The UNC enterprise

If anything qualifies as a sacred cow in state budgeting these days, it's dollars for student enrollment increases at North Carolina's public universities.

By raising entrance requirements and lowering the cap on the incoming freshmen class, universities can act to restrict student enrollment.

Not surprisingly, North Carolina policymakers have taken quite the opposite approach over the last several decades. They've wanted to expand educational opportunity, giving greater numbers of people the chance at a better quality of life that a college education can provide.

So, governors and legislators have backed efforts to make more and more money available to expand universities and increase student enrollment.

For the past several years, UNC campuses have expanded by roughly 7,000 additional students in each year. Those expansions cost almost $80 million a year. That's an accumulating expense. It means the overall cost of running the university system rises $80 million in each and every year, and that the system grows by about 7,000 students in each and every year.

Today, more than 215,000 students attend UNC system schools.

But during the state's last budget crunch in 2001 and 2002, despite more than a few references by legislators to the Great Depression, the money to expand university enrollment wasn't touched.

Now we face another budget squeeze, a far worse economy and, no doubt, many more references to the Great Depression.

UNC officials talk of eliminating 1,600 jobs and 660 faculty positions as they prepare to whack their budgets by as much as 7 percent. Courses will be eliminated. Classes will be crowded. Attention to students' individual needs will lessen.

At N.C. State University, one proposal is to drop tutoring and advising programs, and cut counseling by 25 percent. At N.C. Central University, 340 course selections would be eliminated. At UNC-Chapel Hill, support for teaching assistants would fall.

But officials at UNC-Chapel Hill have also put forward the possibility of limiting enrollment. The proposal wasn't warmly embraced by Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand, a key UNC system supporter at the legislature. The Fayetteville Democrat was quoted in The News & Observer of Raleigh saying that he would hate to turn students away.

Rand, like any number of his colleagues in the legislature, doesn't want to be seen putting up a road block to opportunity.

But tough times will make for some tough decisions. Expanding opportunity for some while diminishing the quality of education for all may not make for such a good trade.

Of course, anyone managing any enterprise always has to shift and trade priorities. And even in a down economy, sometimes those shifts can happen without damaging the overall enterprise. In this case, getting rid of courses and increasing class sizes is damaging the enterprise.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
ECU fetes Darwin, unveils contest winners

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 12, 2009

The world will soon have two new named species of spiders.

Jason Bond, biologist at East Carolina University, discovered 25 species of trap door spider in California in 2008. Donors to the Department of Biology at ECU will name two of those spiders.

Pam Tripp and the Evans family, Cindy, Phil and son, Nathaniel, will choose names for two of the species discovered by Bond.

Tripp will name her spider after her husband, Dan. The Evans family has not decided on a name yet.

Between Tripp, the Evans family and a third anonymous donor, the department raised around $10,000 for bio-diversity research.

The department announced a contest to name the spiders several months ago with the highest donor winning the honor of naming a spider. Bond decided to allow both donors to choose names for his spiders, some of which have already been named for celebrities including Angelina Jolie, Neil Young and Stephen Colbert.

The winners were announced Thursday at the department's celebration of the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin.

The department celebrated the event with tours of the building, workshops in teaching evolution in high school and a lecture by Bond.

Bond's lecture focused on the human effects of bio-diversity on the planet and what people should do to slow the disappearance of species.

"There is so much out there and we are losing it at an alarming rate," Bond said. "We are losing what we don't even know is out there."

Bond said that Americans need to teach their children to love nature, require biology at every educational level, join the world-wide Convention on Biological Diversity and support academic programs at universities.

"There is a connection with this and human well-being and quality of life," Bond said.

"Our lives are dependent on the nature that surrounds us."

Bond said there is still much work to do in discovering and naming species and working to slow climate change that may eliminate species before they can be identified.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9565.

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Alter ego 'Mr. Big,' notorious red suit may take the stage

The Daily Reflector

Friday, February 13, 2009

Carroll V. Dashiell Jr.'s alter ego Mr. Big has been a crowd favorite at East Carolina University's Tribute to Motown concert each year.

In 2008, he promised to retire the red suit associated with Mr. Big. But with this year's concert at 8 p.m. Saturday — Valentine's Day — Mr. Big may make just one more appearance. The concert will be held in Wright Auditorium.

"You will have to attend to find out. One never knows," Dashiell said. He is the musical director for the Motown review concert.

As Mr. Big, Dashiell sings with roses in hand.

The 13th annual concert is presented by the School of Music and the Office of Co-Curricular programs as a Black History Month event.

The concert is tribute to Motown, Detroit, where Motown Records played an important role in the racial integration of popular music. It was the first record label owned by an African American and the first label to primarily feature African-American artists.

Dashiell brings together a distinguished ensemble of musicians and vocalists for the event and the program will include such Motown classics as "Respect," "Dr. Feel Good," "Dancin' in the Street," "Sugar Pie Honey-Bun," "Kansas City," and "My Girl."

The core program is the same each year, but always includes a few surprises from today's most popular music.

Returning this year will be vocalist Aishah who will be assisted by Bill Ford as a guest pianist. Jon Ozment will also play the piano and keyboards with Dashiell on bass, Jeff Bair, Jeremiah Miller and Vaughn Ambrose on saxophones, Joe Phillips and Jared Wofford, guitar; Joey Stultz and Quintin Mallette, ethnic percussion; Mitch Butler and Karen Peele, trombone; Bryan Castro and Ben Sparrow, tenor sax; and Tim Odom and Clifton Smith, trumpet.

Dashiell's children will also take the stage. Carroll V. Dashiell III will play the drums and Cameron and Christie Dashiell will provide back up vocals with Deb Nansteel, Katy Avery and Rochelle Rice as 3 D.

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Anonymous threat to ECU investigated

The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 12, 2009

East Carolina University officials received an anonymous e-mail threat on Thursday that violence would take place on campus, according to a press release from the university.

ECU police, student affairs, academic affairs and safety representatives immediately implemented threat-assessment techniques and standard operating procedures, according to John Durham, executive director of university communications. They determined that the threat was not credible, that there was no immediate danger to the university community and that there was no need to close buildings or take any other extraordinary steps. Law enforcement officials at the local, state, and federal levels were informed of the e-mail.

"We believe that students, faculty and staff should feel free to pursue their normal activities," Durham said in the release.

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Harrison gets front row seat to BCS title game

By Mike Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 12, 2009

As he stood on the field of Dolphins Stadium in Miami, absorbing for a moment being a part of the 2009 FedEx BCS National Championship between Florida and Oklahoma, Darrell Harrison couldn’t help but think of the long road and many people involved in getting him here. No doubt he had come a long way from the days of officiating seventh-grade games in Vanceboro — or most anywhere in eastern North Carolina.

“I’m not sure there’s a crossroads you can think of (Interstate) 95 east that I haven’t been to and officiated,” said Harrison, whose day job is president of Document Solutions East, a Xerox company. “... If they had a football and two teams playing, I’d go do it.

“I had the desire to make this go,” he said. “I would go anywhere, anytime to officiate a game.”

A career that has spanned more than two decades and included 13 postseason games reached a pinnacle on college football’s biggest stage on Jan. 8. Harrison, an Atlantic Coast Conference official the past 17 years, was a side judge, the position at which he is stationed throughout the regular season.

He worked the sideline of eventual champion Florida, which won 24-14, calling the interactions with players and coaches “very professional.”

“You could tell they had been there before,” Harrison said.

But this was a first for Harrison, who was accompanied by his wife, Sandy, and 16-year-old son, Lucas. He has had other high-profile assignments, but none matched the intensity of the national championship, he said.

“I’ve been very blessed to have the Rose Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl,” Harrison said. “The Rose Bowl was incredibly special. It’s one of my favorite memories. The Fiesta Bowl was a fantastic experience. ... But to know that the winner of this game is the national champion is quite special.

“I’m just so blessed that it finally happened,” Harrison said. “The circumstances for which it happened, a bunch of things came together.”

The officiating crew for the national championship rotates annually among the six BCS conferences, but a conference is not permitted to have a team and its officials in the same game — Harrison and his colleagues would have been bumped this year if an ACC team had secured a spot in the championship.

“Some of our guys got knocked out several years ago because Florida State was in there,” he said.

Performance evaluations determine who makes the cut. Harrison was joined by field judge Jerry McGee, referee and crew chief Ron Cherry, line judge Rich Misner, head linesman Sam Stephenson, umpire Tom Laverty, head linesman Sam Stephenson, replay official Ted Jackson and alternate Tom DeJoseph. McGee is an East Carolina University Athletics Hall of Fame member and president of Wingate College. The BCS title game was the last of his officiating career of 404 games — 300 in Division 1, including 20 bowl games.

Unlike the regular season when officials have a week between games, the ACC crew had five weeks between being notified to kickoff. Harrison said he was “absolutely stunned” when he got the call on Dec. 10 and tried to stay tight-lipped about his selection for the big game. He did tell his wife and son.

“I’ll never forget my son’s reaction,” Harrison said. “It was priceless.”

Word eventually leaked out.
“Somehow it got on the Internet, and I’m getting all these e-mails,” Harrison said. “Here I’m sitting in Greenville trying to be low-key.”

During the five-week buildup by national media, Harrison said he tried to avoid reading or watching any reports about the two teams.

“Imagine for five weeks trying to avoid hearing about that game,” he said.

His individual preparation focused on reading through the rule book a few times in case “of that special freak play.” As a group, the officials arrived three days before the game and reviewed videos prepared by supervisor Doug Rhodes, a former FBI agent, highlighting types of plays and blocking infractions.

“The conference, and Doug especially, did a great job of preparing us from a video standpoint,” Harrison said.

Harrison said he had worked with each official at least once, but the crew was working together for the first time. Aside from a couple of microphone and timing glitches, the officials kept a low profile, which is how Harrison wants it.

“It’s just great to have worked the game and not have any controversy from an officiating standpoint,” he said. “If it’s VMI and Coastal Carolina, you want players to decide and coaches to coach us to just go in and do our job. ... We’re a non-factor. That’s the goal of any crew in any game. You want to be sure the game is played fairly, competitively, by the rules, and then when it’s all said and done, the officials are not a part of the story.”

Harrison had a call reviewed on just the second play from scrimmage after Oklahoma quarterback Sam Bradford completed a pass to Manuel Johnson. Harrison’s mark of the ball for a first down was confirmed by replay.

Late in the fourth quarter, Laverty got caught in the middle of a play and was knocked down by Florida quarterback Tim Tebow. He was not injured.

“There was a big to-do about he was the last guy to tackle Tebo,” Harrison said. “Thankfully it wasn’t me. I’m over on the sideline. If they come my way, I can either back pedal or get off to the side.”

Harrison got involved in officiating as a way to stay close to the game. He was on the team at East Carolina University for two years — “it would be pretty liberal to say I played” — but did not want to invest the time in coaching as his brother had.

The late Charlie Vincent, who was then with the Greenville Recreation and Parks Department, got him started. He learned the basics from George Fuller and James Heath, who still oversee officials for the area.

“I still use today some of the basics they taught me,” Harrison said.

An opportunity to officiate an ECU scrimmage opened the door to the college game for Harrison. A letter from then-ECU coach Art Baker helped Harrison join a group of officials for independent schools in 1986. Another recommendation letter from then-ECU coach Bill Lewis helped Harrison land a spot in the ACC.

“Wow, what a whirlwind — 1992,” he said. “I can remember it like it was yesterday.”

And he flashed back to all that as he prepared to call the biggest game of his life.

“Back then there was no better way to end the week than being at a game on Friday night, being out there with the kids, coaches, the fresh field, just the whole Friday night atmosphere,” Harrison said. “A lot of people have helped me a long the way. I knew I was representing them in a sense, so I wanted to be darn sure I did the best I could possibly do.

“It’s humbling. I’m just thankful to the good Lord and a lot of people, including my wife and son, to have had that opportunity.”

Contact Mike Grizzard at mgrizzard@coxnc.com and 329-9580.

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In-state tuition may go up 3.9%

UNC governors meet this morning

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - The UNC system's Board of Governors will likely raise tuition and fees this morning by 3.9 percent, on average, for in-state undergraduate students at public universities.

University officials will then hope the state's revenue situation doesn't get so dire that the state legislature is forced to increase tuition even more.

The increases under review today could have been higher, and the extra revenue would prove useful for a university system preparing for significant cuts to its budget. Many campuses had asked for larger increases.

But UNC system President Erskine Bowles chopped each request by one-third, citing the state's dire economy and the economic stresses facing students and their families.

The board's budget and finance committee approved the rate increases Thursday, clearing the way for a likely endorsement today from the full board. Under the plan, tuition and fees for in-state undergraduates will increase by as little as $71 at East Carolina University to as much as $431.65 at UNC-Wilmington. A 3.9 percent tuition increase is low compared to tuition increases at public universities in many other states.

In New York, public university tuition may rise 14 percent. And Virginians next year will face tuition increases of nearly 7 percent at public universities, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

David Young, a UNC system board member from Asheville, said he was pleased to see a tuition increase far lower than the double-digit increases that often come during hard times. In 2003, the last time the university faced significant budget cuts, tuition went up more than 24 percent.

"I think the [3.9 percent] average is phenomenally low," Young said.

But the tuition increases came with a warning from former Gov. Jim Holshouser, a longtime emeritus member of the board. If the state's revenue collections don't improve soon, the legislature may have to raise tuition again, he cautioned.

"No matter what we do here ... I don't think we'll be able to give the students much assurance about what tuition and fees will look like in the fall," he said. "This is just the first step in what I feel will be a long and painful process."

State Sen. Richard Stevens, a Wake County Republican co-chairman of the Senate education/higher education committee, said it is too soon to speculate about what the legislature might do.
A former chairman of the UNC-Chapel Hill Board of Trustees, Stevens said he'd like legislators to give education funding at least some level of special treatment.

"I view education differently than other parts of state government," Stevens said. "We could postpone building a park. But we can't postpone a year of school."

At least 40 percent of all revenue raised through tuition at each campus will be used for need-based financial aid.

NCSU will set aside 60 percent for financial aid, Chancellor James Oblinger said. His campus had hoped for a larger rate increase that would have netted $900,000 more in revenue.

"I'd like to have what we asked for," Oblinger said, "but I certainly understand what [Bowles] is trying to convey to the public."

Universities are now preparing for permanent budget cuts of up to 7 percent this year. At that level, the university system would be forced to cut more than 1,600 jobs, including 600 faculty positions.

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PROPOSED TUITION AT TRIANGLE CAMPUSES

Here's how a series of tuition and fee increases would apply to undergraduate programs. Note: Figures do not include room, board, books and other costs of college. At least 40 percent of all revenue raised by tuition increases must be used for need-based financial aid.

N.C. STATE UNIVERSITY: In-state undergraduates would pay $5,396 in tuition and fees next year, a 4.9 percent increase. Undergraduates from other states would pay $17,881, a 2.5 percent increase.

UNC-CHAPEL HILL: In-state undergraduates would pay $5,456.16 next year, a 4.4 percent increase. Undergraduates from other states would pay $23,344.16, a 5.5 percent increase.

N.C. CENTRAL UNIVERSITY: In-state undergraduates would pay $3,861.21 next year, a 3.5 percent increase, while their out-of-state counterparts would pay $13,930.21, a 3.4 percent increase.

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Tuition hike OK'd by UNC board of governors

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - The UNC system's Board of Governors approved today a plan to raise tuition and fees by 3.9 percent, on average, for in-state undergraduate students at public universities.

Under the plan, tuition and fees for in-state undergraduates will increase by as little as $71 at East Carolina University to as much as $431.65 at UNC-Wilmington. The 3.9 percent tuition increase is low compared to tuition increases at public universities in many other states.

In New York, public university tuition may rise 14 percent. And Virginians next year will face tuition increases of nearly 7 percent at public universities, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

The increase now goes to the state legislature as it prepares a state budget for fiscal year 2009-10. University officials hope the state's revenue situation isn't so dire that the state legislature is forced to increase tuition even more.

Many state universities had sought higher increases, but UNC system President Erskine Bowles chopped each request by one-third, citing the state's economy and the economic stresses facing students and their families.

Here's how a series of tuition and fee increases would apply to undergraduate programs at Triangle universities. Figures do not include room, board, books and other costs of college. At least 40 percent of all revenue raised by tuition increases must be used for need-based financial aid.

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Islamic women help fund UNC chair

YONAT SHIMRON, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - American universities have benefited for years from the largess of Middle Eastern Arabs who have contributed money for the establishment of mosques and centers for Islamic thought on campuses.

But that money, typically from Saudi Arabia, came draped in the values of a deeply conservative and patriarchal strand of Islam known sometimes as Wahhabism.

On Thursday, UNC-Chapel Hill accepted a different kind of financial offer for an endowed chair in Islamic studies.

The money will be raised by the Turkish Women's Cultural Association, an Istanbul-based nonprofit that promotes the mystical strand of Islam known as Sufism and is devoted to social service and education.

The association will work to raise nearly $700,000 for the Kenan Rifai Distinguished Professorship of Islamic Studies, named after a Turkish Sufi master who died in 1950. The university will then apply to the state for a matching grant through the N.C. Distinguished Professors Endowment Trust Fund.

The arrangement, said UNC Provost Bernadette Gray-Little, represents a "striking demonstration of shared ideals among people of widely different backgrounds."

Representatives from the women's cultural association -- who, though Muslim, do not veil -- attended a public announcement Thursday. For leader Cemalnur Sargut, it was her 10th visit to UNC. She first came for a festival eight years ago, and developed good relations with UNC's religious studies department and with Islamic Studies professor Carl Ernst.

"They brought this proposal to us last fall, and we presented it to the dean," said Ernst. He hopes the new chair will become a reality within a year or two.

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Gov. Beverly Perdue is opposed to requiring North Carolina state employees to pay a premium for their own health insurance.

Perdue's office largely confirmed a comment made by the head of the State Employees Association of North Carolina.

Association executive director Dana Cope said Tuesday the governor told him last week she would veto any bill requiring employees be charged for their own premiums.

Perdue spokeswoman Chrissy Pearson said the governor understands the State Health Plan is under financial strain but won't support a premium increase as part of the solution.

Forcing workers to pay a monthly premium could generate hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The State Health Plan may need an extra $1.2 billion over the next two years to cover claims.

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Expert says region may do well as alternative vacation spot for tourists

February 11, 2009 - 8:09 PM

Jim Kleckley, the director of ECU's Bureau of Business Research, said that because the region's tourism is largely seasonal, good numbers on the recession's effect will not be available for several more months.

But what is clearly in Eastern North Carolina's favor, he said, is that last year's tourist season was strong until September. Further, he said, the region has offerings that make it an attractive option for a traveler who still wants to venture away from home - but not as far.

Kleckley was one of the keynote speakers Wednesday at a conference on sustainable tourism in New Bern. The event, sponsored by ECU and several organizations tasked with economic and tourism development, drew about 150 people to the New Bern Riverfront Convention Center.

"In a lot of ways, we don't really know what's going to happen," Kleckley said. "What is good for us is that gas is down, and because of the economy, we expect to be a big draw for people in other parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee. We have historical sites that they can see with a day's drive, and our beaches are different than the ones in Myrtle Beach."

Kleckley said last year's drop in tourists in September isn't necessarily indicative of what this year will be like first.
"The spending reductions we're seeing are on durable goods - cars, washing machines, things like that," he said. "But they are still going to shopping centers; they are still going out to eat. Maybe not as often, but they are. The discretionary spending is still there."

Kleckley thinks this is the year that Eastern North Carolina sees a different kind of tourist. That traveler's profile is not yet known, but one piece is clear: That tourist is one who has never considered Eastern North Carolina as a vacation destination.

"We're seeing a shift right now, though we can't exactly define it," he said. "But this is the time when a tourist who would normally go to Europe isn't going, or when a family that would normally go to Disney World every year isn't going.

"Instead, for the first time, a person who has never thought about Eastern North Carolina is really intrigued by the idea of renting a beach house for a few days and then tooling around the region to see what he can find. We are the alternative to Disney World."

Sandy Chamberlin, who directs the convention center and tourism-related matters in Craven County, believes that the alternative-travel trend will serve this area well.

"New Bern is a hub in a whole lot of ways," she said. "We have Tryon Palace, we have the waterfront, we have the convention center and hotels. There is a lot here that makes us a regional hub for people who are looking for something to do that is only a few hours away."

Robert O'Halloran, the chairman of ECU's Department of Hospitality Management, said success in tourism comes down to meeting travelers' demands - and one of their newer demands is finding hot spots that go green.

"We're not there yet in the hotel business," he said. "You still have the people who say, 'I paid to use that towel once and then throw it on the floor.' But more and more, you see people who plan their vacations around certain places because of their green business practices."

Jim Davis, Craven County's chief economic developer, said that tourism is not just linked to economic development - it is economic development.

"Economic development, business development, retail and tourism are all intertwined and we try to handle it that way," Davis said. "You need one to help the other function as well as it can. When we're courting a new business, we work closely with the tourism office because at the end of the day, we're part of the same big team, and that's Craven County."

See archived 'Local' stories »
Diving too fast into college

Some students who get early admission regret their choice

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

New research offers yet another argument for why high school students should avoid the college early-admissions frenzy. They may be more likely to regret their decision later in life.

Bad timing is the culprit. "Many young people are being pressured into making college choices before they are developmentally ready," says Michigan State University sociologist Barbara Schneider, author of a report released today that examines the psychological and social implications of admission policies.

Though she says that case "has yet to be made empirically," she cites her forthcoming research suggesting "students who make these choices very early, without having opportunities to explore other options, (in their 20s) report some dissatisfaction with their college choices and lives."

David Hawkins of the non-profit National Association for College Admission Counseling says the findings support some members' concerns that students are being rushed. The group's 2005 survey found that 25% of responding colleges accept some applicants before they start their senior year. Some recruiters have waived application fees or offered priority housing to students who apply as juniors.

The group now bars colleges from admitting a student until after they get a junior year transcript. Harvard, Stanford and other selective schools have softened binding early-admission policies so that admitted students could apply elsewhere, too.

Traditionally, students applied early if they were sure they would enroll there. Adam Sapp, an admissions official at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif., says that's still a good reason. But, he says, "perhaps this study will cause students and families to take more seriously the idea that (admissions) is more about fit than getting into (a selective school) four months ahead of their neighbor."