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ECU trustees discuss university's grim budget, job cuts

By Josh Humphries  
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 26, 2009

The East Carolina University Board of Trustees discussed a grim budget outlook Thursday that may result in job cuts.

Board members met between their normal committee meetings to discuss the state funding crisis. The full board meets at 8:30 a.m. today at the East Carolina Heart Institute.

Chancellor Steve Ballard told board members that the budget will be tight.

The board discussed eliminating programs that only have a few students, but the idea is difficult legally because tenured faculty can not be eliminated.

Cutting staff is not a popular idea among administrators and the university is exploring every way possible to make the budget tighter without losing jobs. Ballard has formed a budget task force to find ways in every department to save money without layoffs.

"I think we need to cut everywhere we can before we touch staff," said trustee Bill Bodenhamer.

But it will be difficult, if not impossible, to balance the budget without losing some positions, Ballard said.

"We cut $20 million this year and did it without layoffs," Ballard said. "But if we get 7 percent over the next two years, we can't do it. We are 80 percent people. Those levels of cuts, $60-70 million, we won't be able to do it without a layoff."

Officials are anticipating a 7 percent budget reduction, or possibly more, for the next two years.

"This is the toughest issue I have faced in my five years here, to maintain the fabric of the university," Ballard said. "There will be severe, but right now unknown, cuts in the next biennium."

Ballard said the university has achieved focus by managing to cut 7 percent from the budget this year without cutting jobs.

The state asked for a 7 percent reversion in state funds, around $20 million for the current fiscal budget.

But officials say that long-term cuts could be harder to swallow and recurring cuts could be very detrimental to the university's mission and may cost jobs.

The university is already leaving vacant positions open, eliminating non-essential travel, eliminating salary increases and working to conserve energy on campus.

Suggestions for cutting the budget that are circulating around campus include furloughs for faculty, salary reductions or incentives for early retirement.

But those suggestions are not within the power of the university or the University of North Carolina system, Kevin Seltz, vice chancellor for administration and finance, told a group of faculty members last week in a special budget meeting. Special legislation would have to be approved in Raleigh to allow any of those cost-cutting scenarios.

The university is working to make sure that budget issues do not affect the overall mission of ECU and cuts
to instruction are to be minimized, Seitz said.

"As we go into 2009-10 we are trying to avoid hurting the mission, but when you get up to 7 percent it is very difficult," Seitz said.

"Our service level may come down a little bit, but we are trying to do it in a way that will not have a severe impact."

UNC President Erskine Bowles is lobbying to make sure that any cuts to the UNC system are one-time cuts. But, Seitz said, it could be a political problem for other agencies to receive permanent cuts while the universities receive a one-time cut.

Gov. Beverly Perdue is expected to submit her budget by mid-April, but it will likely be June 30 before any agencies know exactly how much of a cut they will be facing.

Perdue asked each agency in the state to present budgets with 3, 5 and 7 percent cuts. Officials now believe that most, if not all, state agencies will face 7 percent cuts since the state’s revenues from income taxes are down by 10 percent.

A long list of plans to address the budget include identifying strategic “must fund” programs, revising the current faculty workload policy, increasing energy conservation, combining some positions and potentially merging some centers on campus.

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DA says West Virginia game was a 'recipe for a mess' 

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, February 26, 2009

A decision on criminal charges resulting from violence at last year's ECU-West Virginia football game remains forthcoming three months after the SBI completed its review of the incident.

Pitt County District Attorney Clark Everett said he's trying to untangle the details surrounding allegations of police brutality following the Sept. 6, 2008, Pirate victory. He described the whole event as "a dadgum mess."

After a preliminary investigation, Everett received an extensive report from the State Bureau of Investigation in early November. He has been reviewing those documents since, he said.

He also has reviewed video footage of the incident where officers subdued people in a mob that rushed the field, including online postings on YouTube. Requests to ESPN for access to their coverage of the game were declined, he said.

While some spectators in the stands were not allowed onto the field by officers, others fans were granted access 20 yards away, Everett said.

"It was very clear that the way (officers) were enforcing the law was different around the stadium that day," he said.

Most of the team lending support to the East Carolina University Police Department were off-duty officers from neighboring agencies, including many who had performed the same duty for years, Everett said.

"It's a difficult situation to sort out, get straight and deal with. I want to construct a comprehensive timeline to establish what exactly went wrong," he said.

Everett has seen some things in his video review that, from a distance, appear to be out of line, but he cannot identify the apparent offenders, he said.

"I got a pretty good view of some isolated incidents, but in many others I couldn't tell what department an officer was with," Everett said.

After reviewing the documents and video and whatever personal interviews he conducts, Everett will have to determine whether criminal offenses occurred, either by fans or law enforcement officers, and whether some cases warrant prosecution or a recommendation of disciplinary actions by school or law enforcement officials.

If an officer was clearly out of line and can be identified, he will discuss that with the appropriate law enforcement agency before deciding how to proceed, he said.

Everett would like his findings and whatever recommendations he makes to help officials and law enforcement agencies create clearer procedures, policies and guidelines so the situation will not be repeated, he said.

"You've got a great day going on, ECU's just won a big game, people want to celebrate. You throw a little alcohol in there, with people seeing the situation from different angles, possibly some miscommunication mixed in there, and it's a recipe for a mess," Everett said.
“Maybe they learned something from this experience, because we didn't have this kind of incident again. But we also didn't have this kind of home victory again,” Everett said.

Everett made no projection for the conclusion of his investigation. Before he decides whether his office should or will prosecute anyone, he intends to first present his findings to ECU police officials and give them a chance to review and respond to them, he said.

“I'll want to give ECU officials an opportunity to discuss it with me,” he said.

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Letter: Stimulus plan's 'HIT' provision has support

Friday, February 27, 2009

Cal Thomas's Feb. 18 column, "Stimulus for life," is so full of misinformation that it reads more like science fiction than reality. Thomas opposed the economic stimulus package that recently passed in Congress despite no Republican support in the House and only three Republican supporters in the Senate.

Thomas plays the fear card regarding the health information technology provision of the bill stating that "among other things, it means that a Washington official will monitor treatments to make sure your doctor is doing what the federal government deems appropriate and cost effective."

Responding to this claim, Dr. Nancy Nielsen, president of the American Medical Association and an ardent supporter of the health information technology provision of the stimulus package, stated that such suggestions "are unfounded" and that "there is no such authority in the legislation."

The reality of health information technology is that it will improve health care quality, reduce medical errors, increase efficiency and reduce costs. Expansion of HIT has been recommended by almost every organized medical group in this country, including the AMA and American College of Physicians.

The leadership at Pitt County Memorial Hospital has embraced HIT. Two years ago, the hospital incorporated an electronic medical record in the hospital. This same system will soon be incorporated in the clinics at the Brody School of Medicine, replacing an existing electronic medical record. The benefits of expanding technology are obvious. Patient information is readily available to all providers.

Expansion of health information technology is a win-win situation for patients and providers. Thomas' contention that expansion of HIT will lead to widespread euthanasia is a scare tactic that is, quite frankly, poppycock. The logo of The Daily Reflector states, "Truth in preference to fiction." So, how did Thomas' column get in the paper?

PAUL COOK
Greenville_SPGB

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Letter: Trim pay for university heads, faculty

Friday, February 27, 2009

Drastic times demand drastic actions. In order to avoid or prevent future layoffs or furloughs at ECU (or any public college or university in the UNC system) and add to the country's swelling unemployment ranks, I propose the following considerations.

Reduce all administrative salaries (school directors and up) by 25 percent. Reduce tenured faculty salaries by 10 percent.

Furthermore, I believe all individual salaries of public employees should be pegged downward from the salary level of our governor.

Therefore, now is the appropriate time to get those large administrative salaries under control.

In this economic environment, I'm sure we could replace Chancellor Steve Ballard with a very competent person at half his present salary. If an administrator can't live on a salary of $150,000, then I question his/her fiscal abilities to run the organization. Remember, it's taxpayer money funding these salaries and we as taxpayers should have the final say.

WALTER ZOLLER
Greenville_SPGB
'Most performed opera' lives by the sword at ECU

The Daily Reflector

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Giacomo Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" is the most performed opera in the United States according to Opera America.

East Carolina University will continue this trend when the School of Music Opera Theatre presents "Madama Butterfly" at 7 p.m. Wednesday through March 6 with an additional matinee performance at 2 p.m. March 6 in A.J. Fletcher Recital Hall.

Puccini learned of the story of "Madame Butterfly" in 1900, when he attended a performance in London of a play by David Belasco of the same name.

The Italian composer didn't speak English, but was captivated by the tragic story of Cio-Cio-San, a naive and vulnerable Japanese girl, and was inspired to write his sixth opera. It took him four years to write the music.

For ECU director John Kramar, "Madama Butterfly" was the first opera he ever saw. Much like Puccini, Kramar was unable to understand the Italian songs but was nonetheless moved by the story.

"To this day it remains on my list of favorite stage works," he said. "I have set out to produce an effective, simple version of this Italian masterpiece, in its original language, without the distraction of projected titles. It is my belief that Puccini's work stands on its own."

The two-act opera opens in a Japanese house at the turn of the 20th century. American Naval Officer, Lt. Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, has just purchased the house along with a bride, Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San) who is a former geisha. At the couple's wedding, Butterfly's uncle Bonze becomes angry when he learns that she has renounced her faith to become a Christian. Bonze curses his niece and the wedding party leaves. Pinkerton comforts his bride and the couple fall in love.

Act two is set in the same house several years later. Pinkerton returned the United States, promising to come back in the spring, but more than three years have passed.

A proposal for Butterfly's hand in marriage by a wealthy prince is overshadowed by a letter from Pinkerton saying that he never intends to return to Japan. A canon shot is heard in the harbor, a signal that an American ship has arrived. It's Pinkerton, who has learned he has a son.

With her house decorated in anticipation of her husband's return, Butterfly waits. When he arrives, he is with his new wife, Kate. Pinkerton has come to claim his son by Butterfly and take him back to America. Heartbroken, Butterfly takes her own life with the same sword that her father used to commit hari-kari. The sword reads, "Die with honor when you can no longer live with honor."

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Pirates host Keith LeClair Classic

By nathan summers
The Daily Reflector

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Omaha still rolls right off the tongues of most people associated with East Carolina baseball, though none have had the pleasure just yet of booking a ticket to see the Pirates play in a College World Series.

ECU baseball has long since made itself a fixture in the national framework of college baseball. A regular in the NCAA’s regional rounds, the Pirates are hoping to build the kind of season in 2009 that will begin another flirtation with a trip to Nebraska and the college game’s mecca.

The dream of playing in Omaha took on new meaning when Keith LeClair managed the Pirate program for five seasons from 1998 to 2002, and the dream has become something of a quest since LeClair lost his fight with ALS in 2006.

Now, the Keith LeClair Classic tournament serves as an annual tribute to the former coach. It’s a fitting memorial, in part because it draws prominent clubs from across the country to the Clark-LeClair Stadium, which the coach helped inspire, and also because the tournament so closely resembles a postseason regional.

"It's the second week of the season, and it should be a regional atmosphere," ECU coach Billy Godwin said of this weekend's tournament, in which the Pirates face St. John's today 40 minutes after the tourney's 9 a.m. opening game and Oklahoma State 40 minutes after Game 2. "When I came here, this is what we wanted to create was a regional atmosphere, and to get that type of teams in here.

"I challenged our guys to let them know that — I know we're only talking about the second weekend of the season — these count just as much as those in May."

In his three previous seasons, Godwin's teams have welcomed the likes of Penn State, Virginia Tech, UNC Wilmington, Pepperdine, N.C. State, Western Carolina, Pittsburgh, Michigan and Georgia Southern to town for the LeClair Classic.

According to Godwin, the LeClair legacy will always be safe at ECU.

"We've worked very hard in our program to make the players understand the importance of what coach LeClair did here — his name's on the stadium — and all he meant to Pirate baseball," Godwin said. "We've done everything we can to keep that alive and well in our program. They understand the importance of this, and it's a way for us to reflect back and honor a great man.

"For us to get the quality of teams that we did last year and this year, it says a lot about people wanting to be in our tournament, with our fanbase, and it's just a great environment."

Each year, the Pirates' No. 23 jersey is bestowed upon a different ECU player in honor of LeClair. Past recipients are Brian Cavanaugh, Jamie Page, Chris Powell, Ben Sanderson, Drew Schieber and Adam Witter.

This year, senior Brandon Henderson has carried on the tradition.

"It's a special tournament, a special weekend to be able to honor him and all that he's done for this program," Henderson said. "To go out there and play three really good teams, it's going to be fun."

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Hard times muddy college choices

Recession introduces extra uncertainty for applicants as well as admissions officers

JAY PRICE, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

Record numbers of admissions applications and pools of unusually strong candidates might sound like a dream for admissions directors at the 16 schools in the state university system.

Instead, they are sweating as they ponder the main wave of candidates for the next freshman class. The sour economy that brought such a bounty of applicants has made this a season of uncertainty for admissions directors, who thrive on solid historical data and safe statistical bets.

They simply don't have data for an economy like this, and many fear that their finely tuned systems for predicting how many students will actually enroll may be out of whack. And with schools slashing budgets and dropping instructors, an unexpectedly oversize incoming class is the last thing they need.

"You're seeing this increase in the number of applications and in the quality of the applicants, and you're smiling -- but it's a nervous smile," said Anthony Britt, admissions director at East Carolina University.

His university has notched nearly 18,000 applicants for the freshman class, up almost 14 percent from last year. The system's two largest universities, N.C. State and UNC-Chapel Hill, have received record numbers of applications. NCSU has topped 18,000 for the first time, nearly 1,000 more than it had by this point last year, and hundreds more are expected. UNC-CH, meanwhile, has more than 23,000 applications, 7 percent above the final tally last year.

Many admissions directors think more North Carolina residents might accept admission offers because of tempting in-state tuition. But from there, questions remain: How many students will show up next fall who in prosperous times might have picked an expensive out-of-state or private school? How many others will say yes, they are coming and send in a deposit, then enroll at a less expensive community college?

"We certainly want to enroll enough, but not way too many," said Thomas H. Griffin, director of undergraduate admissions at NCSU. "Classes are going to be hard enough to find as it is."

At UNC-Chapel Hill, admissions officials use statistical modeling that usually helps them predict with accuracy of about 0.5 percent. This year, though, they will lean a bit more on guessing, said Stephen M. Farmer, who oversees undergraduate admissions.

"We continue to model, but we're more skeptical of the model we've been using with good results in the past," he said. His office has started to look at some models that take macroeconomics into account but thinks those will be of only minor help.
"It's a pretty serious guessing game," Farmer said, "because if we miscalculate and enroll hundreds more than we expected, then everyone's educational experience would be compromised."

It's also an unusually troubling time for the students getting those decision letters. The economy affects not only where they are applying but also their chances of getting in, said Elizabeth Gordon, a guidance counselor at Jordan High School in Durham.

"The number of students we have applying to out-of-state and private schools are down, and more kids are applying in-state," Gordon said.

One family's calculus

Even for those finally picking a school elsewhere over a state one, the decision around the family dinner table is harder.

Erin Stewart, 17, a senior at Jordan who hopes to become an aerospace engineer, was accepted at UNC-Greensboro, Appalachian State and NCSU, and at the private University of Dayton in Ohio, her first choice.

"Last year, it was like, if you want to go to Dayton, we'll find a way," Stewart said. "This year, it was more like, we think you need to go to an in-state school."

Only after she got a partial scholarship did her parents agree that going to Ohio could work. She will also have to work year-round instead of just summers to help pay the $32,000-a-year cost.

Applicant trends

The 16 schools in the state university system are seeing some distinctive, and in some cases, seemingly contradictory trends. Most of UNC-CH's increase in applicants this year came from out-of-state residents, who find the school's out-of-state tuition lower than that of most private schools. They face heavier competition, because the UNC system's out-of-state enrollment is capped at 18 percent.

Applications at UNC-Wilmington, meanwhile, are up slightly, but those coming from other states were off 6 percent, which means a notable increase from in-state students.

The number of applicants may not be a record, but the quality has improved dramatically, said Terry Curran, associate provost for enrollment management: The applicants' average SAT score is over 1200, compared with 1178 for applicants last year.

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Economy dictates changes for college athletics

Colleges find ways to save money

ROBBI PICKERAL AND KEN TYSIAC, Staff Writers
Comment on this story

The N.C. State men's basketball team traveled by bus to Virginia Tech on Feb. 8 rather than chartering a plane, saving about $25,000. Fourth-ranked North Carolina plans to do the same thing Wednesday, whittling more than $20,000 from the travel budget.

Clearly, athletic departments are not immune from the nation's economic slide.

"We try to do anything we can to save the university money," Wolfpack coach Sidney Lowe said. "Absolutely. Bus to Virginia Tech, that's not bad. We flew before. But we've taken the bus, and we'll continue to look at that."

Although the administrators of the sports programs at State and UNC say they are insulated from the UNC system's proposed budget cuts -- which could reach 7 percent, eliminating more than 1,000 jobs and canceling hundreds of courses -- local athletic departments are at the mercy of something just as dangerous during a recession: how people spend their dwindling entertainment dollars.

The athletic programs at both schools operate largely without taxpayers' dollars -- their operating budgets are built from income that includes ticket sales, television contracts, postseason funds, advertising and concessions. But with some of those sources of revenue threatened by the economic downturn, athletic departments are feeling the pain.

"We've never had anything close to this," said Jeff Elliott, the ACC's associate commissioner for finance, adding that the league faces the worst budget crunch in its 56 years.

With the national unemployment rate at 7.6 percent and the stock market dipping and diving virtually every other day, the league's member schools haven't felt anything like this, either.
The UNC athletic department, for instance, has instituted a hiring freeze and is taking a close look at overtime pay. Duke (a private school which does not disclose its finances), State and UNC are all considering scheduling games closer to home beginning in 2009-10.

The ACC might try to hold more championships close to its geographic center; that means the league baseball championship at Boston's Fenway Park in 2010, for example, could be a one-year experiment.

And it’s not inconceivable that Lowe and UNC basketball coach Roy Williams could face unpaid furloughs, along with thousands of other state workers.

**That's the ticket**

The biggest impact on athletic department budgets could come from a change in ticket sales.

About a third of Carolina's $61.4 million operating budget in 2008-09 came from football and basketball ticket sales. About 47 percent of State's $36.1 million (which doesn’t include $7 million in scholarship money from the Wolfpack Club) also came from ticket sales.

UNC athletic director Dick Baddour, whose department began an $18 million renovation to Kenan Stadium earlier this month with funds that will be raised from the Educational Foundation (Rams Club), remains cautiously optimistic after seven home sellouts and a bowl trip under coach Butch Davis in 2008. Clint Gwaltney, UNC's associate athletic director in charge of ticket operations, said season ticket football sales, which began Jan. 1, "are going well." It's hard to gauge how well, however, because the first deadline for renewals isn't until the end of the month.

Although season football ticket renewals haven't been sent out yet at N.C. State, officials are optimistic there, too. The Wolfpack generated excitement with first-team All-ACC quarterback Russell Wilson and four consecutive wins to end the 2008 regular season.

"I can almost assure you we will be sold out," Wolfpack Club executive director Bobby Purcell said.

The problem in Raleigh, though, could be basketball. While tickets should continue to be a hot commodity at highly ranked Carolina and Duke, basketball revenues could sink at State, especially if the Wolfpack misses the NCAA Tournament for the third straight season under Lowe. N.C. State athletic director Lee Fowler says he is confident about the basketball, if not the budget.

"With the recruiting class he's [Lowe] got coming in, if he gets another kid or two, [it] could be super," Fowler said. "So I think the outlook for basketball could be really good. ... The economy is more of a concern for me."

**Scaling back travel**

Duke, UNC and State are all reviewing how far to travel.

"For example, in recent history our wrestling team has gone to a tournament in Reno [Nevada]," Blue Devils sports information director Art Chase said. "That doesn't make much sense during these times."

In addition, UNC is cutting the number of players on travel squads and plans to take an item-by-item look at its 2009-10 budget, beginning next month. "Because I think we have to assume that the world will be different next year," Baddour said.

State and UNC have cut costs by chartering 41-seat planes rather than 50-seat planes for men's basketball trips. Wolfpack coaches are being asked to stay two to a room on the road and limit travel for conventions or conferences to once a year. UNC has cut down on the number of rooms teams use on away trips, and all administrative trips to conventions and
conferences have been eliminated.

State's Fowler said football coach Tom O'Brien is considering motoring to Virginia Tech this fall to save money after busing to South Carolina for last season's opener. UNC football took the bus to Virginia in 2008, and plans to do the same thing when it visits the Hokies this fall.

"All ADs across the country are looking for ways to cut back, because there's no question the revenue will drop, I think sizably," said Fowler, who gave each team a travel budget to meet at the beginning of the year. "We've got to make sure that we're being prudent in what we're doing."

**Furloughs a factor**

Local athletic departments might also have to face something other states have already instituted: furloughs.

UNC president Erskine Bowles said last month he would seek legislation to force workers to take time off without pay. That could affect coaches such as Lowe, O'Brien, Williams and Davis, who are considered state employees even though their base salaries come from their athletic departments' operating budgets. Joni Worthington, vice president for communications for the university system, said it's too early to know whether coaches would be subject to furloughs; it depends on details of the legislation.

But it has already happened at Clemson, where the school ordered employees to take five days off without pay by June 30. Tigers senior associate athletic director Katie Hill said state law mandates that Clemson athletic employees are not exempt, even though the department does not get revenue from the state.

According to USA Today, Arizona State football coach Dennis Erickson and basketball coach Herb Sendek will lose 12 days of pay between Feb. 2 and June 30. Oliver Purnell, Clemson's basketball coach, will lose about $4,300 of his $225,000 base salary because of the furlough.

Purnell will probably work through his South Carolina-mandated furlough days -- as might Lowe and Williams, if the same thing happens in the Tar Heel state.

"Even though we're in the state system here and all of that, a lot of times when people here are on holiday and all of that, we're still working," Purnell said. "So we don't look to take any particular time off like that."

**More cost cutting**

Belt-tightening hasn't been confined to the schools.

Last week, the ACC's business committee met in Greensboro to brainstorm about cost cutting. No plans were approved, but school officials talked about how to save money.

Elliott, the ACC's associate commissioner for finance, said universities throughout the nation could save thousands of dollars if the NCAA would eliminate the regional qualifying round for its track meets. (Qualifying times from conference championship meets could be accepted instead for admission to the NCAA championships.)

ACC officials also are considering asking the NCAA to re-examine and possibly lower maximum staffing limits in some sports. The ACC might reintroduce a proposal shot down two years ago that would call for an early signing date for football and eliminate some travel for coaches.

In the meantime, athletes are making the best of the situation.

Although the Wolfpack will fly commercial instead of by charter for the Miami game on March 7, for example, the team will spend an extra day in the Sunshine State during spring break,
and the cost savings on the airline travel will more than offset the additional lodging and meal expenses.

"I guess that's not too bad, huh?" Wolfpack forward Dennis Horner said.

Not yet.

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