THE DAILY CLIPS

March 12, 2010

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

The Greenville Daily Reflector
The Raleigh News & Observer
The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
USA Today
The Charlotte Observer
The Fayetteville Observer
The Greensboro News & Record
Newsweek
U.S. News & World Report
Business Week
Time

East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481
Editorial: **Teaching partnership focuses on training, preparation**

The first students to come to Greenville for a college education more than 100 years ago did so to prepare for careers in the classroom. The General Assembly founded the East Carolina Teachers Training School to address an absence of educators, particularly in eastern North Carolina, and that has been central to the university throughout its development.

So it speaks to the very core of East Carolina University’s mission that it would enter into an agreement with Pitt County Schools and other local education groups to improve teacher training and preparation. With grant funding in place, this program looks like a promising initiative that will serve both East Carolina and area school children.

Ample evidence indicates that the most important determinant of a child’s success in school is the quality of the teacher at the front of the classroom. According to Teach for America, a non-profit organization specializing in teacher training, the best educators are those who set ambitious goals, constantly evaluate their methods and ensure that all involved — parents and students — are invested in the process.

For first-year teachers, that poses a daunting task. Even after graduating with a degree from an strong education program like that at East Carolina, the responsibility of a school year — with its daily challenges and unexpected obstacles — can be terribly difficult. Some new teachers thrive, to their students’ benefit, while others can whither.

The goal, then, becomes the preparation and training of new teachers so they can hit the ground running. And in Pitt County, an $8.8 million grant received late last year from the U.S. Department of Education may help in that important effort. East Carolina, in partnership with the school systems in Pitt and Greene counties, and with several education organizations in the area, aims to improve the quality of all teachers, with a focus on that all-important first year.

The partnership aspect warrants emphasis. This is the first such working relationship between East Carolina, Pitt County Schools and Greene County Schools. All sides speak with optimism about the arrangement, as they should. Harnessing the collective effort of these entities is bound to create a more effective program.

As the only recipient of that grant in North Carolina, this program will be under heavy scrutiny as it proceeds. However, with that close watch will be the hope for success, since it does hold tremendous promise for ensuring that every child in public schools here has a great teacher at the front of the classroom.
Professor's work rendered bombs inert

RALEIGH -- On the morning of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, men and women all over the country decided to join the military. What Michael Steer decided that day probably saved the lives of some of them.

Steer, an N.C. State professor of electrical and computer engineering, and a naturalized citizen from Australia, was meeting with Army researchers when the attack came. He says he immediately knew that he wanted to fight terrorism by drawing on his years of research on the interactions between energy fields and electronic devices.

He worked every day, including weekends and holidays, from 2002 through 2005 on technology that saved the lives of hundreds of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the commanding general of the U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command, said Thursday.

Devices based on his work prevent the enemy from triggering roadside bombs with wireless devices such as cell phones. Improvised bombs have been the largest killer of U.S. troops in Iraq and now Afghanistan, causing more than 60 percent of fatalities there.

"This is a game-changer in modern warfare," said Maj. Gen. Nick Justice, who came from Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland to give Steer a special civilian award - the U.S. Army Commander's Award for Public Service - at a ceremony Thursday on NCSU's Centennial Campus.

The way that Steer's work is used is classified, Justice said. In fact, it's so sensitive he declined to say when it was deployed in the two war zones.

It started, though, when Steer beamed electromagnetic energy at electronic communications devices and measured the response. The measurements allowed him to learn about the way the devices were constructed.

In a speech during the ceremony, Steer, 54, said the work became a Manhattan Project-like effort that, along with his teaching and other faculty duties, devoured all his days for nearly three years, including Christmases.

In a way, Steer enlisted his wife and three children in the project.

"I think it was pretty tough on them," he said in an interview. "I'd talk to them about how this was really important, but of course I couldn't tell them exactly what I was doing."

His wife, Mary, stopped working full-time so that Steer could bear down. The rare breaks in those 80- and 90-hour workweeks included periodic games of tennis, a game everyone in the family plays.

Pressure was on

Aaron Walker, then one of Steer's doctoral students and a member of the research team, said the pressure was extraordinary because they could see on television every day what the bombs were doing to U.S.
troops. They knew that any day off likely meant more deaths.

"Every bombing it was, like, how can we work harder and faster," Walker said. "The tempo was pretty intense."

The work provided Army research funding for 20 faculty members, students and postdoctoral researchers. A powerful motivator came, Walker said, when word filtered back that some of the products developed with their research were starting to save lives.

Justice said it did more.

"It also changed the way the enemy behaves," he said. "We had lost the capability to operate in that environment, and this put us back on the battlefield and gave us the ability to go out there knowing we can protect the young soldiers' lives and engage the enemy and not have to hide behind the castle walls."

An adaptable enemy

Steer's work didn't mean the end of improvised bombs. In 2009, there were 7,228 IED attacks in Afghanistan, a 120 percent increase over 2008; of 448 non-Afghan troops killed in action last year, 280 were killed by IEDs.

But it robbed the enemy of one of its best means of triggering bombs. Alternatives such as detonators connected by wires, or those triggered simply by the pressure of a vehicle or person passing over them, have weaknesses that troops can exploit. But all troops know that just when there seems to be a solution for one kind of bomb, the enemy changes things to adapt.

"The insurgents are very versatile," Steer said. "Once you've got one thing tackled, another shoots up. It kind of goes on and on, but eventually you'll have solutions for all of these things."

Steer said that he had eased his pace since 2005 and turned back to broader research.

Walker said he was skeptical of Steer's claim.

"Michael's pretty tireless," he said. "I wouldn't say there has been much of a letup."

jay.price@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4526
March 11, 2010

Deal Gives New Life to Overhaul of Student Loans

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN and TAMAR LEWIN

WASHINGTON — Democratic Congressional leaders struck a tentative agreement on Thursday that breathes new life into President Obama’s proposed overhaul of federal student loan programs.

The deal would bundle the bill into an expedited budget package along with the Democratic health care legislation, which would allow for both measures to be passed by the Senate on a simple majority vote. Without the deal, the student loan bill would have been unlikely to pass because it lacked the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster.

The bill would end government payments to private, commercial student lenders, leaving the government to lend directly to students. It would also redirect billions of dollars to expand the Pell grant program for low-income students, and to pay for other education initiatives.

The maximum Pell grant is set to rise to $5,550 for the 2010-11 school year and, under the deal struck Thursday, would increase automatically each year in line with inflation. As many as eight million of the nation’s lowest-income students receive Pell grants to help pay for college each year. Under current law, Congress must determine any increases.

“Families and students who rely on federal student aid need to know that Congress sides with them and not with the big banks,” Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa and chairman of the Education Committee, said at a news conference on Thursday. “The federal government has been subsidizing these banks and wasting taxpayer money for far too long. It’s time to end it.”

Private banks had lobbied fiercely against the bill, which would cut off a longtime stream of revenue. Even on Thursday, lobbyists for the private lenders made a last-ditch effort to stop Democrats from adding it to the budget package.
House Democrats predicted that packaging the two proposals in an expedited budget reconciliation bill would help them secure the needed votes on health care because the financial aid bill is popular. In September, the House adopted that bill, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, by a vote of 253 to 171.

Senate Democrats said that they could lose some votes as a result of the packaging, but that they did not believe it would swing the outcome. Senate Democrats nominally control 59 votes, and need only 50 to approve the reconciliation measure, because Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. would break a tie.

Some Democrats in the Senate, where the private student loan industry has strong allies, had resisted tying the two bills together. But federal education officials warned on Thursday that if Congress failed to act, millions of students might see their Pell grants cut by 60 percent.

Democrats said that in a caucus meeting Thursday, Mr. Harkin made a compelling case for moving more quickly on the education measure and that other senators had voiced agreement, outweighing doubts raised in particular by Senator Kent Conrad of North Dakota, the chairman of the Budget Committee.

Aides to Mr. Conrad said he was open to packaging the two bills, provided that House Democrats agreed to meet budget reconciliation rules by adjusting the education measure to account for a revised cost analysis by the Congressional Budget Office.

The House-passed bill had anticipated savings of $87 billion by eliminating payments to private lenders, and would have redirected that money to Pell grants and other education programs.

But in recent months, more colleges have joined the government’s direct lending program, in anticipation of the change, generating the savings up front and reducing the amount of revenue that would be available for new spending to about $67 billion.

"The Treasury is winning every day that somebody takes out a direct loan," said Representative George Miller, Democrat of California and chairman of the Education and Labor Committee. "The concept is already driving savings to the government."

At the same time, a rise in the number of people attending college and seeking aid in the weak economy has raised the projected cost of new Pell grants to $54 billion from $40 billion.

Officials said they could reduce the spending in the education bill by tying annual increases in Pell grants to the consumer price index, a measure of inflation, rather than to the consumer price index plus 1 percent, as set forth in the House bill.
Mr. Harkin and Mr. Miller said on Thursday that if the financial aid measure was not tied to health care, it might collapse.

Six Democrat senators had written a letter to the majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, expressing doubts about the education proposal. And given Republican opposition, the bill was unlikely to win the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster.

The decision by Democrats to package the two bills creates tough choices for some lawmakers. Senator Ben Nelson, Democrat of Nebraska, for instance, has reason to vote for the health care bill in part to undo a special provision that Senate leaders included giving Nebraska extra federal Medicaid money.

That provision, derided by Republicans as the “Cornhusker kickback,” has become a political liability for Mr. Nelson. But Nebraska is also home to some major private student lenders, and he will be hard-pressed to vote in favor of a package that ends their lucrative business originating federal student loans.

David M. Herszenhorn reported from Washington, and Tamar Lewin from New York.
More colleges offering 3-year degrees

By Jennifer Epstein, Inside Higher Ed

What was a year ago an emerging idea about how to reduce college costs and better serve students has begun to take hold at colleges across the United States, as more institutions introduce three-year bachelor's degrees.

On Wednesday, Stanley Ikenberry, interim president of the University of Illinois, said that the university had begun studying whether it would make sense to offer three-year bachelor's degrees and would release a report in six months. In just the past month, Arcadia University, Holy Family University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and, in partnership, Georgia Perimeter College and Georgia Southwestern State University have all introduced formal three-year programs that will begin this fall.

Concerns about ever-rising college costs, which have been only compounded by the prolonged recession, and the Bologna Process's success in standardizing three-year, competency-based bachelor's degrees throughout Europe have helped to amplify the drumbeat that has played in the background for decades. Despite the surge in interest in and introduction of these programs, some experts are critical, arguing that students may miss out on key experiences, and wondering whether many students will be able to finish their degrees in three years.

Q&A ON THE WEB: The challenge of the Bologna Process

INSIDE HIGHER ED: Group pushes to improve U.S. college completion rate

4-YEAR COLLEGES: Only 53% of students earn degree in 6 years

Students have long been able to take heavier course loads, summer classes or use Advanced Placement or other pre-matriculation credits to graduate in less than four years. Maine's Bates College and Alabama's Judson College, among others, have for decades actively offered applicants and students guided paths toward earning their bachelor's degrees in three years, though relatively few students take that route. But economic and geopolitical realities — and the vocal opinions of several prominent higher education thinkers — have helped the three-year degree gain traction.

Prominent promoters

The highest-profile proponent has been Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), who served as U.S. secretary of education from 1991 to 1993. In a speech at the February 2009 meeting of the American Council on Education, he described shorter degrees as the "higher ed equivalent of a fuel-efficient car," a less time-consuming and expensive option than a "gas guzzling four-year course." In October, Newsweek published a column by Alexander that brought the issue into thousands of living rooms.

Among the idea's other supporters: the late George Keller, who was a professor of higher education studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education; Robert Zemsky, also of Penn; and Richard K. Vedder, an Ohio University economist who was on former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

The three-year degree is not without its detractors. Alexander C. McCormick, director of the Indiana University-based National Survey of Student Engagement, said "it would be nice if institutions actually provided four-year degrees … before we think about accelerating."

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, the four-year graduation rate for first-time undergraduate who began their bachelor's degrees in 2000-01 was 36.1%. The six-year rate was 57.5%.

Nonetheless, colleges have begun to embrace the three-year option. Besides the institutions that have made announcements this spring, the University of Houston-Victoria, the University of
Washington, Lipscomb University and a few others have introduced three-year degrees in the last year or so.

Trustees at Arcadia, in the Philadelphia suburb of Glenside, voted March 5 to begin offering three-year degree sequences next fall. "We've been thinking about affordability issues for some time even before the downturn of the economy," said Jerry Greiner, the university's president. "More administrators wanted to think about it after the downturn and we quickly got a number of faculty members interested in pursuing that kind of program."

The requirements for an accelerated degree are identical to those needed to earn a four-year Arcadia bachelor's; they are simply condensed into less time. Admission will be limited to what Greiner called "high ability students," who must maintain a 3.0 G.P.A. to remain in the program. Students will take a heavier course load each semester and spend the summers of the program fulfilling other degree requirements: a service project and a major-related internship, perhaps outside the United States. Offerings will start with five majors — business administration, communications, international business and culture, international studies, and psychology — whose course sequences have been mapped out to ensure that students will be able to fulfill all requirements in the abbreviated time to degree.

Though next fall's freshmen applied without knowing that the three-year course of study would be an option, Greiner said he's heard interest since the trustees' vote from a few admitted students, who've been notified of the program because of their expressed interest in its five majors or who are among the university's top admits. For this year, he said, "we anticipate that this will increase our yield among these populations of students." Next fall, he expects it will draw applicants who might not have otherwise considered Arcadia.

**Interest at Hartwick**

Hartwick College, in Oneonta, N.Y., is already seeing substantial interest from applicants since beginning its three-year program last fall. Twenty percent of applicants for fall 2010 expressed interest on their application forms. In the current freshman class, 18 students in a class of 400 have joined the program, which requires a minimum high school G.P.A. of 3.0. Instead of taking 12 to 15 credits each semester, students in the program take 15 to 18 credits, plus classes during the college's January term. Twenty-four of the college's 31 majors have opted to participate.

Margaret Drugovich, the college's president and a former enrollment officer, said that the idea for the program emerged years ago as an attempt to make a Hartwick degree more affordable.

"Parents would tell me they wanted the kind of education that Hartwick provides but that they simply couldn't afford it." Tuition for the current academic year is $32,550, and room, board and fees total close to $10,000.

But students aren't choosing the option only for financial reasons. "It's clear that students who are very focused and really have some graduate school aspirations are really going to be attracted to this option," she said.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro began its "UNCG in 3" program in February in response from an increasing number of "questions from students who wanted to go through an accelerated process," said Steve Roberson, dean of undergraduate studies. Only students who enter with a minimum of 12 college credits are eligible to join.

Price and time are concerns, but so too is the fact that a shorter degree gets students into the full-time work force sooner. "They're getting the earning power of the fourth year ... like when a high school or college sports player decides to become a professional before graduating," he said, which will be especially attractive to older students. "We think this will appeal to military folks, who are very serious and very dedicated and might want to do this in three years."

**Potential downsides**

McCormick, of NSSE, expressed concerns that abbreviating the time to degree by saddling students with heavier course loads and forcing them to give up breaks might lead to "sacrifices in the sort of informal learning experiences" that happen in extracurricular activities and
dormitories. At institutions where study abroad isn't a graduation requirement, he said, students would probably have to stay on campus throughout their undergraduate careers, giving up what is "for a lot of students recognized as a high-impact practice."

Even so, McCormick said he thinks that three years of full-time study could be preferable to four or more years spent commuting, working part time or taking classes online. Despite needing to take a heavier course load, students who spend "three years full time on campus may still be better off in terms of their opportunities to connect informally with other students and be involved with other opportunities."

To Carol Geary Schneider, president of Association of American Colleges and Universities, the degrees are a distraction. In an article to be published in the forthcoming issue of the association's journal, she blasts three-year degrees as part of a "new crop of faux reforms that, if adopted, would send us backward."

By focusing on relatively high-performing students, colleges have the potential to forget about those who can't graduate in four, five or even six years. At Hartwick and UNCG, students in the accelerated programs get course registration priority over more senior students. A freshman in one of these programs could nose out a senior in registering for a course that the senior needs to graduate.

Large numbers of students who enter college never complete their degrees and "the majority of graduates are far from prepared for the challenges of either the economy or our democracy," Schneider wrote, suggesting that students need more time in college, not less. "By every possible measure — outcomes studies, employer assessments, faculty reports and proficiency levels on standardized tests — too many students already are falling short."

Nina Xue in New York graduated from Rose University in three years. "Making my parents pay for another year of school would not have been fair," she said.