Area students attending classes in a digital reality

On Friday morning, Lenoir County Schools had five students attending their first class at East Carolina University but they were locked out of the lecture hall.

However, they weren’t stranded out in the cold; they weren’t even in Greenville. The students — who are earning three credit hours in a website design and maintenance course — were sitting comfortably in Kinston High School’s Cyber Campus.

Although distance education is nothing new, the Kinston High seniors are taking a new approach to online education, the Early College Second Life Program. The students are attending a virtual college — built to resemble ECU — in the computer simulation Second Life.

Second Life is a virtual world that launched in 2003 and is accessible via the Internet. A free client program called the Second Life Viewer enables its users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars.

Sharon Collins, Early College High School Program Director at ECU, said the course is designed to combine the convenience of online education and the atmosphere of a college classroom.

“What we found in distance education classes is that students didn’t feel like they were part of the university, they felt isolated and wanted more connections,” Collins said. “Second Life works because we can connect (the student) with a faculty member and they actually have class with their avatars.”
Collins said the program has been successful in Pitt County and Kinston High’s involvement is the first in Lenoir County. She hopes to involve the other high schools next year.

Students set up avatars earlier in the week in order to help Friday’s class run smoothly. Unfortunately, the five students in the Cyber Campus hit a road bump when they could not gain access to the virtual building — hence being locked out. Luckily, the entire class was able to move their avatars outside, and class continued.

Jeremy Merritt, like the five students at the Cyber Campus, said he had no experience with Second Life before the course, but he said he’s always liked computers.

“I thought (the course itself) would be cool because I’d be able to learn how to make websites and stuff like that,” Merritt said. “Second Life just makes it a little bit more fun because you are in a game. Obviously that’s going to be a little better than sitting in a class looking at a professor.”

Kinston school counselor Jennifer Hollingsworth said the course’s daily time doesn’t align perfectly with the school’s period schedule, but by using part of their remediation time after first period, students would not miss time in either their high school or college classes.

For Steve Hill, director of secondary education in Lenoir County, the program is an example of the county working around the looming budget cuts.

“You’ve got two options, you can quit and give up or you can get innovative,” Hill said. “We’re having to rewrite ourselves on how we do things, because we don’t have the money anymore. We’re looking for any and every opportunity and ECU was able to step up and help us with that.”

Tyquan Dove said the class is a way for him to prepare for college before physically arriving on campus.

“I want to go to ECU anyway,” Dove said. “I just wanted to experience college to get ready before I (graduate).”

Hollingsworth said if the program is successful this semester, she hopes students will be able to take more than just one class. Collins added several Pitt County students entered ECU last fall with over a semester’s worth of credits through the program.

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Snow covers shrubbery in the median near Interstate 485 in Charlotte, N.C. early Monday, Jan. 10, 2011. Sleet, ice and several inches of snow — as much as 9 inches in some places — blanketed states from Louisiana to the Carolinas mostly unaccustomed to arctic weather and caused at least three deaths and left thousands without power. (AP Photo/Charlotte Observer, Davie Hinshaw)

Drivers urged to use caution
By Jackie Drake
The Daily Reflector
Tuesday, January 11, 2011

Predictions of a wintry mix had authorities urging drivers to stay off the roads if conditions are icy today.

The National Weather Service said freezing rain was likely before 10 a.m. and could continue until 1 p.m., creating concerns about driving conditions. Locals schools, utilities, transportation crews and law enforcement were ready.

“Basically if you don't have to be out, don't,” 1st Sgt. Marvin Williams of the State Highway Patrol said in response to the forecast. Drivers who must travel in icy conditions should avoid cruise control, increase following distance, decrease speed and be alert on bridges, overpasses and shaded areas.

“People really should be decreasing speed more than just 5 or 10 mph,” Williams said.

Few local closings for today had been announced Monday night. Pitt County Schools was operating on a two-hour delay. East Carolina University and Pitt Community College were hoping to hold classes on normal schedules but would alert students via automated systems if cancellations were necessary.

The Greenville Community Based Outpatient VA Clinic will open at noon today, according to a news release.
All primary and many secondary roads in Pitt County were treated with brine solution Monday, according to Jeff Cabaniss, county maintenance engineer with the N.C. Department of Public Transportation.

Cabaniss estimated that roughly 40,000 gallons had been sprayed. The solution lasts for two to three days, he said.
“If we were to put dry salt down beforehand, the cars would just blow it off,” Cabaniss said. “That's what's really good about the brine, when the liquid evaporates the salt stays.”

Pitt County Schools released students early Monday, and ECU and PCC canceled evening activities as a precaution. Little precipitation fell in Pitt County before 7 p.m.

Greenville Utilities activated its Emergency Storm Plan to prepare for possible power outages, according to public information officer Sue Hatch. During an emergency, the training room at the operations center on Mumford Road becomes GUC's base to accept calls around the clock.

The utility also sends out damage assessment teams to determine the type of problem, and the proper equipment and crew needed to restore service. Ice can be more damaging to power lines than snow, officials said, and it certainly makes roads slicker.

The State Highway Patrol's Jeff Collins said ice could cause more problems than the snow in mid-December that caused more than 100 collisions in Pitt County in one day.

“If this ends up being ice, it's going to be bad,” Collins said Monday evening. “Ice is worse than snow, and there's not a whole lot anyone can do with ice. You're at the mercy of physics and gravity.”

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I agree completely with Van Fleming (Public Forum, Jan. 6) concerning the new contract with Coca Cola having the exclusive rights to sell their products on the ECU campus for the next 10 years. I have nothing against Coke products, but where have they been over the last 50 to 60 years.

It seems that ECU has developed the attitude of “what can you do for us now” rather than “what have you contributed to us in past years?” It is my opinion that whoever made this decision to go with Coca Cola for the next 10 years has a short memory or is not aware of the contributions that the Minges family and Pepsi Cola have made in the past for ECU and eastern North Carolina. They have personally and professionally been involved in the welfare of all of us in eastern North Carolina.

They are local folks who have lived a long time in Greenville, Kinston, New Bern and other parts Down East and they care about us.

It is true that the Brody family once controlled the local Coca Cola franchise and they too have contributed immensely to our quality of life in eastern North Carolina. However, the local Coca Cola distributions are now controlled by Coca Cola Consolidated in Charlotte and I question their interest in ECU and eastern North Carolina.

To me, this is a slap in the face to the Minges family and their support over the many years. They certainly deserve more credit than this. All of them have supported ECU and the Pirate Club as well as the many other schools in Pitt County and surrounding counties.

DAVE MARTIN
Greenville
ECU graphic designer illustrates best-selling picture book

The Daily Reflector

“My Name is Not Isabella,” a children’s book illustrated by East Carolina University alumnus and Greenville resident Mike Litwin, currently appears as number 10 on The New York Times Best Seller list of children’s picture books.

Written by Jennifer Fosberry and published by Jabberwocky/Sourcebooks, this picture book (for children ages 4-8) follows the vibrant, purple-haired Isabella through her day as she imagines herself in the roles of her favorite historical female heroes.

“My Name is Not Isabella” has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Silver ForeWord Book of the Year Award for Picture Books, the Gold Independent Publisher Book Award, the Gold Moonbeam Children’s Book Award and the NAPPA (National Parenting Publications Awards) Gold Award.

Litwin is a 2001 graduate of the ECU School of Art and works as a graphic designer for the ECU Department of Publications. He is also the illustrator of “The Adventures of Pee Dee the Pirate,” an ECU children’s book that debuted in 2007. His next illustrated work, “My Name is Not Alexander,” is a boy-themed sequel to “My Name is Not Isabella” and is scheduled to be released in March.
Golden expected to join Holtz at USF

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector
Tuesday, January 11, 2011

An important era in East Carolina University athletics appears set to end.

Though in some college football programs a strength coach is little more than a weight room manager, ECU director of strength and conditioning Mike Golden helped former head coach Skip Holtz redefine winning at ECU. Now, it is imminent Golden will follow Holtz to South Florida, rejoining the man he worked with at Connecticut and South Carolina before coming to Greenville in 2005 when Holtz was hired away from the Gamecocks staff.

Reached late Monday afternoon by phone, Golden did not wish to comment on his immediate future, but it is expected his appointment at USF will be announced as early as today.

Holtz, coming off his first season atop the Bulls' program, and ECU head coach Ruffin McNeill are attending the American Football Coaches Association convention in Dallas, and neither responded to text messages sent Monday evening.

Also unable to be reached for comment was USF sports information director Jeremy Sharpe.
While with the Pirates — including the 2010 season in which he stayed to work with McNeill — Golden's strength and offseason training programs helped to turn around a football team that had been 3-20 the two seasons previous to his arrival. During the same time, he also coordinated the training regimens of ECU's 15 other sports teams.

The physical gains made by his pupils during Golden's six years in Greenville were exemplified by players bound for the National Football League like running back Chris Johnson, tight end Davon Drew and defensive lineman Linval Joseph.

In addition to his time at ECU, South Carolina and Connecticut, Golden also served as strength and physical education instructor at New Britain and Bloomfield high schools in his home state of Connecticut, and at his alma mater, Central Connecticut State. Golden got his start by traveling the world as an assistant coach on the USA Men's World Powerlifting Team.

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East Carolina track and field coach Curt Kraft could not have seemed happier last Friday afternoon, even though his athletes were stuck practicing at a local high school.

Some college coaches would have been flustered at the mere idea of being forced into a scholastic facility at the onset of the first of college track's dual spring seasons.

Yet Kraft was awash in positive energy as he strode across the track encircling the J.H. Rose football field on a chilly, breezy day.

Now in his sixth year at ECU, Kraft has plenty of reason to smile.

Still seeking his first conference title with the Pirates, Kraft likes his chances on both the men's and the women's sides as they limber up for this weekend's Virginia Tech Invitational, the start of the indoor season.

“We've set a goal that we want to be conference champions,” said Kraft, who welcomes back sophomore national high jump qualifier Tynita Butts on the women's side and senior Conference USA champion shot putter Dennis Aliotta on the men's half. “We set that goal six years ago, so it's not new. The goal is also to have individual conference champions on both the men's side and the women's side, and to qualify people for the indoor nationals and have All-Americans.”
As for being forced onto a high school track for practice, Kraft knows it's a small price to pay for a program about to break in a brand new outdoor oval on the ECU campus.

“I've been coaching 25 years, and I don't think I've ever gotten a chance to coach at a brand new facility. This is like Christmas all over again,” Kraft said of the ongoing ECU athletic facilities project that began with major football stadium upgrades and will also bring new venues for track and field, women's soccer and softball.

“It is going to help recruiting, it is going to help the city of Greenville, it is going to help Pitt County,” said Kraft, who will also get a boost from the return of three other all-C-USA performers in senior Brittany Copeland (distance events), sophomore Drew Kanz (jumps) and sophomore Antonial Marshall (sprints). “We can't wait to get that thing done. The kids are excited and you can see it in their body language. Every time they drive down Charles Boulevard, they look over.”

After a four-event swing through January and early February, the University of Houston hosts the C-USA indoor championships beginning Feb. 25. The national indoor championships begin March 11, leaving little time before the 90-member ECU team strides into the outdoor campaign with a March 18 meet at Wake Forest.

According to Kraft, the indoor circuit is vital in getting competitors in gear and up to speed for the outdoor campaign.

“The indoor season is getting us ready for the outdoor season, so it's kind of a transition phase,” he said. “We take it very seriously and we want to do well, but it very much sets up our outdoor season.”

Also back in the fold on the men's side are senior Isiah Gyasi (specializes in the 60 meter), sophomore Austin Lewis (60M, long jump), sophomore Miles Coats (high jump), sophomore Aaron Zakula (pole vault) and the four-man distance medley relay unit.

On the women's half, sophomore Tiffany Harris (400M), junior Abbey Way (pole vault), junior Kim Kanala (throws) and the 1600M and distance medley relay teams look to improve on their scores from last year.

Both the men's and the women's squads took sixth place at last season's C-USA indoor championships. This year, Kraft hopes his traditionally strong throwing teams will show greater versatility.

“We're a balanced team, and that's been my philosophy since (ECU director of athletics) Terry Holland hired me,” Kraft said. “Our strength has been throws on both sides, but we've got great sprinters and jumpers returning. It's a balanced team across the board.”

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UNC Health, BCBS plan joint facility

BY ALAN M. WOLF - Staff Writer

Two of the state's largest health care companies are joining forces to open a new type of medical practice in the Triangle, the latest evidence that the federal overhaul law is spurring major shifts in the industry.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield will collaborate with the UNC Health Care System to build a primary care facility that will coordinate care exclusively for about 5,000 Blue Cross members. The company is the state's largest health insurer.

Blue Cross and UNC Health will announce the project this morning, but are still working out details. Officials want to open the practice in Durham or Orange County and expect it to be ready by later this year.

The partnership was driven partly by the federal health overhaul, which includes a wide range of provisions designed to encourage the medical industry to try new ways to cut costs and improve care.

"The climate is calling for change and innovation," Blue Cross CEO Brad Wilson said. "North Carolina continues to be a leader in finding new ways to provide health care."

But critics worry that such changes will consolidate the health care industry. That could hurt consumers and limit choices.

"If a few select organizations have tremendous market power, it eliminates competition," said Joseph Coletti, director of health and fiscal policy studies at the John Locke Foundation, a conservative think tank in Raleigh. "It could make it more difficult for consumers to get the care they want."

One trend gaining steam nationally is the creation of so-called accountable-care organizations, provider groups that accept responsibility for the cost and quality of care delivered to a specific population of patients. Last year, Congress directed the federal agency that oversees Medicare and Medicaid to establish a framework for such organizations.

The new organizations differ from HMOs, in which insurers were calling more shots for medical care and costs.

**Going with the flow**
New rules will encourage physicians and hospitals to work more closely to improve care, including by allowing them to keep some of the money Medicare saves when expenses are reduced. That's driving physicians to affiliate with hospitals, which could reshape how patients receive care.

The UNC Health partnership with a major health insurer goes a step further. The CEOs of UNC Health and Blue Cross said the medical practice will be a starting point and that they expect to collaborate on other efforts down the road. That could include additional joint ventures and exploring ways to improve inpatient hospital care, said UNC Health CEO Bill Roper.

"We could have done this before the reform passed, but the legislation last year and continuing debate only adds to the urgency that we get serious about redesigning health care," Roper said. "Whatever happens in Washington or Raleigh, our health care costs too much. We need to do better."

Financial terms of the deal weren't disclosed. The two organizations, both based in Chapel Hill, will split costs. "The goal is for Blue Cross to save money, and we profit at the same time," Roper said.

**Collaborations**
Shortly after Wilson took over as Blue Cross CEO nearly a year ago, Roper suggested they meet to discuss ways to collaborate. That led to teams from each company working for the past four or five months to set up the new practice.

Wilson and Roper have talked about their partnership with White House officials, who they say are excited to hear about new efforts to redesign the health delivery. They also were scheduled to brief Gov. Bev Perdue about the project on Monday. Both CEOs said they may look at similar collaborations with other partners, too.

The new practice will provide primary care for Blue Cross members, including some covered by the state health plan, who have chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma and major depression. The practice will include a range of physicians affiliated with UNC Health, and offer other services, such as mental health, home monitoring and nutrition. The facility will not have hospital or surgery beds, and isn't expected to require state regulatory approval.

Wilson has said previously that he wants Blue Cross to expand into new lines of business beyond health insurance. In this case, the practice's health care will be run by UNC Health providers. "We are not going to be practicing medicine here, but they will have access to our expertise on data processing, claims" and more, he added.

The practice's patients ultimately will need to hold Blue Cross and UNC Health accountable and decide whether the experiment is successful, said Adam Searing, project director of the Health Access Coalition, part of the N.C. Justice Center, a liberal consumer advocacy group in Raleigh.
"This is what a nonprofit Blue Cross plan should be doing, coming up with innovative solutions," Searing said. "But it's the details that matter. We need to make sure these new models are consumer friendly, and that they're improving outcomes, not just cutting costs."

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Study Finds Family Connections Give Big Advantage in College Admissions

By TAMAR LEWIN

A new study of admissions at 30 highly selective colleges found that legacy applicants get a big advantage over those with no family connections to the institution — but the benefit is far greater for those with a parent who earned an undergraduate degree at the college than for those with other family connections.

According to the study, by Michael Hurwitz, a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, applicants to a parent’s alma mater had, on average, seven times the odds of admission of nonlegacy applicants. Those whose parents did graduate work there or who had a grandparent, sibling, uncle or aunt who attended the college were, by comparison, only twice as likely to be admitted.

Legacy admissions have become an increasingly touchy issue for colleges. Admissions officers mostly play down the impact of legacy status. But a growing body of research shows that family connections count for a lot — and Mr. Hurwitz’s study found a larger impact than previous studies.

And at a time when admission to elite colleges has become increasingly competitive, critics say the legacy admissions advantage stands as an undemocratic obstacle to social mobility.

“It’s fundamentally unfair because it’s a preference that advantages the already advantaged,” said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a nonprofit research organization. “It has nothing to do with the individual merit of the applicant.”

Mr. Kahlenberg, the author of “Affirmative Action for the Rich: Legacy Preferences in College Admissions,” said a legal challenge to legacy preferences is becoming likely. Public university preferences could be attacked as unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection, he said, while private universities might be vulnerable under an 1866 civil rights statute prohibiting discrimination based on “ancestry.”

Mr. Hurwitz’s study, published in “Economics of Education Review,” looked at data from 133,236 applicants for 2007 college admission, and analyzed the outcomes of the 61,962 who applied to more than one of the elite colleges. That allowed him to compare how much more likely they were to be offered admission where they had family connections.
“I was able to take into account all the applicant’s characteristics,” Mr. Hurwitz said, “because they were the same at every school they applied to. About the only thing that would be different was their legacy status.”

Family donations were not included in the data.

On average, Mr. Hurwitz’s study found, legacy applicants had slightly higher SAT scores than others. Education researchers point out that students whose parents attended elite colleges are also more likely to have advantages like family wealth and private school education.

Thomas P. Espenshade, a Princeton sociologist who has studied legacy admissions, said Mr. Hurwitz’s study was the first to compare the advantage to students applying to a parent’s alma mater with that of students with other family ties.

Mr. Espenshade pointed out that legacy status is just one of many possible advantages.

“We did a paper that found that if you are an athlete, you have 4.2 times the likelihood of admission as a nonathlete,” he said. “The advantages for underrepresented minorities are pretty big, too.”

Mr. Hurwitz said applicants with the highest SATs got the biggest legacy benefits.

Among the 30 colleges, the legacy advantage varied enormously: one college was more than 15 times as likely to accept legacy applicants, while at another, the effect was insignificant.

As a condition of access to the data, Mr. Hurwitz said, he agreed not to identify the colleges.

Given a table showing characteristics like high endowments and SAT scores and low acceptance rates, it seemed apparent that they are the members of the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, a group made up of the Ivy Leagues and two dozen other private research universities and liberal arts colleges.
Red Flags at a College, but Tied Hands

By BENEDICT CAREY

He was coming undone, that much is clear.

Sometimes surly, sometimes seemingly unhinged, he was unpredictable in a way that made fellow students in a community college class want to leave the room.

He had changed since high school: the shy, seemingly normal boy had experimented with drugs and, increasingly, with conspiracy theories that made sense to no one but himself.

“This guy wasn’t a missed case,” Randy Borum, an expert on threat assessment at the University of South Florida, said about Jared L. Loughner, the 22-year-old college dropout who is accused of trying to assassinate Representative Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona on Saturday.

“It wasn’t a case of ‘Gee, no one saw this coming,’ ” Dr. Borum said. “People saw it. But the question then was what do you do about it? Who do you call? The whole thing speaks to the need for some coordinated way to detect such threats.”

Even after the 2007 massacre by a student at Virginia Tech, institutions and employers are seldom set up to handle such potential threats, experts say — even when the warning signs are blatant and numerous.

These institutions typically have no single person or center that tracks the sorts of complaints that teachers and fellow students were making about Mr. Loughner. Nor do they have the legal authority to force people into treatment against their will. Officials at Pima Community College said the young man was suspended and told he would have to have a mental health consultation before he could be reinstated. But it is not clear whether the matter went any further.

In a case like this one, experts say, a psychiatric evaluation may have made all the difference. Although there is no reliable profile for a political assassin, such people almost always plan their attack, carefully choosing a target, a weapon and a time. “We tend to want to dismiss these people as unstable types that snapped,” Dr. Borum said, “but there’s a whole process that occurs between conceiving the idea and executing it.”
Details about Mr. Loughner are still emerging, and only an examining doctor will be able to make a definitive diagnosis. But the writings and comments attributed to him point strongly to the kind of delusional thinking that is common in schizophrenia.

“I’d say the chances are 99 percent that he has schizophrenia,” said Dr. E. Fuller Torrey, the founder of the Treatment Advocacy Center in Arlington, Va., which advocates stronger laws to require treatment for people with severe mental illnesses. “He was together enough to take courses, and people with untreated schizophrenia can function very well for periods. But when you see these rambling, incoherent writings and comments, there is almost no other disorder where this is a prominent symptom.”

Many of Mr. Loughner’s reported comments — about currency and government — also suggest a growing paranoia. As a rule, violence is less common among people with mental illness than is often assumed; a vast majority are no more likely to commit harm than anyone else.

But studies suggest that a small subset of those with untreated, paranoid psychosis are two to three times as likely as people without mental disorders to get into physical altercations, researchers say.

“Certainly not all paranoids are mass murderers” by a long shot, said Dr. Michael Stone, a forensic psychiatrist in New York, “but almost all mass murderers are paranoid.”

But even if a doctor had diagnosed paranoia in this case, the knowledge might not have been helpful. A 1999 study of assassins and attackers found few common threads. Many had delusional ideas, but few heard voices; still fewer abused drugs or belonged to militant groups.

It is also not clear, some doctors said, that today’s partisan climate had any bearing on the assault. “The psychosis picks up on the grand themes of the day, whether those are antigovernment or something else,” Dr. Stone said.

In the logic of delusion, a grievance may be conflated with some larger mission, whether religious, political or artistic. “It’s not political thinking,” Dr. Torrey said. “It’s psychotic thinking.”

Dr. Borum and many others have argued that colleges, among other large institutions, can be more assertive in their approach to people who show a potential for violence.

“If complaints are piling up about someone, you could send a mental health person and a member of the campus police over to simply interview the person,” Dr. Borum said. “This intervention might be enough to put the person on notice, and maybe to move them into treatment.”
If not, they may wind up — as Mr. Loughner apparently did — alone with their thoughts. In recent decades, states have cut spending for hospitals and treatment centers, to the point where many people with aggressive urges cannot get therapy even if they want it. This retreat from providing services may have affected the sentencing of mentally ill offenders, some experts argue.

“The insanity defense, which may be tried in this case, is often unsuccessful,” Dr. Torrey said, “and one reason is that juries are afraid to send people to state hospitals, where they belong. They’d rather lock them up for longer, in prison.”