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Editorial: ECU should lead by example
Thursday, January 20, 2011

The recent appointment of East Carolina University Chancellor Steve Ballard to lead a task force on academics and athletics for the University of North Carolina system should challenge ECU to take the lead in that arena.

The appointment reflects well on ECU's proactive stance with regard to achieving and maintaining academic and athletic excellence. It also presents the positive necessity for everyone associated with ECU and the Pirate Nation to step up their game as Ballard further raises ECU's profile among the system's 17 campuses.

Against a headwind of what is sure to be among the most painful budget cuts ever experienced at ECU, the school is completing an ambitious expansion of its athletics facilities. A larger Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium saw a banner year of football attendance during coach Ruffin McNeill's first season at the helm. Other projects include new facilities for softball, track and field, soccer and sports administration offices.

Add to those the ongoing fundraising campaign aimed at collecting $15 million toward a basketball and volleyball practice facility and it is abundantly clear that ECU will be attracting more top athletes and the fans who want to see them win.

With such a huge commitment to athletics comes the added responsibility of assuring that receiving a quality education remains the chief concern of student athletes. The task of maintaining that standard must compete with ever-increasing pressures to succeed on the playing field.

That pressure falls to student athletes who — along with boosters, coaches and administrators — must adhere to strict NCAA rules or suffer consequences such as those currently faced by the football team at UNC-Chapel Hill and other programs across the nation.

While this task force has not received its name or charge, a portion of its mission will surely be to improve graduation rates among student athletes. Although ECU out ranks many schools in that area, there is much room for improvement.

With regard to football players, for instance, there is a large gap between the number of white and black athletes who complete four-year degrees. According to a recent study by the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, ECU's graduation rate among white football players is 91 percent, while that of their black teammates lags at 50 percent.
As one who excelled in the classroom and on the playing field as shortstop and captain of the Arizona Wildcats baseball team, Ballard can identify with the challenges faced by student athletes. That experience and his record of strict adherence to ethical standards make him uniquely qualified to lead this new task force.

Ballard's systemwide leadership toward improving academics and athletics will bring added attention to ECU, and along with it the expectation that the university must now lead by example in those areas.
Dental school chooses next outreach site

By K.j. Williams

The Daily Reflector
Thursday, January 20, 2011

Faculty from East Carolina University's new dental school celebrated with Harnett County officials in Lillington on Wednesday, marking the county's selection as one of 10 sites of community service learning centers where future dental students will provide low-cost care to rural communities.

The School of Dental Medicine will begin teaching its first-year students in August. When those students are in their fourth year of school, they'll begin working on-site at learning centers under faculty supervision in areas lacking affordable dental care services.

Harnett County is the fourth site chosen. Construction could begin at the Ahoskie and Elizabeth City sites this year. Sylva also will have a learning center.

“This is a huge announcement for Harnett County,” County Manager Scott Sauer said in a phone interview Wednesday. “There's a significant interest in outreach for children and young families. Oral health care is directly tied to so many other medical issues that our board of commissioners sees this as a great improvement in public health.”

The General Assembly allocated about $30 million toward the construction of these learning centers out of the $90 million it had designated to the dental school. Classes will take place at the Brody School of Medicine until construction of the dental school's Ross Hall is finished in mid-2012.

Sauer said there's a need for affordable dental care in Harnett.

“The ratio of practicing dentists to the county population, which is about 112,000 residents, is such that access to dental care is very limited, particularly for our low-income residents,” he said.

Dr. Greg Chadwick, the dental school's associate dean for planning and extramural affairs, said the learning centers will be located where there are Medicaid patients among a pool of low-income residents who either can't find dental care or afford what's available. Patients can pay according to their income on a sliding-fee basis for procedures including tooth crowns, dental bridges and implants.

The land for the learning centers must be donated. Sauer said Harnett County had donated 9.5 acres to the county's nonprofit economic development partner, Harnett Forward Together. The learning center will be built on about 1 1/2 acres within a planned
business park, adjacent to the future site of a federally funded First Choice Community Health Center.

Health care is growing in the county, with a new hospital planned across the street from the learning center and the recent announcement that Campbell University expects to open a medical school in the county in 2013.

The dean of the dental school, Dr. James Hupp, said the new health care facilities will complement the learning center.

“That area is in need of more dental services, but it also has a good plan for providing comprehensive health services,” he said. “So we can partner with them on that.”

Chadwick said learning centers will be situated throughout the state, with an emphasis on western and eastern North Carolina.

“That's part of our commitment to the General Assembly,” he said.

He said dental school staff hope the learning centers will spark interest in attending dental school within those rural communities, and those future dentists will want to return home to provide care to the underserved.

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East Carolina head football coach Ruffin McNeill said he is on the way to regaining an active lifestyle befitting a former college athlete.

The former ECU defensive back and second-year head coach successfully underwent bariatric surgery last Thursday, and called that the beginning of a long process toward better health which will also entail hip replacement surgery in the spring.

Ultimately, McNeill said he expects to be able to resume a daily workout.

“While I understand the process has only started, my commitment to get back in the weight room and resume a daily workout routine runs deep,” said McNeill, who finished his first season with ECU 6-7 and guided the team to its fifth bowl game in five years.

“My wife Erlene, my daughters, our football team and the Pirate Nation has and continues to serve as an inspiration for me.”

By definition, bariatric surgery is a procedure designed to decrease the size of the stomach and promote substantial weight loss.

For the moment, McNeill is at home recovering, but the coach who is on the cusp of his second National Signing Day with the Pirates won't be behind closed doors for long. In fact, it is possible McNeill will be back in business by this weekend to make some crucial late recruiting visits.
In the meantime, the coach said he is appreciative of the outpouring of concern and support for him.

“I am appreciative and deeply touched by the caring support so many have extended to me as I work through another one of life's journeys,” McNeill said. “My first priority is to regain an active lifestyle that will not only benefit myself physically, but put me in a position to provide uninterrupted leadership to our football program and service to East Carolina University.

“The first step was to address the strain I was putting on my body. ... It is our plan that this procedure will precede hip replacement surgery later in the spring that will allow the pain-free mobility I have longed for over the last few years.”
Randy Woodson, a veteran professor and administrator and now chancellor at N.C. State University, knows better than most that changing "the academy" makes turning a battleship look like taking a Ferrari around a hairpin curve. Universities with more than 34,000 students, like NCSU, are organizational behemoths divided into a multitude of departments, divisions and schools, all of them supervised by layers of officialdom.

So the chancellor is aware that he's delivering nothing but bad news to lower-level campus administrators with an ambitious reorganization objective. Still, he's to be commended for being in touch with the reality of a possible $80 million loss in the university's budget appropriation.

That means, Woodson said, that the university must engage in a restructuring that likely will result in layoffs and also the merger of departments and possibly even some schools. His provost, Warwick Allen, and Vice Chancellor Charles Leffler with develop the plan.

From the day he arrived on campus, Woodson has made it clear he recognizes the well-earned stature of NCSU's engineering and science curricula. Those core strengths must be protected, he says, and the university has others as well, such as agriculture, textiles, design and veterinary medicine. All are tremendous resources for the state. Yet in departments where students are under-subscribed or where programs are well removed from the university's core missions, changes can be expected to come.

Classes almost certainly will be larger. And though this would be a hard sell in tradition-bound academia, it's quite likely that at all state university campuses, senior faculty members with heavy research responsibilities but light teaching loads will be asked to spend more time in the classroom.

Importantly, Woodson also will focus on merging some administrative duties and on consolidating business offices that handle human resources
needs, purchasing, grants, travel and so forth. That ought to be the first priority in terms of where the university goes for savings. Campuses, not just N.C. State but nationally, tend to grow and expand without much attention to the duplication of such tasks in those offices. Pretty soon, the offices are well-entrenched and a university finds itself with too many people doing jobs that are essentially the same, just in different places.

That's one reason Tom Ross, new president of the University of North Carolina system, is ready to empty some trenches himself. Ross has announced a system-wide study of duplication with the intention of reducing it dramatically. The system is anticipating a possible 15 percent budget cut from the incoming legislature, which must find a way to answer a $3.7 billion overall shortfall.

At a time when budget cuts have been made and more are coming, the university system will have to do its part. Thanks to friends in the General Assembly, the UNC system has been relatively well insulated from hard times, even though under former president Erskine Bowles, the central administrative staff was trimmed. But because of political shifts and the ongoing budget crisis, the days of insulation are over.

Former UNC-Charlotte Chancellor James Woodward will lead the fact-finding mission about duplication. Ross recognizes that in a statewide system, a student on a campus in the west needs the option of a chemistry major, as does that student at East Carolina. So in a practical sense, some duplication is necessary. But it may be that duplicative schools can be merged and programs shared.

These are hard choices for hard times.
Fulfilling a dream takes work, and realizing Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of equality for all continues to be a vital cause today.

That was the essence of a discussion at East Carolina University on Wednesday night to observe the federal holiday honoring the nation's most renowned civil rights leader.

“We're here tonight to celebrate and visualize the dream of Martin Luther King,” activist and author Kevin Powell said. “But we've got to be engaged and civically involved.”

Powell was the keynote speaker following a student discussion panel at Mendenhall Student Center hosted by the ECU Office of Equity, Diversity and Community Relations.

Born in poverty in New Jersey during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Powell went on to study at Rutgers University. From his longtime residence in New York City, he has published 10 books as well as filmed a documentary, and commented on social issues through various national media outlets.

Most people don't realize King continued to work for years after his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech and 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, up until his assassination in April 1968, Powell said.

“He paved the way for our nation — now we can do what we want to do and be who we want to be because of his courage,” student Amanda Mutio said.
“His legacy to me is love,” student Alex Wyatt said. “He had so much reason to hate, but all he talked about was love.”

“You can dream all you want, but you have to wake up and put it to action,” Tremayne Smith, ECU Student Government Association president, said.

There has been tremendous progress since the 1960s, but harsh realities still exist, Powell said, adding that racism, classism and sexism are alive and well.

“The civil rights movement was not just for black folks,” Powell said. “It was propelled by black folks, but it ended up helping a lot of others.”

It's not just about struggles between blacks and whites anymore, Powell said. “In this economy, more job sites will look like this panel,” student Brandon Sanders said, referencing the panel's diversity.

Student Joshua Martinkovic said, “Other movements mimicked the 1960s — the people are different, but the message is the same.”

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ECU’s McNeill has weight-loss surgery

DAVID HALL
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GREENVILLE — East Carolina football coach Ruffin McNeill is recovering from bariatric weight-loss surgery in advance of undergoing a hip replacement procedure, he announced Wednesday.

McNeill issued a statement through the university to thank supporters for helping him to “work through another one of life's journeys,” adding that he is recovering “successfully.”

“My first priority is to regain an active lifestyle that will not only benefit myself physically, but put me in a position to provide uninterrupted leadership to our football program and service to East Carolina University,” he said.

McNeill, 52, had the weight-loss procedure done last Thursday and plans to have hip surgery in the spring.

The Lumberton native and former ECU defensive back led the Pirates to a 6-7 record during the 2010 season, his first as a head coach after 24 years as a college assistant or coordinator. The season ended with a 51-20 loss to Maryland in the Military Bowl in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 29.

A father of two grown daughters, McNeill walked with a noticeable limp that grew more pronounced as the season went on. He said his doctors have implemented a “team approach” as he works toward getting through both procedures.

“While I understand the process has only started, my commitment to get back in the weight room and resume a daily workout routine runs deep,” he said. “My wife, Erlene, my daughters, our football team and the Pirate Nation has and continues to serve as an inspiration for me.”

In 2009, about 220,000 people in the U.S. had bariatric surgery, in which the stomach’s capacity for food intake is manipulated, according to the website of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery.

One of the most common forms of the surgery is gastric bypass, though McNeill did not specify the type of procedure he underwent.

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My late father was the first chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at ECU. I asked him once, how many people in society have some mental illness. He said that in the population, about 5 percent had some level of schizophrenia and paranoia and about 5 percent had some level of depression deserving of treatment. So that's give or take 10 percent of the population not feeling well and subject to issues. And we've not accounted for the mean ones.

So with around 350 million people in this country, that's 35 million with psychiatric problems of some degree. Almost every one of them can get a gun easier than they can get help. Almost every one of them can pass you on the street with no red flag flying or black cloud over their head for you to pick them out. They can come to dinner with you and you could not discern a thing.

The gentleman in Arizona manifested many overt symptoms to certain people, but I'm pretty sure that he was cool and calm at the gun store. Math says you can't do a thing about the episode that just occurred. Sooner or later, the numbers catch up to a society that basically has no mental health care system.

But just as sure as there are millions of fragile minds in our society, the blank-check hate speech we see and hear can bear fruit in a manner we will regret. It's not the Rush Limbaughss or the Shawn Hannitys. But it just might be the Michael Savages and the second- and third-tier talking heads that cultivate hatred and fear. It might be that you can't blame anyone. But we sure can stop and refuse to support media that offer hate speech and we sure can consider the state of the mental health system in this country.

J.L. MATHIS
Grimesland
Andrew Bowen, 28, is spending January exploring Hinduism, part of his year-long quest to understand what unites and divides faiths. 'When I study religion, life makes sense,' he says.

11 Religions, 12 Months
A scholar drawn to ritual tries different faiths

BY YONAT SHIMRON - Staff Writer

To some, the formal elements of religion - the prayers, chants, hymns and incantations - are the most exhausting.

To Andrew Bowen, they are the most rejuvenating.

The 28-year-old religious studies major is on a quest to experience 11 of the world's religions over the coming year. Each month during 2011 he plans to immerse himself in one of them - with the exception of June, when he will explore Scientology and other new religions and take a rest.

Project Conversion, his year-long quest, is an attempt to understand what unites and divides faiths. For Bowen, a longtime resident of Lumberton, the quest is more than an intellectual pursuit. He thrives on the ritual.

"It's like asking a mathematician what numbers mean to them - they make sense," he said. "When I study religion, life makes sense."

Bowen, who is spending January exploring Hinduism, is nothing if not disciplined. He rises at 5 a.m., showers and sits cross-legged before a makeshift altar to perform devotions to Shiva, the Destroyer, a major Hindu
deity. Gazing on a "murti" or postcard-size image of Shiva, he lights candles and incense and recites a mantra he memorized in the original Sanskrit. Next he turns east to perform the sun salutation, the 12-step yoga exercise.

He repeats this routine noontime and night. To keep mindful of his Hindu practice, Bowen wears a string of dried berry beads called "rudraksha," which resembles a rosary. At his computer desk, he listens to Indian music, courtesy of Pandora, the online radio service. At the kitchen table, he dines on vegetarian cuisine, keeping with the tradition of some Hindus who abstain from meat.

"The thoughtfulness he's put into his approach is pretty unique," said Michael J. Solender of Charlotte, a writer who met Bowen online and agreed to be his mentor in April as he explores Judaism. "With the political discourse being so polarized, it's refreshing to see someone finding out the commonalities that unite us."

**Going to the Web**

Bowen, who blogs about his experience on a website created for this project, is not receiving college credit for his quest. The idea came to him as he was writing a novel and realized he knew too little about the world's faiths. His protagonist, a man named Tom, hears voices telling him he is a savior.

Bowen grew up in a nominally Christian home. His parents did not attend church, but Bowen was drawn to evangelical Christianity while in high school. For a time he was president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter at his school. By his first year at East Carolina University, his faith was sidelined and it ultimately died.

He defines himself as an agnostic.

"I'm spiritually promiscuous," he said proudly. "I'm single and loving it." Bowen says he has deep respect for people of the faiths he's studying. "I just love the art and culture, the ideas and the evolution of religion," he said.

A quick look at Bowen's writings and it's clear that religion is a passion. In addition to Project Conversion, he writes and edits a publication, Divine Dirt Quarterly, a collection of spiritual essays and poems, and he has numerous creative writing projects in the works.
This week, he interviewed Bharat J. Gajjar, a 79-year-old yoga master and priest from Wilmington, Del. Bowen is already reading up on the Baha'i faith, his focus during February. He has sought out a mentor, a local physician, Carolyn McCormick, who has been practicing the Baha'i faith since 1971.

"He seems intent on really studying and really practicing each faith," McCormick said. "I was tickled he knew anything about the Baha'i faith and was able to find me."

Despite the name of his project, Bowen has no illusions that he's "converting" to a new faith each month.

Instead, he says he is immersing himself in rites and rituals and reflecting on the process as a way to better understand people and world conflicts.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding out there, a lot of ignorance," Bowen said. "Maybe other people will say, 'He's trying his best to understand where people are coming from, maybe I should too.' If it helps someone do that, then it's worth the whole year, every bit of it."

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