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ECU eases troops' return

BY MARTHA QUILLIN - Staff Writer
GREENVILLE—East Carolina University is getting into the fight to help troops who have come home injured by war.

The university's pilot program, called Operation Re-Entry NC, will use Department of Defense grants to study and find new treatments for a range of problems that plague combat veterans. If successful, the work could expand to include up to 30 projects a year at universities throughout the UNC system.

"We have a responsibility for the health care of the state, and in particular, our region, and that includes the health care of returning veterans and their families," said Dr. David Cistola, a professor and associate dean for research in health sciences at ECU's Brody School of Medicine.

About three years ago, Cistola noticed that individual researchers in various departments at ECU were working separately on wounded warrior issues, including the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Organizing the disparate projects under one umbrella has made it easier for experts to collaborate, and gave ECU a research theme to present to the Defense Department for funding.
The Defense Department allocated $2.4 million for Operation Re-Entry in the 2010 budget, though the money has not yet been released to the university. Another $2.2 million is expected to be included in the 2011 budget, though that's not guaranteed.

Already, ECU researchers are working on a handful of promising projects, such as the one that takes Marine Cpl. Will Thorpe back to Iraq once a week. Thorpe, based at Camp Lejeune, spent 14 months in Iraq over two deployments between July 2006 and May 2008. The first time he was there, he and four others were on patrol near Fallujah when their vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive.

None of the Marines was killed, but all were peppered with shrapnel. Thorpe, a gunner, was rendered unconscious for 20 seconds. He suffered a cracked vertebra and took metal fragments in his leg.

"I got two weeks off and was right back in the mix," Thorpe says.

Over time, he says, his wounds have taken a toll. He has constant pain from the back injury, and realized after he was home from his deployments that part of him seemed to still be in a combat zone.

"I didn't like walking near parked cars. I didn't like people I didn't know being around me. I couldn't be around crowds," Thorpe says, describing a symptom of combat stress that military doctors call hyper-vigilance.

"Driving down the road, I was always scanning. I would avoid pot holes, packages, dead animals. Any of that stuff would get my blood pressure up, really get my heart racing."

Once a week, Thorpe now drives from the barracks of the Wounded Warrior Battalion East, at Camp Lejeune, to Greenville to get biofeedback training.

Using a computer program called "Virtual Iraq" in Carmen Russoniello's lab in ECU's Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Thorpe can recreate his experiences on the highways of Iraq, including the one where his truck was hit. His ride in the virtual Humvee, viewed through a headset in an otherwise dark room, has all the elements of his fateful trip: the right weather, the exact light, the same concussive sound of the IED going off.
But now, Thorpe, 24, has learned to control his reactions to those elements and the ones like them in his everyday life that would otherwise trigger anxiety.

"We try to recreate the experience, and give it a different ending," says Tami Maes, a graduate student who works with the Marines in the lab.

Elsewhere on campus, Sherri Jones, an associate professor in communication sciences and disorders, and one of her graduate students are trying to help frustrated combat veterans from Camp Lejeune figure out why they can't keep their balance in activities they've done all their lives.

Already, the team has found - unexpectedly - that most of those who were exposed to blasts have no damage to the part of their inner ear used to maintain balance. The next step is to figure out what else could be causing them to be off-kilter.

ECU researchers also are trying to develop a blood test that would reveal "mild" traumatic brain injury so patients could get treatment before severe symptoms emerge. An occupational therapist is training students to use an "interactive metronome" with veterans, who can synchronize their movements to its beat to regain the natural rhythm of their own steps.

'HIGHLY MOTIVATED'
This spring, the university will install a blast simulator, which can be used to study what happens to tissue, blood and other body parts when something explodes nearby. Researchers also want to expand their work with military hospitals, as well as doctors who have military patients but lack training in the specific problems of combat vets.

Some of the service members who participate in Operation Re-Entry projects won't find relief from their symptoms But they come anyway.

"They are very highly motivated," says Sherri Jones, "They want to get better, but also, if there is anything they can do that will help their fellow Marines, they want to do it."

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Dental clinic site approved
By K.J. Williams
The Daily Reflector
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The deal has been struck for East Carolina University's new School of Dental Medicine to obtain slightly less than 2 acres in Elizabeth City for one of its community service learning centers.

A quorum of seven of 13 members of ECU's Board of Trustees voted unanimously to approve accepting the 1.9-acre site for $1 from the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners in a brief teleconference meeting held on campus Thursday.

The board delayed its planned vote in November to allow negotiations to continue, since Pasquotank commissioners had made some requests.

Learning center staffing will include dental school faculty. Faculty will supervise the work of fourth-year students, who will gain hands-on experience. The community will benefit by receiving low-cost dental services in under-served areas. Patients will pay on a sliding-fee scale, based on income.

The 10 facilities will be located in more rural areas with a focus on providing care for Medicaid patients. Dental services will include tooth crowns, dental bridges and implants, dental school officials have said.

ECU's board agreed to conditions raised by Pasquotank commissioners, including a requirement that construction of the learning center start within five years or the land would revert back to Pasquotank County ownership.

Lloyd Griffin, chair of the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners, said in a later interview that the site is located across from Albemarle Hospital, and in an area planned as a medical park.

“What the board of commissioners wanted to see happen was in the event that the dental school did not move forward with this facility in the next five years, there might be something else that came along and the board would want to reuse the property for another medical type of facility,” he said.

During the ECU meeting, board member Robert Brinkley described a second condition placed on the deal by Pasquotank.
“One of these restrictions does say if we want to change that use … it can't be in conflict or competition with something they're doing close by,” Brinkley said.

Pasquotank County commissioners voted unanimously last month to approve the purchase if ECU agreed to these restrictions. The county required that the property's uses be limited to “dental clinic purposes, dental education and the provision of any other public, nonprofit health care or education services.”

The agreement also requires a 2011 valuation of the property and gives the county the right of first refusal for 30 years if ECU decides to sell the site. If ECU sells it to another entity besides the county, it would pay the county the amount of the 2011 valuation.

Griffin said commissioners approved the deal for the good of the region.

“I think the board voted unanimously because they'd like to see this facility succeed in our county to provide both the training for the students and care for our citizens,” he said.

The dental school has chosen three other sites for the learning centers, to be located in Ahoskie, Harnett County and Sylva.

The General Assembly allocated $30 million for the construction of the learning centers with the stipulation that the land for the centers must be donated.

Classes at the dental school begin in August at the Brody School of Medicine. Construction of the school's Ross Hall is expected to finish by mid-2012.

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Opinion piece critical of ECU dental school

Carolina Journal writer Duke Cheston states that the General Assembly acted wastefully by funding the new dental school.

BY K.J. WILLIAMS
The Daily Reflector

A conservative think tank has challenged the necessity of creating the new School of Dental Medicine at East Carolina University in its monthly newspaper.

When asked about the opinion piece in the January edition of the John Locke Foundation’s Carolina Journal, Dr. James Hupp, the dental school’s dean, refuted the argument.

Carolina Journal writer Duke Cheston states that the General Assembly acted wastefully by funding the new dental school, saying it could have expanded capacity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Dentistry instead.

Hupp said there’s no room at Chapel Hill to expand services.

“They would have to build new facilities and recruit more faculty,” he said, “And once they get to a class size that’s more than they already have, then the quality of education falls.”

Cheston also argues that while it may appear that certain North Carolina counties are under served in terms of the number of dentists, there actually are dentists located a reasonable distance away.

He further states that a shortage of doctors willing to accept Medicaid patients is a problem with the system that can’t be solved by graduating more dentists.

He disputes the ECU dental school’s contention that recruiting students from rural areas to address this shortage will be effective. In Cheston’s opinion, dentists will locate where there are large population bases.

Hupp said he disagrees.

In his view there is a shortage of rural dentists, and Hupp said that he’s witnessed firsthand that recruiting dental students from rural areas does increase the rural supply.

Hupp, who formerly was dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of Mississippi in Jackson, said it paid to recruit from under-served areas.

Those individuals commonly went back to those same communities,” he said. “So I think the maldistribution in North Carolina is in some degree (related) with some people not being comfortable with or used to the idea of living in more rural areas.”

Hupp said he agrees with Cheston on the issues with Medicaid.

“I think there is some truth to the thought that in places where there are dentists in North Carolina, there are some problems getting dental care because the Medicaid reimbursement rates, particularly for adult patients, are poor,” he said.

The John Locke Foundation’s opinion piece was broached by a ECU board of trustees member in a conference call prior to a teleconference meeting on Thursday.

The board member asked chairman David Brody if he planned to write a rebuttal letter. Before Brody could answer, ECU attorney Donna Gooden Payne noted that a reporter was present, and the discussion was abruptly terminated.

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Flu seasons hits ECU students
By Jennifer Swartz
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More than 100 ECU students have contracted influenza or flu-like illnesses since students returned to campus on Jan. 2, but officials aren't worried yet.

The majority of cases have been confirmed as the H1N1 virus, Jolene Jernigan, director of East Carolina University Student Health Services, said Thursday.

ECU, which serves as a surveillance site for the state, has had enough confirmed cases that samples sent to Raleigh for research are now limited to students who had a flu shot but got sick anyway.

University health officials suspect the number of students affected by the flu is much higher than 100 because many do not seek treatment or fail to meet the criteria for such classification.

But there is no reason yet to think this season is particularly problematic.

“We don't really have a long history yet, “ Jernigan said. “We won't know for another week or so if we're in the middle of the peak of it or on the downswing.”

Attempts to reach Pitt County health officials were unsuccessful. University officials said reports from public health leaders indicate flu numbers in Greenville are similar to those of ECU.

Since Jan. 2, 2.4 percent of patient visits to university health services have been for flu or flu-like symptoms, officials said. That figured jumped to 9 percent last week.

As of Wednesday, 7.5 percent of students who sought care were treated for the illnesses, university officials said. There are about 27,000 students enrolled at the university.

Lindsey Smith, 26, a senior from Wilson who plans to work in health education after college, said she had no fear of being felled by the virus. “No, because there's nothing I can do about it,” she said. “I'm not worried about it; it's just the flu.”
Caroline Marks, a business and marketing major from Raleigh, was a bit more concerned. “It doesn't surprise me because everyone's sick right now,” she said of fellow students and co-workers. “I'm worried, yeah I guess. I can't afford to get sick ... but it's not holding me back from going to school.”

Keeping hands off faces, washing up, applying hand sanitizer, avoiding crowded places and covering coughs are good practices toward staying well in winter, Jernigan said. “People don't realize the average person touches their face 300 times a day,” Jernigan said. “You do the best you can,” she said.

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State student government leaders to meet in Greenville

Members of the UNC Association of Student Governments are meeting at East Carolina University this weekend to continue discussing ways to improve student input in tuition and fees decisions.

President Atul Bhula and members of the association will vote on legislation that supports Bhula’s attempts to obtain a vote on the UNC-system Board of Governors.

Bhula currently is a student non-voting member of the board.

Phillip Dixon, a board member who was student body president at ECU in the 1960s, will be attending the meeting to tell the association about the history of the Board of Governors.

Dixon, who was invited to the meeting by Bhula, said he also hopes to answer any questions the association might have about budget cuts. Bhula said he plans to invite other board members and UNC administrators to future meetings.

“My goal is to bridge that connection between ASG and the Board of Governors as well as the faculty,” he said.

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Aetna-UNC Health Care stalemate continues

By Eric Ferreri - Staff Writer

Chapel Hill--A dispute between Aetna and UNC Health Care over reimbursement is no closer to resolution, the public health system's CEO said Thursday.

As a result, Aetna customers who receive services through UNC - including about 8,000 in the Triangle - will likely soon have to pay higher, out-of-network fees for their care.

Though Aetna's contract with UNC expired at the beginning of January, it was extended to Feb. 5.

Speaking to the UNC-Chapel Hill Board of Trustees, health care system CEO William Roper said Thursday that the health care system and the health insurance giant remain at an impasse. UNC wants higher fees paid to its doctors and facilities that treat Aetna members, and the insurance company is trying to keep costs down for employers that purchase coverage for their workers.

"We are not going to subsidize Aetna," Roper said. "So we are about to end that relationship unless they change their minds."

Aetna spokesman Walt Cherniak confirmed Thursday that the two sides are at a standstill.

This month, UNC and Aetna sent letters to patients explaining the situation. Aetna argued that it hoped to keep costs down for customers. And Roper urged patients to let Aetna know they don't want to have to pay more to go to the hospital or doctor they choose.

By state law, pregnant women and patients undergoing care for chronic conditions may be allowed to keep receiving care at UNC or an affiliated facility. But some will need to file "transition of care" forms with Aetna. Most eventually will need to find new in-network providers.
These disputes happen.

In December 2009, Cigna and UNC Health fought over a new contract but resolved their differences that month.

This past summer, Aetna agreed to a new deal with Novant Health, the Winston-Salem hospital system with facilities across the state, but only after a three-month battle that included a lawsuit.

And in 2007, more than four months after dropping WakeMed from its network, UnitedHealthcare signed a new contract with Wake County's largest health system.

In the Novant and UnitedHealthcare cases, patients lost coverage for a few months before the disputes were resolved.

In related news:
Roper said Thursday that he was elated to hear President Barack Obama, in his State of the Union speech this week, voice clear support for continued funding for academic research.

"It's music to my ears and the ears of our faculty," said Roper, also dean of the UNC School of Medicine.

Researchers in that school brought in $424 million in research grants in 2010, more than half of the entire university's funded research. Of that, $85 million came from federal stimulus funds, doled out over the last two years to spur economic growth.

"We have made very good use of those extra two years of funding," Roper said. "We've had extraordinary success."

UNC-CH hired a new dean of dentistry Thursday. She is Jane Weintraub, a former UNC-CH professor now on the dentistry faculty at the University of California, San Francisco, which is considered one of the nation's top dental schools. She starts July 1.

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Despite Obama’s Call, No Rush in R.O.T.C.’s Return to Campus

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

In his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, President Obama called for college campuses to “open their doors to our military recruiters” and the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

This would have been an explosive statement with wide ramifications 40 years ago, at the height of the Vietnam War, but in today’s context, it is basically symbolic. The hostility between universities, many of them now dependent on federal funding, and the military, with the draft long over, is much diminished.

Military recruiters have already been on most college campuses for years. And since Congress last month repealed “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the policy that banned gay men and lesbians from serving openly in the military, most of the elite universities with no R.O.T.C. programs have indicated that they are prepared to bring the military onto campus.

But that is no guarantee that such programs will materialize. For one thing, the military has limited resources for new R.O.T.C. units. For another, the level of student interest is extremely low, with no more than 10 to 20 students at these campuses participating in nearby R.O.T.C. programs now, though that could change if units were more convenient to campus.

“No new schools or universities interested in R.O.T.C. programs will each be evaluated” with an eye toward “the most efficient use of these resources,” Cynthia Smith, a spokeswoman for the Pentagon, said Wednesday.

Diane Mazur, a law professor at the University of Florida, a former Air Force officer and author of “A More Perfect Military,” said: “I would be the most surprised person in the world if the military came back to Harvard or Yale. The military doesn’t have the staffing or the funding, and it’s very expensive to start a new R.O.T.C. detachment.”

She added: “Both sides have to dance to make it work, and the military isn’t in a position to expand these programs.”

The Pentagon says that only two schools — Vermont Law School in South Royalton, Vt., and William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul — have barred military recruiters.
But as soon as Mr. Obama and the military certify the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” Vermont and William Mitchell will allow recruiters on campus, spokesman for both said on Wednesday. It is not clear when that might happen, but Mr. Obama said in his speech that he expected it to occur “this year.”

At the same time, the elite Ivy colleges that resisted the military in the 1960s and 1970s now say they are ready to welcome R.O.T.C. units.

Shortly after “don’t ask, don’t tell” was repealed, Drew Faust, the president of Harvard, said in a statement: “I look forward to pursuing discussions with military officials and others to achieve Harvard’s full and formal recognition of R.O.T.C.”

Richard Levin, Yale’s president, said last month that the university was “eager to open discussions about expanding opportunities for students interested in military service.”

Stanford has formed an ad hoc faculty committee that is considering whether to expand its relationship with the military. The committee, which met Tuesday night as Mr. Obama delivered his speech, is expected to make its recommendations in a couple of months.

Columbia has formed a task force on military engagement. Ron Mazor, co-chairman of the task force and a student at Columbia Law School, said Wednesday that town-hall-style meetings would start next month, as would a student survey on attitudes toward the military. He said the results would be reported to the university senate, of which he is a member, by March 4.

Lee Bollinger, Columbia’s president, said in an earlier statement that repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” “effectively ends what has been a vexing problem for higher education, including at Columbia, given our desire to be open to our military, but not wanting to violate our own core principle against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.”

But the universities were forced to carve out exceptions to that policy in the late-1990s and early 2000s, when Congress, backed by the Supreme Court, denied them federal money if they spurned military recruiters. They stood to lose hundreds of millions of dollars, not just in defense grants but from across the federal government. (Vermont has lost about $500,000 a year in grants, a spokesman said, and William Mitchell simply did not compete for certain grants so did not actually lose money, said Eric Janus, its president and dean.)

As for the R.O.T.C. programs, the Pentagon said it had “disestablished” its units on certain military campuses at the height of the Vietnam War. Ms. Mazur, the law professor, said: “The services made the decision, in an era of downsizing, not to adapt their course content or increase the qualifications of instructors in an effort to meet university requirements,” and so they left.
“It wasn’t worth it to the military to wrestle with these campuses” over the academic qualifications, Ms. Mazur said. Instead, the military established R.O.T.C. units at one centrally located university and allowed students from nearby universities to attend. Students at Harvard, for example, participate in the R.O.T.C. program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; students at Columbia go to Fordham.

The military says that at this point, it has 489 R.O.T.C. units with “cross-town arrangements” with 2,400 universities, allowing almost every student in the country access to a program.

As the universities now move toward recognizing R.O.T.C. programs, they still may hit a snag. Some students are arguing that even with the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the military still does not meet the antidiscrimination requirements of the universities because it bars people who are transgender.

At Stanford, Alok Vaid-Menon, a sophomore and president of Stanford Students for Queer Liberation, said his group wanted to keep R.O.T.C. off the campus, though still allow students to participate in programs at nearby campuses, until the military accepted transgender students. He said that he had tried to raise support for this view from students at other universities but that the response so far had been “bleak.”

Mr. Vaid-Menon said there were about 10 transgender students at Stanford, which he said was about the same number of those involved in R.O.T.C.