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News Releases

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Former university employee pleads guilty to falsifying student information

CHARLOTTE, N.C. - A former employee of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) pled guilty to concealing and shielding foreign college students who were in violation of the terms of their student visas, following an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

A federal criminal bill of information filed in U.S. District court on July 14 charged Thomas C. Briggs, 48, of Charlotte, with concealing and shielding from detection certain aliens who had remained in the United States in violation of the law. According to the information, while serving as an administrative support specialist at UNCC, Briggs made repeated false entries into the school's Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

The SEVIS program is a comprehensive computerized system designed to track the entry, stay, and exit of foreign students in the United States. Court documents indicate that Briggs, as the SEVIS designated school official at UNCC, was responsible for maintaining the SEVIS records for the university's foreign students.

"Student visas are intended to allow people from around the world to come to the United States to study academics," said ICE HSI Special Agent in Charge Brock Nicholson. "One of the lessons learned from the past is that the U.S. government must be vigilant about making sure that those who are here on student visas are in this country for that intended purpose."

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) relies upon the SEVIS system to ensure that foreign students in the United States are in compliance with the terms and conditions of their F-1 student visa status. The information charged Briggs with making false entries in the SEVIS system between in or about January 2007 and in or about June 2009, with respect to approximately 66 foreign nationals. The information entered by Briggs falsely reflected that these foreign nationals were in compliance with the terms of their F-1 student visas, specifically indicating that the foreign nationals were properly enrolled and maintaining a full course of study at UNCC, when Briggs knew this information to be false.

Upon detecting and investigating Briggs' activities, school officials at UNCC immediately contacted federal law enforcement authorities to report the misconduct. Since making the initial report, UNCC officials have fully cooperated with law enforcement personnel and have provided materials relevant to the investigation.

In or about June 2009, Briggs was terminated by the University. The comprehensive investigation conducted by ICE HSI has not revealed any additional national security concerns.

"As UNCC's designated school official for handling foreign student visas, Briggs broke the law and in the process compromised the integrity of our immigration system," said U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina Anne M. Tompkins. "As we have learned from the past, such conduct can place our national security at risk and requires an immediate and thorough investigation of the breach of security and purposes behind the conduct. Based on the identification of Briggs' conduct and the prompt notification to law enforcement authorities by UNCC officials, we were able to determine that Briggs was only involved

in a misguided, but nevertheless illegal, effort to assist foreign students in completing their academic studies. I want to thank UNCC for their swift reporting of the violation and for their cooperation throughout this investigation.

I also want to thank ICE HSI for their thorough investigation of this matter and I want to assure the public that the safety of our communities was not jeopardized in any way by Briggs' criminal conduct."

Briggs entered a plea of guilty before U.S. Magistrate Judge David S. Cayer. He faces a maximum term of five years in a federal prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000. Briggs remains free on bond, and a sentencing date has not been set yet.

The prosecution for the government was handled by Assistant U.S. Attorney Craig D. Randall of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Charlotte.

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