THE DAILY CLIPS

March 6, 2008

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

The Greenville Daily Reflector
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    The Wall Street Journal
        USA Today
    The Charlotte Observer
    The Fayetteville Observer
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    Newsweek
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            Time

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ECU chancellor talks enrollment growth

Steve Ballard held an open forum for students Wednesday.

By Jimmy Ryals
The Daily Reflector

East Carolina University is the largest it’s ever been, but it may grow by nearly half during the next decade.

Enrollment at ECU will likely reach 37,000 by 2017, Chancellor Steve Ballard said during an open forum for students Wednesday. Administrators are probing how to accommodate such growth right now, he said.

That figure is based on University of North Carolina System growth projections, Ballard said. The system’s 16 campuses expect to expand by 80,000 students over the next 10 years, and UNC System President Erskine Bowles is pushing each campus to plan for absorbing a fair share of the increase, Ballard said.

“We will certainly do our part,” he told a gathering of more than 50 students at Hendrix Theatre. “Whether it ends up being 37,000 or not is the subject of lots of hard work we’re doing right now.”

ECU enrolls 25,991 students.

Adding 11,000 students is “a pretty tricky problem to address,” interim Provost Marilyn Sheerer said. It may mean shrinking or eliminating academic programs that don’t perform in favor of higher-quality ones, or speeding the growth of distance education offerings, she said.

It also will mean more funding for infrastructure: class-rooms, offices, technology and more, she said.

“Look around, and you know that right now our facilities are really pushed,” she said. The university plans to add more than 40 new faculty members in the fall and finding office space for them is a challenge already, she said.

Earlier this year, Ballard appointed an enrollment management task force to outline expected growth. Led by Judith Bailey, senior executive director of enrollment management, the 22-member body is considering admissions standards, student retention and academic programming, according to a report given to ECU trustees last month.

Planning now will make growth easier down the road, said Marquita Stringfield, a junior who attended the forum Wednesday. Administrators need to focus on how to support diversity as ECU grows, she said.

“I think, over a period of time, that we’ll be able to handle it,” said Stringfield, an elementary education major from Greenville.

“I hope dorms would be improved as well because (they’re) not going to be able to support more people,” said Crystal Ellis, a sophomore health education major from Cary.

Ballard and other administrators took questions from students during the annual chat with the chancellor, sponsored by the ECU Student Union, Student Government and Omicron Delta Kappa.

■ When asked about better lighting on campus, Environmental Health and Safety Director Bill Koch said a consultant will help ECU develop a master lighting plan this summer.

■ When a student asked about keeping costs down in campus eateries, Associate Vice Chancellor for Campus Living and Dining Services Todd Johnson said food vendor Aramark has introduced value meals for the first time.

“We thought that went a long way in terms of trying to keep prices low,” he said.

■ One student asked the administrators to name their favorite things about ECU.

“I just love the spirit of the students,” Ballard said. “That overwhelms me, compared to any institution I’ve been at.”

Koch and Sheerer cited the underdog spirit at ECU.

“Often, we’re seen as sort of down one to (the University of North Carolina at) Chapel Hill or sometimes (North Carolina) State,” Sheerer said. “But we make it happen. We make it happen with fewer resources often.”

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See BALLARD, B3
Campuses are quick to sound the alarms

BY LORENZO PEREZ
STAFF WRITER

Fearing a Virginia Tech-style shooting, colleges and universities haven’t been shy in recent days about broadcasting warnings and launching their new emergency action plans.

With the February killings at Northern Illinois University fresh in their minds, university leaders in North Carolina say they must be willing to respond to potential threats even if some accuse them of overreacting.

After a young woman was found shot dead Wednesday morning near downtown Chapel Hill, UNC safety officials used cell phone text messages and a Web page to disseminate a drill for its campus lockdown procedures after a student invented a story about a masked gunman roaming the campus.

SEE CAMPUSES, PAGE 8A

CAMPUS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

The same day, N.C. State tested the sirens for its new emergency notification system on a campus largely emptied for spring break.

And last week, Elizabeth City State leaders apologized for an ill-conceived drill in which an undercover officer with a fake gun burst into a classroom and terrified students and a professor.

The air-raid-style sirens, text messages, mass e-mail and lockdown plans are signs of a new reality since a student gunman’s rampage left 32 dead at Virginia Tech last April. For students, staff and faculty, however, that does not translate into complete peace of mind.

Everyone realizes now that they don’t live in a bubble, said Tomasi Larry, student body president at N.C. Central University. “It’s on everyone’s radar,” Larry said. “We try to go on with our lives, but it’s always on our minds.”

At Duke University, officials have communicated with students about warning systems, including an emergency Web site, new towers to enhance signals and low-tech tools such as tacking fliers to the walls of residence halls.

Justin Maltesky, a senior from New Jersey, thinks that’s all the university can do. It’s unreasonable to expect a campus to be totally safe, Maltesky said.

“It’s like getting behind the wheel of a car, there are risks,” he said.

“But I don’t feel that Duke is any less safe than any other university.”

Cell phone red alert

At N.C. State, about 12,500 students, faculty and staff members (about 30 percent of the campus community) have registered their cell phone numbers to receive emergency text messages, said David Rainer, the university’s associate vice chancellor for environmental health and public safety.

“The only thing that we really did change after Virginia Tech was we wanted to enhance our ability to notify the campus if there is a campuswide emergency,” Rainer said. “The issue for us is you can’t use one notification tool. You have to use redundant systems, and we operate under the premise that we will, in a major emergency, use all the tools we have to get information out.”

Yet some students and staff still have specific concerns about what they are expected to do if, say, a gun-wielding student storms a classroom building.

Lisa Marshall, a coordinator in N.C. State’s nuclear engineering department, said she still hears students and faculty wonder whether they should block a classroom door with their desks or try to escape through windows.

“How do you get people to move
quickly?" she said. "In that sense, it's about getting people to act."

UNC-Chapel Hill will test the new sirens for its new Alert Carolina campaign March 19, and public safety officials have taken out ads in The Daily Tar Heel student newspaper and on Chapel Hill buses to inform the university community about the program.

Katrina Mullins, 21, a UNC junior majoring in chemistry, said Wednesday the new plan makes her feel safer, though there are dangers in constant warnings.

"The key is not to overuse it," said Mullins. "We already get pummeled with emails... You don't want all these drills so when a real [emergency] happens, people will react."

Kai Werbeck, 30, said it's better to be safe than sorry.

"I think it is, in itself, a good idea to have people connected by their cell phones and by the [alert system] Web site," said the second-year UNC graduate student studying Germanic languages. "Today, I saw it in effect for the first time — my friend got a text message about the shooting at Hillcrest Drive... because it was close to campus."

Yet, Werbeck, who was sitting on the main quad outside the Wilson Library, worries that brief messages like the one his friend received — with few details about the killing and the suspect's whereabouts — could trigger unnecessary panic. He said some of his fellow graduate students considered skipping lunch because they thought the suspect would head toward campus.

The mother of Appalachian State student Aaron Copeland praised the university's decision to lock down the campus during Monday's perceived threat of a masked gunman. Her son called her in the middle of the confusion.

"I panicked and said, 'Go to your dorm room and lock the door and don't let anybody in until you find out more information,'" said Valerie Collins of Eagle Springs.

"Then when I called back, I couldn't get through, and everything was running through my mind from all those other shootings."

Despite the university's efforts to spread the word about the lockdown, Copeland complained that he walked to biology class without hearing anything about it. "I was in the cafeteria, and no one in there had any idea any this was going on," said Copeland, 21.

The lockdown was not 100 percent, Copeland noted. The main entrance of his classroom building was locked, he said, but he was able to get in through a side door.

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FDA: Contaminant found in heparin

BY MARC KAUFMAN
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — Using a new sophisticated test, the Food and Drug Administration has found a “contaminant” in 5 percent to 20 percent of samples of the blood thinner heparin distributed by Baxter International, agency officials said Wednesday. They also increased the reported number of patients who might have died from allergic reactions to the drug from four to 19.

FDA Chief Medical Officer Janet Woodcock said the agency is investigating whether the contaminant, a large molecule similar to heparin, was produced as part of faulty manufacturing or whether it was intentionally added to reduce costs.

The active ingredient for much of the heparin used in the United States comes from China, and the Baxter product came, via intermediaries, from the Changzhou SPL plant outside of Shanghai. FDA officials have acknowledged that the plant was never inspected by the agency, apparently because it was mistaken for another plant with a similar name.

“We don’t know how this heparin-like compound got into the heparin, but we are aggressively investigating it,” Woodcock said. Although it remained uncertain that the contaminant caused the adverse reactions and deaths, she said that the agency and company think it may be connected and that the problem came from the active pharmaceutical ingredients and not from a problem with the Baxter finishing plant in New Jersey.

Heparin, which has been used in medicine for more than 60 years, comes from a compound found in pig intestines.

Woodcock said that the contamination came to light only through using a kind of test never before used by heparin providers.

In a statement, the provider of heparin to Baxter, Scientific Protein Laboratories LLC, said that it had recalled all active ingredients sourced from China that showed signs of possible contamination. But it also said it remained unclear whether the “contaminant” was the cause of the problem. During a call with the media, the FDA speculated that the source of the adverse events may be a contaminant. It is important to note that this theory is speculation at this point, and SPL is participating actively in working with the FDA to pursue this theory as well as others so that we can understand the cause of the adverse events,” the company said in a statement.
UNC asks patients to pay upfront

The hospital joins others that want to have patients pay their share of bills before medical service is provided.

By Jean P. Fisher
Staff Writer

Less than two years after UNC Health Care pledged to ease billing practices some found threatening, the system is again ramping up efforts to collect money from its patients.

As of Saturday, all hospital and physician clinics affiliated with the state-supported health system began asking patients to pay their share of the bill upfront. That includes $15 and $20 co-payments to see a doctor. It also includes big-ticket services such as MRI scans, which under many insurance plans can run into the hundreds of dollars.

UNC Health Care leaders say asking for such payments doesn't conflict with their commitment to be more friendly to patients. In fact, collecting more of what patients owe on the front end will ensure that fewer people get menacing letters, calls from collection agencies or invita-

If they don't, they can set up a no-interest payment plan. McCall said no one will be turned away if they cannot pay.

Khalid S. Ishaq, a patient at UNC Health Care's Ambulatory Care Center in Chapel Hill, said he wouldn't think twice about paying a set co-payment upfront. But he's not sure the health system will accurately estimate other charges. Ishaq, 75, said UNC once billed him more than $1,000 when it turned out he actually owed about $175 after Medicare paid its share of the claim.

SEE UPFRONT, PAGE 4B
COMMON PRACTICE

In collecting patient fees up-front, UNC Health Care is adopting what is already common practice among private medical practices and most major health care systems in North Carolina and across the country.

The private, nonprofit Duke University Health System, for example, has been requesting that patients pay their portion of the bill at the time of service for at least two years.

"That is what most everyone in the market does," said Cecelia Moore, chief operating officer of the Duke Patient Revenue Management Organization, which oversees billing and collections for the Duke system.

Collecting the patient's share of the bill has become increasingly important in recent years as health insurance coverage has become less generous. Many patients have deductibles of $500 or more and then pay 20 percent of the bill.

Any hospital that isn't trying to collect is losing a lot of money, said Dr. Allen Daugird, UNC Health Care's senior vice president for ambulatory care. Even relatively small payments, such as physician co-payments, add up at an institution as large as UNC Health Care, which has about 750,000 clinic visits a year. If every person had a $20 co-payment, for example, that is $15 million.

Daugird said UNC Health Care's data suggest that it must collect most patient fees up front if it is to collect them at all. The chances of collecting payment fall by 60 percent if the system bills the patient after the visit, he said.

STATE FUNDING LIMITED

Though UNC receives taxpayer support each year, less than 5 percent of the system's nearly $1.4 billion operating budget comes from the state.

UNC was in the early stages of adopting its new collection policy when critics mounted a petition effort that charged it was scaring off the poor — the very group the system's charitable mission instructs it to help.

The system's flagship, UNC Memorial Hospital, was established in 1947 with a mission to care for all North Carolinians regardless of ability to pay.

In response to the petition, UNC Health Care's leaders added a financial assistance hot line, posted signs advertising the system's financial aid programs, and postponed making upfront payments the standard system-wide.

UNC Health Care also has hired additional financial counselors to ensure that anyone who needs help will have someone to walk them through all the options, McCall said.

"We want to make every effort to work with people from the very beginning," McCall said.

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Woman shot in Chapel Hill

Police trying to ID body found in area near Franklin St.

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO  STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL — More than 10 hours after police responded to reported gunshots, plain-clothes detectives were still canvassing the idyllic Hillcrest neighborhood for clues in the shooting death of a college-age woman.

As of Wednesday evening, police had not yet identified the victim, a white female in her late teens or early 20s, with blond hair, about 5 feet 6 inches tall and 120 pounds.

Police found her lying in the intersection of Hillcrest Road and Hillcrest Circle, in the shadow of long-leaf pine trees and neo-Colonial homes.

She had been shot multiple times, including at least once in the head, said Lt. Kevin Gunter of the Chapel Hill Police Department. He said there was no indication of a struggle or sexual assault.

"We're not leaving anything out as a possibility," Gunter said.

Randy Young, a spokesman for UNC-Chapel Hill police, said officials have distributed the victim's description to the faculty, staff and students via radio, e-mail, voice mail, cell phone text messaging, emergency phone line and an Internet page.

She was wearing a short-sleeve, navy blue shirt with a red circle and a white symbol in the center, a gold necklace with a locket, gray sweat pants and blue-gray-and-white Starbury sneakers, a low-priced shoe endorsed by New York Knicks guard Stephon Marbury.

Starbury shoes are sold only in Steve & Barry's stores, which does not have a location in the Triangle. The nearest stores are in High Point and Wilson.

The Hillcrest neighborhood lies east of Franklin Street between downtown and University Mall. A smorgasbord of architecture spills down every side of a high, wooded hill of rolling green lawns and stone walls. Down the hill to the north are apartment complexes and other rental housing. Nearby Roosevelt Drive, the Bolin Creek Trail and Battle Park are popular with runners and walkers.

SEE SHOT, PAGE 48

In other cases since then, authorities have charged four men with killing relatives or close acquaintances.

Last week, Jacobs' 20-year-old son, Gabriel Jacobs, was found dead with a gunshot wound after crashing a pickup truck into a utility pole on N.C. 86 north of Hillsborough.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office does not know who shot him or his mother. A judge found insufficient evidence to charge two suspects. District Attorney Jim Woodall has said charges against the only remaining suspect, Montez Stevons, will not hold up unless the Sheriff's Office can find more evidence against him.

In the case of the shooting death, it did not appear that the victim lived in the Hillcrest neighborhood.

"This is a very hard, sobering experience," said Deborah Dunning, whose house overlooks the intersection where the victim lay.

"This kind of violence is a problem we all need to be worried about. We have to work together to make sure our communities are safe."

Wednesday's killing was Orange County's seventh homicide since late November.

The death of Eva Jacobs in her Cedar Grove home Nov. 24 remains unsolved.

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