1950 Studebaker with a fancy wood-panel bed.

Time together isn't guaranteed between LaurieAnn and Lecomte as it was before Lecomte's diagnosis.

When asked how much time doctors had given him in February, Lecomte only answered "not much," so the two have made the most of whatever time remains. LaurieAnn still lives in New Jersey but says she's made "way more" trips down to North Carolina to see her brother. When she visits, she says the two spend time recounting old stories to each other on Lecomte's back patio.

"It just brings the memories more into the forefront, so that I have them when the time does come," LaurieAnn said. "But we still have a blast when we're together, it's almost as if the cancer is not there."

### One thing

While interviewing Lecomte's family, friends and coworkers, I asked them to tell me one thing campus should know about Lecomte. Each time I asked this question, I was met with the familiar pause people take when making intentional, sincere comments about Lecomte.

Some advertised Lecomte as a resource and spoke highly of his commitment to service. Others talked about his character, how great he was in conversation and how caring Lecomte was — even to complete strangers.

But what should Lecomte know about campus? After everything he'd given me — his time, his trust and his story it felt like I should be able to give something back.

The second time I interviewed Lecomte, he seemed to be in high spirits. He talked to me about the new class of student rangers and the weekend prior, when he went out to the Carolina Pickers Festival, where he'd picked up an old police badge while looking through antiques.

When we'd first interviewed a few weeks earlier, he'd just started his clinical trial, and now I was curious how the new treatment had been going.

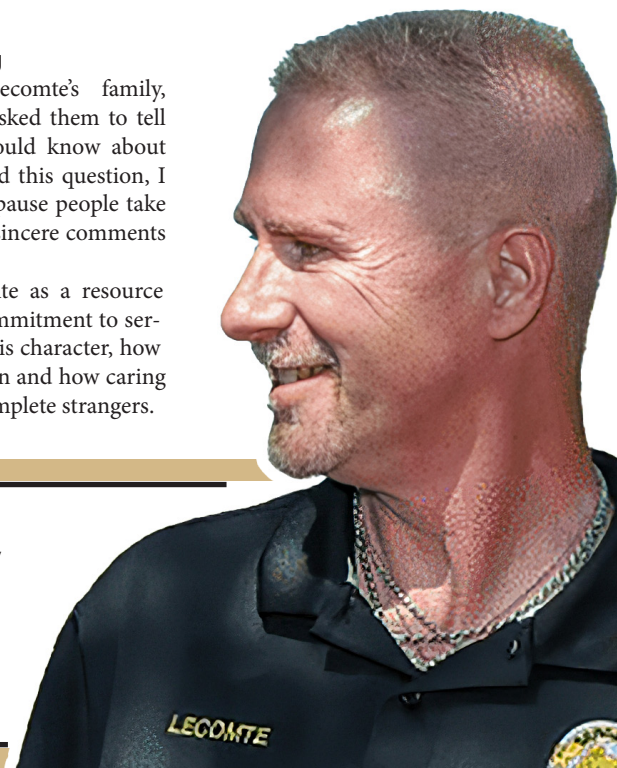
"So far so good," Lecomte said. "I don't want to let the cat out of the bag too soon, because I haven't told a lot of people anything yet. But I've just gotten some results."

Lecomte wouldn't say more, and I didn't pressure him for any further answer. It wasn't exactly clear to me what results Lecomte had received. But I had hope; if anyone deserved a miracle cure or, at the very least, more time, I thought it would be him.

Just like I'm unsure of what Lecomte's results were, I don't know if I can tell Lecomte anything new about campus. He's been here far longer than I have and seems to have a positive relationship with every member of the University.

What I do know is that campus is rooting for him. 2027 would mark 20 years of Lecomte working at UNC Charlotte. If we're lucky, we'll get to see him get 20 more after that.

Courtesy of UNC Charlotte



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**“The awards are amazing, many were completely unexpected, but going out and making those relationships helped tremendously.”**

- Jerry Lecomte

# UNC Charlotte to launch Albert School of Construction in fall 2026

Kyle Boucher | Asst. News Editor

Courtesy of UNC Charlotte & Niner Times File



Two Charlotte alumni, Craig Albert, '85, and Darla Albert, '83, donated funding to the University to establish the Albert School of Construction within the William States Lee College of Engineering.

This new program aims to teach students how to plan and lead construction projects, and will begin classes in the fall 2026 semester.

As the city of Charlotte continues to grow, the need for new infrastructure also rises. This program plans to address the growing needs and aims to connect students with construction-related job opportunities in the Charlotte area.

Students who take these courses will earn a Bachelor of Science in construction engineering, construction management or civil engineering technology.

There will also be a graduate program where students can get a master's degree in construction and facilities engineering.

"I'm glad to hear that UNC Charlotte is expanding their options for engineering and construction, and I'm excited to see what kind of opportunities this will open up," Gabriel Perry, a first-year mechanical engineering student, said.

## The Albert School of Construction

Once established, the Albert School of Construction will be North Carolina's first integrated school of construction and one of only a select few in the nation.

Albert School of Construction was founded by Craig Albert, president and chief operating officer of Bechtel Group, Inc., one of the largest engineering and construction companies in the United States.

Albert graduated from Charlotte in 1985 with a bachelor of science in mechanical en-

gineering and worked at several engineering companies, such as Westinghouse Electric Corporation, before joining Bechtel.

His desire to start the Albert School of Construction was because he felt there was a shortage of engineers in the construction industry.

"Charlotte is a growing region with a real 'can-do' culture," Albert said. "That's something I remember from my time as a student here. It's a place where people want to achieve something and prove something. That mindset is exactly what the construction industry needs."

He hopes to create opportunities for students to explore more specific disciplines of engineering.

## Benefits for students

The Albert School of Construction will combine engineering, business and data science to create an academic program that equips students with everything they need to succeed in construction engineering and management.

Students will learn how to run a construction project from start to finish, while learning many aspects of the construction industry, such as supply chain management and running a construction business.

Linguang Song will be the executive director of the Albert School of Construction. Previously, he worked as a department chair of engineering technology and construction management.

There will be a construction field lab, where students will learn construction engineering in realistic conditions.

The curriculum for the new school has been made in partnership with industry professionals to create a course catalog that



accurately reflects the skills needed in the construction industry.

## A unique program

Since the news broke, Charlotte has clarified what distinguishes the school of construction from civil engineering.

The William States Lee College of Engineering defines civil engineering as "planning and managing infrastructure projects while safeguarding natural environments and public welfare."

However, construction engineering is defined as "[integrating] civil engineering fundamentals with construction management."

The key difference between civil and construction engineering is that civil engineering focuses more on the design and theo-

retical aspects of building infrastructure, whereas construction engineering leans more towards the physical, on-site implementation of engineering in addition to site management and operations.

The construction engineering program also claims to focus more on the full life cycle of a project than on specific phases, unlike other engineering disciplines.

For example, civil engineering mainly occurs in the initial stages of a construction project, during the design and planning phase. But as the project progresses, the influence of civil engineers decreases.

Overall, the Albert School of Construction will introduce new classes and opportunities for engineering students seeking a more hands-on discipline.

# 'Cabaret': Behind the scenes of a student theater production

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer  
Ava Weaver/Niner Times

Any theater production takes a lot of work, but student productions take even more. As UNC Charlotte's College of Arts + Architecture (COA+A) gears up to perform the musical "Cabaret," the Niner Times took an inside look at how they'll do it.

## Getting started

Work on musical productions typically begins a year before the show is planned. COA+A only puts on musicals every other year because they require collaborations between the theater, music and dance departments. The theater department faculty come together and decide what shows they would like to perform and who will direct. Both students and faculty can submit suggestions, and the dean of COA+A, José Gámez, makes the final decision.

From there, set and costume design are planned, actors are cast, and the many months of rehearsals begin. At first, only specific scenes are rehearsed. The actors, director and choreographer work together to determine what is known as blocking, or what the actors are doing during a scene and where they will be positioned on stage. Then songs, lines and choreography are learned.

In the final weeks, the technical aspects of the production, such as lighting and sound, are tested to ensure everything runs smoothly. Costumes and wigs are put on, lines and songs run through one final time, and then it is time to share everyone's hard work with an audience.

## Diving deeper

Any theater production, whether a play or a musical, requires mountains of research and thought. What does the script reveal

about the atmosphere? Previous productions? How much creative freedom do the designers have? With "Cabaret" being a period piece, even more research is required.

"Cabaret" takes place primarily in a burlesque club in early 1930s Germany as the Nazis rise to power. It explores the use of art as both a tool of rebellion and denial in the face of oppression. Assistant professor of costume design Meredith Magoun started her design process by looking into popular artists of the time period and place. As "Cabaret" also explores queer culture in 1920s and 1930s Berlin, designers researched it as well.

"I do all this research, and then I apply that to what the characters need and ask for," Magoun said.

She draws the designs on her iPad and then gets the director's opinion. The set, lighting and sound designers go through a similar process. When they come to a consensus, the staff get to work bringing the designs to life.

## Putting the students first

There are many ways student theater productions differ from more professional ones like Broadway. There is a smaller budget and a wider experience level, but what sets student theater productions apart is their emphasis on learning.

"We have a list of shows that we think we should expose our students to," Magoun said.

As a professor, she always thinks about what would best help students learn while working on a production.

"[I'm] making sure I have projects that are challenging enough for them, that are good for building their portfolio and that kind of thing," Magoun said.

A student volunteering to help design and build costumes could have been sewing since

childhood, or looking for an excuse to learn finally. If they are majoring in dance, music or theater, then it's likely that they are looking to pursue the arts professionally.

Through firsthand experience offered by campus productions, students can decide whether theater is the path for them.

Balancing theater and college can be tough, but it is worth it to the students who take the leap.

## Student acting

"I just have to focus on all my school work throughout the day, and then just block it out of my mind through the night, so I'm not just stressing about it during rehearsals and vice versa," first-year Mimi Mollins said.

Mollins, a theater performance major, plays the female lead in "Cabaret," Sally Bowles.

To audition, she had to sing a one-minute cut of a song and perform a minute-long monologue. If an actor makes it past the first round of auditions, they are "called back" to perform more, usually songs and scenes from the show.

Unlike in the first round, callbacks are typically held with multiple actors at once, providing an opportunity to learn from each other.

"It was fun to watch other people play Sally in a different way than you would have thought to play it," Mollins said.

Mollins was familiar with "Cabaret" before auditioning. Her co-lead, third-year Ezra Devane, was not.

"It's definitely a very good show, but it's different than anything I've done before," Devane said. "I've done 'Legally Blonde' and 'Prince of Egypt' recently, which are both really big in terms of production numbers,

modern. But this is more of a golden age piece, an older musical."

Devane first heard about Charlotte's production of "Cabaret" from its director, Tod Kubo, with whom he was working in a regional production. Devane likes the story's timelessness and the questions it asks of both its characters and its audience.

"It's a story that can be represented not only by the community that it speaks in, but it can speak volumes for any communities today within the things that we're going through in the world," Devane said.

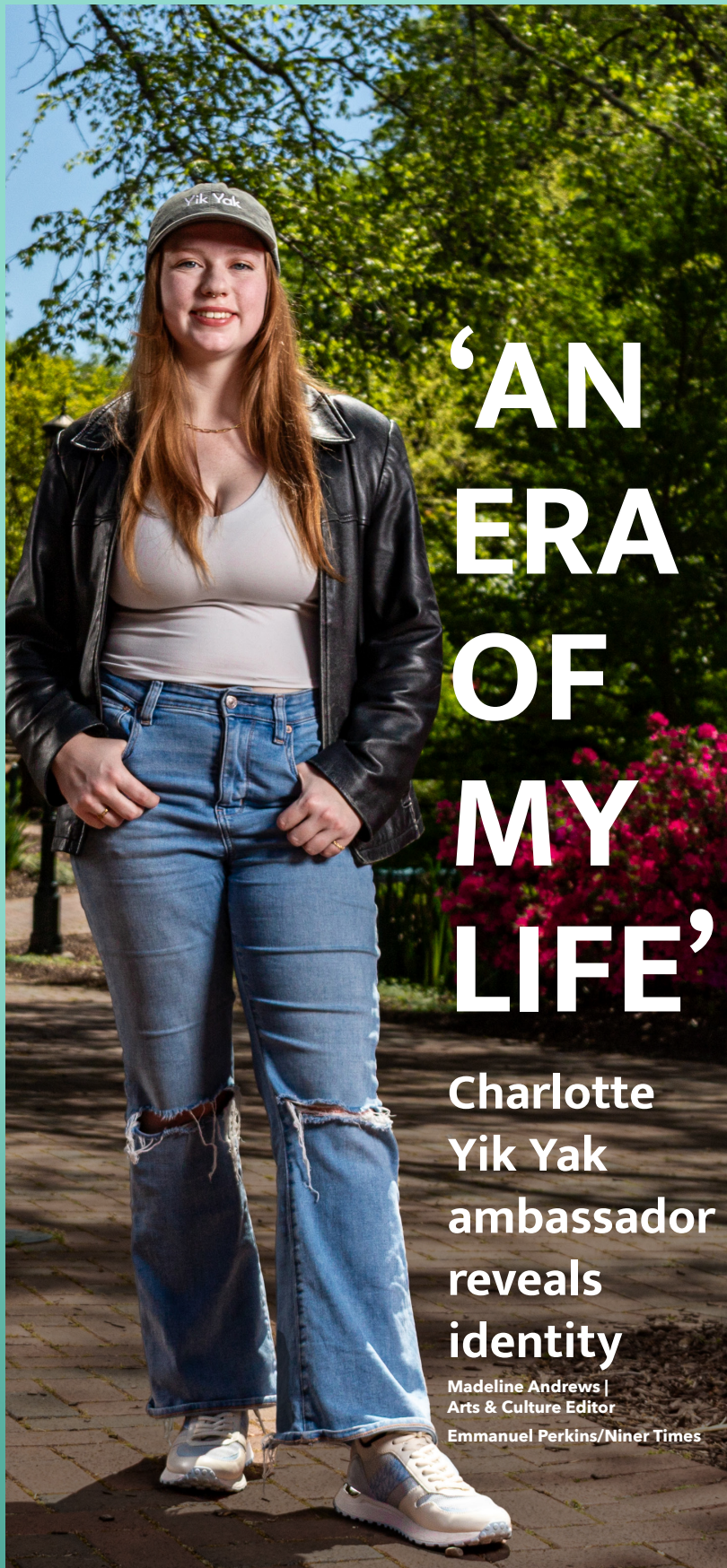
## Building community

Connecting with the community is perhaps the most important part of student theater. Seeing Broadway and touring shows can be expensive. Community theater productions like the ones put on by theater departments are often people's first exposure to theater.

Seeing these productions not only positively impacts students' futures but also those of the audience. They learn alongside them, feel the same emotions as the actors and hear stories they might not otherwise.

"People view theater as something that is almost childish in a way," Mollins said. "Like, people think, 'Oh, it's just people playing pretend on stage.' But, especially 'Cabaret,' it definitely focuses on real-life issues, and in a way that is entertaining to watch. I think that having students perform and things like that, it's also very educational."

To support "Cabaret" and future COA+A work, visit the events calendar to buy tickets. "Cabaret" is playing April 16-18 at 7:30 p.m. and April 18-19 at 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.



# 'AN ERA OF MY LIFE'

Charlotte Yik Yak ambassador reveals identity

Madeline Andrews | Arts & Culture Editor  
Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

Rage-baiters, herders, scooters and more can all be found on Yik Yak.

Yik Yak is an app that allows college students to post within a five-mile radius of their school, with separate threads for universities around the country.

Since 2021, popular posts from Yik Yak have been screenshotted and posted on @clt.yikyak on Instagram, which now boasts nearly 8,000 followers.

## @clt.yikyak: revealed

Alexa Abbott, a fourth-year student, has been the brain behind the Instagram account, and with only a few weeks before her graduation, she felt it was time to reveal her identity.

"This account has been a daily thing for about four and a half years now," Abbott shared.

She has seen it all in her years tracking the herd.

"Back in the day, a lot of the conversation was around frats and sororities or people figuring out campus life in general," Abbott explained.

Due to the anonymity, anyone within five miles of the University can post anything within the terms of service on the site.

"That's one thing that we've noticed on our end at Yik Yak: people are searching for connection. That's always been a huge theme," Abbott said.

Frequent Yik Yak users agree with Abbott that campus connection is the most important, even if it comes at a cost.

Due to the anonymity on the app, posters chose to be referred to by their YikYak username for safety.

"As a first-year, seeing stuff like the snowstorm this January and all of the posts about it was awesome and really illuminated how close our community is," user @nwjnz shared.

After Charlotte received the most snow in a single day since 1980, the Yik Yak was flooded with posts both before, during and after the blizzard.

Posters went from hypothesizing snow totals — typically low numbers after 45 years of consistent disappointment, to scheduled meet-

ups to sled down Craver Road.

"That's what I do it for," Abbott said. "Because when people were saying, 'Hey, we are meeting at 7 o'clock to sled down Craver,' I took that, I threw it on the Instagram story, and said, 'Let's make this a big thing.' It was awesome. We had done it in past years, and I was happy to be a part of people learning about that," Abbott said.

2024 brought the first snowfall in Charlotte in over 1,000 days, leaving thousands of students unaware of the University traditions when the elusive snowflake finally does appear.

Posts from January's 'snowmageddon' are still within the top posts of all time on the thread, even three months later.

## 'That one day on campus'

Yet one image, posted a whopping 144 weeks ago, still holds the crown for the most liked image post on the UNC Charlotte thread.

The image is known colloquially as "the guy on the scooter," with the caption "0 survival instincts."

The original image is of a student on an electric scooter, headed towards the clock tower in front of the College of Health and Human Services. Directly behind the student is a plainclothes police officer in a bulletproof vest, sprinting with a large rifle.

The image was posted during the Feb. 1 false shooting report incident, when a falling cabinet was reported as shots fired.

The image went viral in student circles, as the easily recognizable backdrop of the center campus made the stark image that much more meaningful to the students who experienced the event.

The virality of both the "guy on the scooter" image and student communication during the aftermath of



the day was heavily influenced by Yik Yak.

Abbott shared a folder in her Apple Photos titled “That one day on campus” dedicated to the posts and edits from Yik Yak surrounding the event.

“It had been so traumatic because people thought that there was going to be a tragedy here,” Abbott recalled.

The image was symbolically transformed and edited into countless formats — a black-and-white album cover with a parental advisory logo, Norm the Niner being chased by an armed goose and even the foreground of a Grand Theft Auto V playthrough.

Although seemingly humorous, the image served a larger purpose for the students on campus that day: to collectively process the fear that comes with a potential tragedy.

“I think Yik Yak is a great place to make those jokes and find camaraderie in this thing that you went through together with a bunch of strangers that you don’t know,” Abbott shared. “And people can share something a little more lighthearted to deal with this really heavy thing.”

### The price of anonymity

No matter how much connection is fostered, remaining anonymous is one of the most important pillars of the community, and sometimes, that anonymity is threatened.

User @diamond on YikYak is a third-year at UNC Charlotte and a self-proclaimed Yik Yak “schizo-poster.” She has been doxxed twice, meaning her address had been leaked on the app without her consent. Abbott reported the posts leaking Diamond’s

real identity, and works to prevent further incidents of doxxing.

For Diamond, the incidents didn’t deter her.

“I know, like campus Wi-Fi has [Yik Yak] blocked too, I think there is definitely a narrative being pushed that it’s so scary and dangerous to be on there, but it’s an anonymous app where people just make shit posts, it’s not that serious,” Diamond shared.

OneIt began blocking Yik Yak on University devices and the campus network beginning Aug. 2, 2024, in compliance with UNC System Regulation 1400.1[R].

UNC System President Peter Hans was behind the policy change, referring to Yik Yak as the “modern equivalent of scrawling cruel rumors on the bathroom wall,” adding that the site provides “simply no value to our campus communities in providing a taxpayer-paid platform for trolling.”

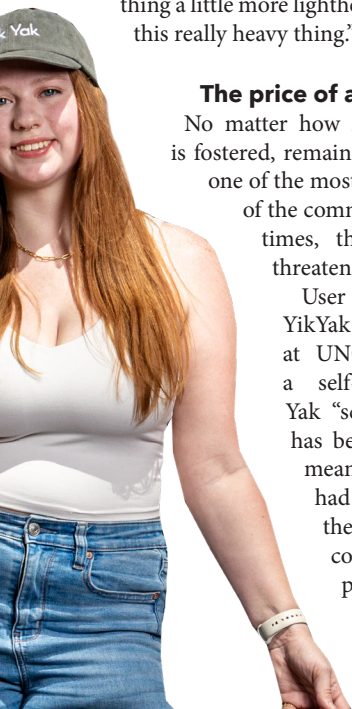
The statements were made during the Feb. 29, 2024, Board of Governors meeting, just weeks after the false shooting report incident.

For Abbott, Yik Yak has been the heart of her time at Charlotte, and the legacy she leaves behind.

In preparing for graduation, she considered leaving the Instagram page as a memorial of her time in college. That was until two weeks ago, when she decided on a close friend to become her successor.

“I am very excited for what is to come, and I hope everyone in the Yik Yak community is as well,” says user @luckycharm, a second-year and Abbott’s soon-to-be replacement.

“This has been a whole era of my life,” Abbott said. “I feel really lucky and thankful for all the people that I’ve met and all the friends that I’ve made.”



**C** Alexa Abbott

“This has been a whole era of my life. I feel really lucky and thankful for all the people that I’ve met and all the friends that I’ve made.”



# Either side of the vial: The suffering and saving of plasma donation

Madeline Andrews | Arts & Culture Editor



Although easy to ignore, the bulletin boards on campus are like a conversation through space and time. With each flyer, like another voice asking to be heard, it's easy to get lost among the club meeting times and roommate-wanted signs.

Yet hidden in the noise, there are quiet pleas for plasma.

Once you notice them, they feel inescapable, and it's not just bulletin boards. Advertisements encouraging plasma donation are plastered every-

where from the light rail to your Instagram feed, framed for college students, all promising cash.

As someone who has given blood away for free, I felt mildly cheated after seeing all of these offers for money.

However, there are key differences between whole blood and plasma that make one worth a sappy t-shirt and the other a guaranteed direct deposit.

## Plasma donation

The Cleveland Clinic describes plasma as the liquid component in blood, making up over half of its volume, carrying proteins, hormones and vitamins throughout the body.

It can be used in emergency transfusions, such as severe burns or hemorrhages, to treat

ongoing conditions like liver or clotting disorders, and can be developed into treatments to combat chronic illnesses.

So, plasma is a valuable resource that can be transferred from willing donors to suffering patients, and according to all of these ads, the donors get compensated.

Jean Crawford, a fourth-year student at Charlotte, started donating whole blood with her older sisters in high school.

"A group of us would get together as something fun to do, and we mainly did it for the free pizza and t-shirts," Crawford laughed.

It wasn't until her second year of college that she realized plasma donation paid real money.

The center she went to allowed biweekly donations, with a guaranteed \$40 for the first donation and \$45 for the second. The center even provides a company-issued debit card, an industry standard.

At her most frequent, Crawford was donating twice a week, and she began to notice a pattern.

"I think minus like two times, I was the only white person there. It was primarily minorities in their 30s and 40s, many of them in their work uniforms," Crawford said.

A '25 UNC Charlotte alumna, who chose to remain anonymous, noticed the same thing as a person of color herself when she began donating to fill the gap from her part-time job.

"The majority of the people in there donating are Black individuals; now granted, this is Charlotte, and most urban cities have a higher Black population as is, but Charlotte is also extremely diverse," she said. "So, for it to be majority Black people every single time I would go and donate, that kind of just rubs me the wrong way and puts systemic racism in a different view."

Both of their experiences align with local and national statistics, as research has found that donation centers tend to pop up in high-poverty areas with predominantly Black and Hispanic residents.

### Where the money goes

Those who donate are part of a growing class of working Americans who rely on the guaranteed cash flow from the centers. At a legal maximum of 104 donations per year, that's a potential of over \$4,000 annually.

Yet, the party making the most money

in the arrangement is the donation centers themselves.

The plasmapheresis business is a mysterious one.

There are 14 donation centers within Charlotte city limits alone, and hundreds nationwide. Business Insider valued the industry at a staggering \$24 billion in 2021.

The donation centers act as a middleman between the donors and the pharmaceutical companies that manufacture plasma-derived treatments like albumin and clotting factors.

The drugs are life-saving, yet some of the highest costs are associated with emergency care, with one dose of albumin costing between \$100 and \$1,000, magnitudes more than the amount donors are compensated.

There is no synthetic replacement for plasma, so the medication requires a constant human supply, and the promise of \$30-70 per donation keeps a desperate few coming back.

Although under-researched, there are potential health risks associated with frequent donation.

Tonya Cauble, BSN RN, is the director of nursing and resident healthcare for a retirement community in Brevard, North Carolina.

"[Plasma donation] is time-consuming, often 1.5 hours each time, with risk of needle bruising and scarring if someone does it a lot," Cauble explained. "It can also cause someone to become anemic from loss of proteins from repeated donations."

According to frequent donors, some people tolerate whole blood donation better than plasma donation, or vice versa.

"I've had reactions from donating blood, not plasma, because I didn't eat well enough beforehand, so I threw up and passed out. Twice," Crawford chuckled.

But to those on the other side of the vial, the people in life-threatening situations requiring donor blood to survive, the sacrifice is well worth it.

### The lives saved

Savannah Mirales, a former Charlotte student who withdrew in 2024, was expecting her first child in early May of this year.

During the last week of March, she woke up with severe preeclampsia and was rushed to the hospital. After a week of monitoring both Mirales and her baby, she went into labor six weeks early. The birth was successful, but a few hours postpar-

tum, she suddenly hemorrhaged 2400mls of blood in 10 minutes — over half of the blood in her body.

"I felt myself bleeding out; it soaked through the bedsheets and all over the floor," Mirales shared. "I genuinely thought I would never see my son again, that I would only have gotten to hold him for a few minutes."

Mirales' condition, postpartum hemorrhage, is the leading cause of maternal mortality in the U.S.

After rushing her into emergency surgery, four transfusions and several doses of albumin and clotting factors are ultimately what kept her alive.

When asked about how she feels about helping people, Crawford seemed hopeful.

"I'm pretty sure I've gotten an email before that was like 'congratulations, your plasma was used,' which is like 'okay great,'" Crawford said.

The total amount of plasma Crawford has donated is over 12 times the amount used in Mirales's transfusions, with enough left over for the plasma-derived medications that prevented Mirales from further blood loss.

"I am extremely grateful to the people who donated blood because that's what saved my life," Mirales said. "And now I get to have my little boy in my arms and watch him grow up."

“

**"I am extremely grateful to the people who donated blood because that's what saved my life. And now I get to have my little boy in my arms and watch him grow up."**

- Savannah Mirales



Skyler Nyutu/Niner Times

# How short-form media has reshaped users' time and thought

Shad Burton | Staff Writer

Short-form media has become an internet norm, with 4.65 billion people using social media. With highly accessible platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the 15-second video format has taken the internet by storm. The new age of media also comes with new concerns: addiction, attentiveness and productivity.

## The alluring addiction of short-form content

Social media platforms are designed to be addictive. Each video gives the user a quick boost of dopamine with relatable, funny and interesting moments in the span of a couple of seconds. While seemingly harmless at first, the constant stream of instant gratification keeps the user hooked thanks to the endless scroll feature.

Recently, Meta and YouTube were deemed liable in a class-action lawsuit by a Los Angeles jury over their short-form content platforms. KGM, the plaintiff, described the algorithm of both YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels as engineered to keep users hooked. Their algorithms use machine learning to gauge the engagement of a video, predicting how much traction it will get. Completion and rewatch rates are prioritized, as are the number of likes, shares and comments.

Short-form video algorithms target a viewer's interests; they are based on what a user interacts with and create a personalized content cycle. This way, it be-

comes more difficult to pull away from the platform and easier to indulge in it.

## How much time does short-form media consume

Research points out that users average 59 minutes to 95 minutes on TikTok alone. This is hundreds of videos a day. A frequent user of the app could be losing one to two months per year to short-form media.

The time spent endlessly scrolling on these platforms is significant, especially when factoring in other responsibilities like school and work.

Short sessions in the day add up quickly. Whether it's upon waking up, a check during a commute or while in bed, users often underestimate the time they're sacrificing. Even small check-ins add up over time.

The time we give up to social media takes away from time for other aspects of our lives. It is common to become sidetracked from a passion because of short-form media platforms. Instead of spending time with an enjoyable activity, many end up mindlessly scrolling. Since social media grants instant dopamine with no thought or work at all, activities can feel less appealing because they require genuine time and effort to achieve that satisfaction.

## The attack on attention span and critical thinking

Fast-paced, rapid-fire videos train people to crave impulsive pleasure-seeking with everything else we consume because of the easy access to entertainment and information. Many people now find it harder to focus on slower-paced content, such as novels and films. It's easier to skip ahead to the next scene of a movie or drop

a book instead of thinking through a complex storyline now. People seek an immediate reward, not an earned one.

Students may be unable to focus on homework and have difficulty retaining information from lectures. Media multitasking is the main culprit for poor cognitive performance. Since education has become dependent on technology, it is no surprise that adding another device to use unproductive short-form media platforms may impair memory, comprehension and focus.

Critical thinking skills may suffer too. Now, students have a difficult time processing and retaining information when faced with topics that require more in-depth research. Many students consume content through quick videos without taking the steps to research the topic further. These platforms make it easier to go with what is being given to users.

Opinions are for people to form independently. Instead, perspectives may be molded by videos less than 30 seconds long.

"[Students] have a lot of knowledge on very niche things. But, on the other side of that is the depth of knowledge, and achieving adaptive knowledge has become a little bit of a challenge," UNC Charlotte English instructor Brittany Olson said.

## Reclaiming the time and the mind

To overcome passive overconsumption, replace them with active hobbies. Training the brain involves activities that require you to work for the reward — things like reading, writing or drawing force the brain to think about what it is fed. Physical hobbies like exercise and hiking are refreshing mentally and keep you fit in the long run.

Many students schedule their social media time by setting daily limits or taking a break from it altogether.

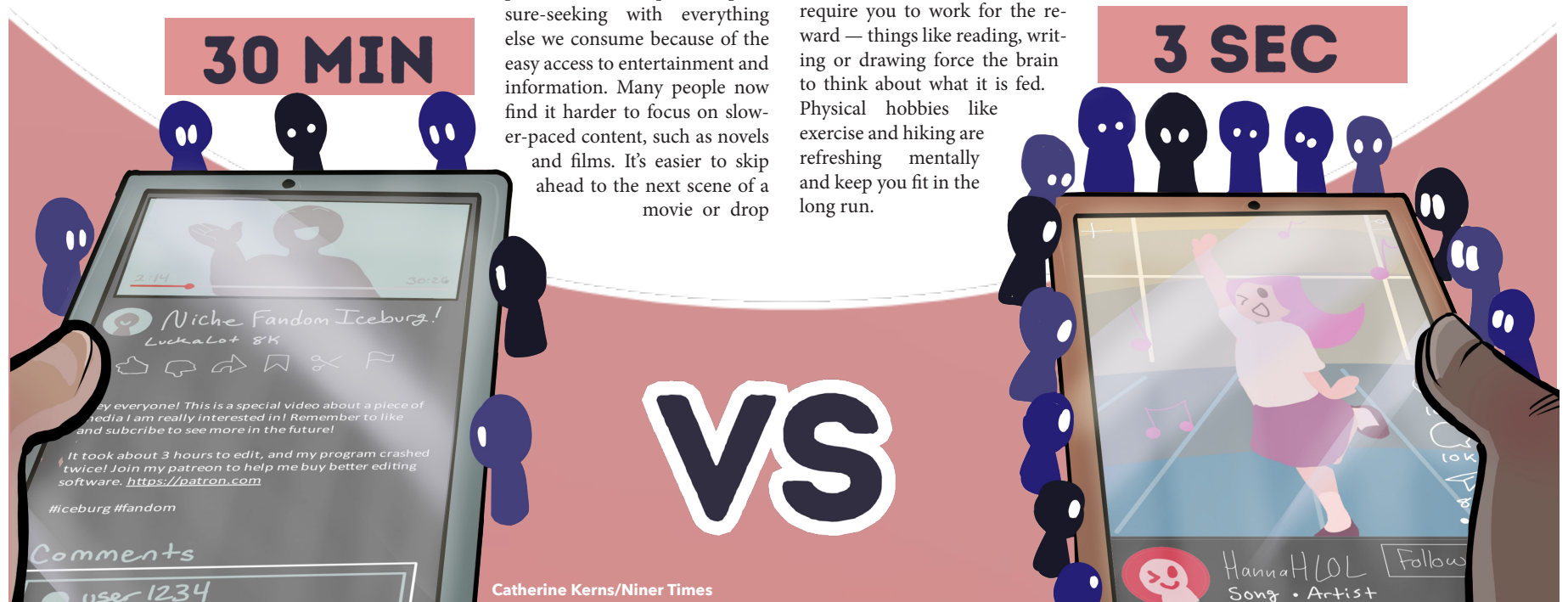
"I have this app installed on my phone. It blocks social media on certain parts of the day," first-year student Krish Shah said.

Blocking platforms like TikTok and Instagram ends up creating time for higher productivity. Awareness of the content consumed is the first step to ensuring that responsibility and personal priorities are put first, rather than an algorithm.

The overconsumption of short-form media presents a real concern. Social media addiction is an undeniable issue we have, and it has impacted us in the wrong ways. We've normalized giving up our time, hobbies and mind in exchange for a temporary hit of instantaneous pleasure.

“[Students] have a lot of knowledge on very niche things. But, on the other side of that is the depth of knowledge, and achieving adaptive knowledge has become a little bit of a challenge.”

- Brittany Olson, UNC Charlotte English instructor



# Curtis Simpson

brings confidence  
to Charlotte  
football's pass rush

Tre Holland | Staff Writer

Kelli Blackburn/Niner Times



Charlotte football redshirt sophomore defensive lineman Curtis Simpson, a Shelby, North Carolina native, enters his second season with the program after transferring from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2025. Simpson joined Head Coach Tim Albin during his first year at Charlotte.

## Path to Charlotte

Simpson graduated from Kings Mountain High School in 2024, where he played basketball and football, recording more than 200 tackles, 40 sacks and 80 tackles-for-loss in three years. He earned two All-State and All-Conference selections along with the 2023 Big South 3A Defensive Player of the Year award under Head Coach Strait Herron.

"Being at one of the best schools in Cleveland County definitely set a lot of things for me," Simpson said. "Preparation, nutrition, understanding the game, studying, watching film — it helped a lot."

Simpson credited Herron for his development.

"He helped us prepare on a whole new level," Simpson said. "He showed us new cover-

ages and new terminology."

Following his high school career, Simpson was ranked as the nation's No. 22 edge rusher and the No. 15 player in North Carolina by Rivals. He received more than 10 offers before committing to UNC-Chapel Hill as an early enrollee in 2023.

After redshirting his freshman season, Simpson entered the transfer portal in 2025 and joined Charlotte.

Simpson credited Charlotte's coaching staff for its approach during his recruitment.

"Seeing how they treated my mom, how respectful they were to her and to me, breaking things down for me — it was wonderful throughout the whole process," Simpson said.

## Expanding role in first season

As a redshirt freshman, Simpson appeared in all 11 games in 2025, recording 31 total tackles, 19 quarterback pressures, 11 solo tackles, 2.5 sacks, a pass deflection and a forced fumble.

He recorded his first career sack in a 42-35 game against Monmouth University. Simpson followed that with a strong performance

against the University of Texas at San Antonio, totaling four tackles, a forced fumble and a pass deflection and later added a sack against the University of Georgia.

Despite Charlotte finishing 1-11 in 2025, Simpson gained valuable experience and continued to build chemistry within the defense under Defensive Coordinator Nate Faanes.

## Simpson's self-belief

Entering year two, expectations continue to rise with added talent from the transfer portal, continuity within the coaching staff and strong fan support.

"I love Niner Nation," Simpson said. "Everything they have brought to us as a whole, not only me but my teammates."

Charlotte saw record support in 2025, selling out season tickets for the first time in program history and surpassing Jerry Richardson Stadium's listed capacity of 15,314 with crowds exceeding 19,000.

After briefly entering the transfer portal in December 2025, Simpson withdrew in early January 2026, reinforcing his commitment to Charlotte.

With Simpson entering the portal twice in his young career, the uncertainty it brings can be difficult to navigate. According to NCAA research in 2024, 23% of FBS athletes and 40% of FCS athletes remained in the transfer portal, either exploring opportunities outside the NCAA or leaving their sport altogether.

"Knowing what my plan was going to be here, how I was going to develop as a player, putting on more size and strength," Simpson said. "They had a plan for me and I really appreciate that."

Simpson is ultimately driven by his family, using their sacrifices as motivation in his development.

"If I go out there and slack or show up late or I'm last in a run, I'm not only hurting myself, I'm hurting my family. I'm letting them down," Simpson said.

As spring football continues, Simpson enters his redshirt sophomore season with high expectations for himself and the 49ers.

"We're going to be the best team in the conference," Simpson said. "I'm telling you."

# Charlotte women's lacrosse finds its form behind Torres, Rakis

Spencer Tritt | Staff Writer



Emmanuel Perkins/Niner Times

For a program in its second year of existence, Charlotte women's lacrosse has already experienced significant change. Coaching and roster turnover, along with stadium construction disrupting practices, have tested the 49ers early, but the group has come together at the right time.

Leading Charlotte on and off the field is a pair of standout attackers in junior Isa Torres and freshman Sophia Rakis, who have helped drive the program's early success.

## Charlotte's star leads the way

After starting the season 1-4, Charlotte responded with five straight wins. Torres scored 24 goals during that stretch, a run she viewed as routine.

"I'm an attacker, so that's all I can do, is shoot," Torres said. "I just think that I got 34 girls right beside me who can all do the same thing, and hopefully I can capitalize on those opportunities from them."

Torres leads not only the 49ers but also the American Conference in goals scored. She also led Charlotte in scoring last season.

In the offseason, former Head Coach Clare Short stepped away, leading to Interim Head Coach Sarah Stagaard taking over in her first year. Torres said the transition never disrupted the team.

"She took on all the responsibilities and kept it really consistent," Torres said. "There wasn't a drop-off or a second of doubt."

## Rakis rising

Rakis has quickly emerged as one of Charlotte's top offensive threats. A native of Ellicott City, Maryland, Rakis has scored 22 goals despite starting just seven games for Charlotte.

Her scoring role developed over time. After a three-goal performance against Campbell University, she has gone scoreless only once in the eight games since.

Since entering the

starting lineup, Rakis has scored 10 goals and earned American Conference Freshman of the Week honors.

Despite being a freshman, Rakis emphasized the team's chemistry.

"It's just so special, and all 34 of us bond so well," Rakis said. "We have so much fun, but we're also able to work hard at the same time."

That cohesion has become a defining trait for Charlotte during its midseason turnaround.

"I just think that we're now meshing with each other really well," Rakis said. "No matter freshman, sophomore, junior or senior, you are a player on the team."

## Playing for more than expectations

Torres, a team captain, has earned American Conference Attacker of the Week honors twice this season.

Externally, expectations for Charlotte were low. The 49ers were picked to finish No. 6 out of seven teams in the preseason conference poll, matching their finish from the previous season.

Inside the locker room, the expectations were different.

"Expectation from day one was to play in May," Torres said. "We're obviously still working towards that goal."

That mindset has translated into record-setting performances. Charlotte scored 20 goals in a road win against George Washington University before surpassing that total with 21 goals in a home win against Winthrop University, the highest mark of the 2026 season and second-highest in program history.

Torres scored seven goals in the first of those wins, tying both her own mark and the program record for goals in a single game.

"Our keyword this year is legacy," Torres said. "Everything we do is just another note in the history book. It's really special to be a part of the team that gets to write its own story."

The foundation Charlotte women's lacrosse is building extends beyond the field. As the program continues to grow, the impact of Torres and Rakis is helping shape the identity of a team still writing its first chapters.

# Opinion: Memeing about ‘World War III’ is not funny, it’s disrespectful

Lauren Simendinger | Staff Writer

On Feb. 28, the U.S. and Israel launched joint attacks on Iran. These strikes quickly led to retaliatory strikes from Iran across the Middle East. People across the world have been quick to post their thoughts and feelings online. Posts about ‘World War III’ began circulating, and that is a problem.

## The reality of the war and the situation in Iran

The U.S. and Israel have attacked Iran before, including in June 2025 when the U.S. bombed Iran’s nuclear facilities. This year’s attacks, and the start of the war, were meant to permanently decimate Iran’s military capabilities and usher in regime change. However, military sites are not the only places attacked.

Both countries have targeted energy structures in Iran and across the Middle East, including Iranian threats against boats in the Strait of Hormuz, and Israeli strikes on Iran’s South Pars gas field. Civilians have also been targeted on both sides. Suspected U.S. bombs struck the Shajareh Tayyebah girls’ school in southern Iran, killing 170 people, over 100 of whom were the girls in the school themselves. The school was near an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) base. Iran struck two towns in southern Israel that were near nuclear sites, injuring 180. Seven people were injured in strikes on Tel Aviv.

While this is all scary, and a lot remains unknown, what is known is that the fighting remains concentrated in one singular region, the Middle East; NATO has not gotten involved, and there have been no strikes on U.S. soil.

Defining a world war is tricky. There is no set definition; the prevailing view is that it involves most, if not all, of the world’s most powerful nations and spans multiple continents. Until the governments of the world or the press declare it so, the war with Iran has not escalated into a world war. To discuss it in such terms, online or elsewhere, is inappropriate and disrespectful to all those actually involved.

## Memeing through the trauma: a modern coping mechanism

Who is calling this war ‘World War III’ online? Across social media, most are people who appear to be white and American, with no apparent ties to the actual conflict. Do people have the right to be scared? Ab-

solutely. Do they have the right to cope with their fears through humor? Of course. But at a certain point, humor does not just take the edge off. It neutralizes the severity completely, causing people to stop taking it seriously.

A lot of the people joking about ‘World War III’ do not have to take the war with Iran seriously. But when they do not, they run the risk of no longer taking the people affected by it seriously, either.

Civilians have died. The latest civilian death toll out of Iran is over 3,000, and 1,497 people have died so far in Lebanon. Twenty-six people have died in Israel. People who live outside the region but have family and friends who do are praying for their safety. They do not get to joke about war; for them, it is reality.

## The real cost

For many people, social media is the start and end of their knowledge and interaction with the war, and all other conflicts outside their immediate bubble. They will take in scenes of horror happening across the globe through their six-inch phone screen, and then they will move on.

That is not an option for the people of Iran and the Middle East. Even when the war is over, they may not ever move on. It will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

“It’s not just a fight against one singular person; one singular air-strike and the assassination of one single person doesn’t destroy an entire system that’s been growing for 47 years, that has been prepared for war since its inception,” Yasmin Moaf, a graduate student, said.

Moaf is Iranian-American. She moved to the United States when she was 12 years old, and many of her family members are still in Iran.

The Iranian diaspora holds many different opinions about the war. Some believe it will

help end the current regime; others do not. But their opinions, their words, matter far more than those online joking through their so-called ‘fears.’

“We’re trying to deal with issues domestically, we’re also having to deal with explaining what we want as Iranians, what war looks like for us as Iranians,” Moaf said. “Because Americans today aren’t really necessarily concerned with what happens in Iran, even those who are very anti-war in the U.S. don’t really care about the aftermath of what happens to the Iranian people.”

Middle-Easterners may joke about their experiences, but that will not change their reality. It also will not change the reality that those joking about ‘World War III’ will likely never experience it. For the people actually affected by the war, their fears go far beyond worrying about getting drafted and potentially being bombed. They are being bombed, and they cannot escape it.

The people there have dealt with war and violence for over 50

years, much of which was the result of U.S. intervention. The U.S. has not seen a major attack on its soil since 9/11. Many of those joking about ‘World War III’ are young; they have not experienced a world war. They know nothing of air raids and bomb shelters.

If war were to reach U.S. soil, citizens would likely have some protection. Money would go toward repairing old Cold War-era bomb shelters and building new ones. Air raid warnings would go into effect. People in Iran do not have that luxury.

These jokes are not harmless. They show disregard and disrespect for the actual victims of this war, for the civilians targeted and the soldiers who died fighting. It disrespects the survivors and their families.

Using humor to cope with trauma can help alleviate the pain. But it is only helpful if it is your own trauma, not someone else’s.





Blaise Uy/Niner Times

# Opinion: Politicians have convinced Americans not to put America first

Christa Harris | Staff Writer

A moral panic is defined as “a widespread, exaggerated fear that a specific group, behavior or event threatens societal values, often amplified by mass media and authorities.” The term was created by sociologist Stanley Cohen, who noted that moral panics are not random overreactions but the result of media exaggeration, public fear and official control measures.

Over the past decade, American political parties have, more or less, manipulated voters into a state of moral panic. Leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties have convinced their supporters that the opposing side will ruin their lives if voted into power.

Since the election of President Richard Nixon in 1968, issues like abortion, border security and gun laws have been central to candidates’ policy agendas. Politicians now gain support by persuading members of their own party and moderates that electing the opposing party would lead to disastrous outcomes.

Currently, both parties’ members feel persecuted by one another, even those wielding primary power. The media serves as a crucial

link between citizens and the government. In 2016, President Donald Trump became the first major presidential candidate to use Twitter frequently to reach millions of Americans directly, seeking to counter the negative portrayal he received from mass media.

Nonetheless, the mass media in question continued to derive stories from many of his tweets, often heavily criticizing Democrats like Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. The mass media typically refers to TV news networks, notably Fox News, CNN, MS NOW and ABC. Fox News is generally viewed as appealing to conservative Republicans, while CNN is seen as catering to liberal Democrats. Despite their public ideological differences, all of these networks are owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group, a large, right-wing company.

This common ownership has led news anchors across the networks to present similar narratives. These media platforms often report more negative stories than positive ones, reinforcing echo chambers for those across the political spectrum. Politicians and media outlets have identified acts of violence as the result of the opposing agenda rather

than failures of government. Republicans blame Democrats for mass shootings with left-leaning perpetrators, while Democrats blame Republicans for those committed by right-leaning perpetrators.

One area of consensus between Democrats and Republicans is the importance of the alliance between the United States and Israel. AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) funding for political candidates remains a persistent topic in the current political climate. Of all 50 states, Vermont is the only one whose Congressional body has not received funding from AIPAC.

This connection between AIPAC and U.S. politicians has drawn the attention of many Americans, especially younger voters who often identify as Independents. The administrations of Trump, Joe Biden, Barack Obama and George W. Bush have all voiced their ‘ironclad’ support for Israel.

Interestingly, the same mass media and elected officials that promote polarization among Americans advocate for unity regarding Israel’s well-being. Public figures from Ms. Rachel to Tucker Carlson have faced accusations of antisemitism for either criti-

cizing Israel or hosting Palestinian civilians impacted by the conflict.

However, public support for Israel’s military actions and its backing from the United States has steadily decreased, particularly among Gen Z. Many question why it is deemed acceptable for Americans to criticize a neighbor next door while being discouraged from doing so with a country 6,000 miles away.

It is crucial to acknowledge the significant policy differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. Analyzing candidates’ policies and selecting one who aligns with personal beliefs is logical. Amid rising skepticism surrounding the American government’s ties to Israel, it is notable that standard right- and left-wing talking points continue to dominate the political climate.

Despite the strong support for Israel from major leaders in both parties, there are still claims that alternative candidates would have acted differently regarding the war in Iran. With such being the case, it’s clear that politicians have successfully convinced Americans to prioritize ideology above altruism.