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Cuts in budget could cost ECU about 150 jobs

By Josh Humphries  
The Daily Reflector  
Wednesday, April 08, 2009

East Carolina University may have to dissolve about 150 positions if budget cuts from Raleigh are as severe as expected.

ECU is preparing for budget cuts up to 7 percent from the state. Officials cannot give an exact number for the positions or how many of them are currently filled, ECU spokesman John Durham said.

The university has had a hiring freeze in place since October, and all new hires must be approved by the department's vice chancellor, Durham said.

"The number of vacancies is trending upward," he said. "Whatever decisions we make will maximize the number of vacancies."

Chancellor Steve Ballard formed a budget task force composed of administrators and faculty members months ago to develop plans for cuts in the university's budget.

"Departments across the campus are working really hard to control their vacancies," Durham said.

Members of the ECU Chapter of the American Association of University Professors are calling for the university to be more open about decisions and to implement a hiring freeze. In addition to the freeze, Durham said the university is looking at cutting administrative stipends, which account for about $4.4 million of the university's budget, in accordance with the wishes of the professors' association.

Administrative stipends are funds that are paid to department chairs and other faculty and staff for assuming administrative work. The faculty gets about 82 percent of administrative stipends, Durham said.

ECU has already dissolved a small music program and some vacant positions and will be looking at keeping those positions vacant or moving them to a university pool to be shifted around to various departments, Provost Marilyn Sheerer said last month.

Because the university does not know how deep the cuts will be, officials are planning at various degrees.

"In every division we are trying to lay out a scenario," Sheerer said.

"If we are asked to cut deeper than we planned, where do we start? What can do first, second and so on? We are trying to be ready so that we don't have to run around at the very end."

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Editorial: At the trough - Earmark requests warrant scrutiny

Thursday, April 09, 2009

Members of Congress walk a treacherous path in this economic climate as they seek to balance an obligation to their constituent communities against a ballooning federal budget running a massive deficit and compounding a crushing national debt. That represents the heart of the national debate about earmarks, the funding appropriation requests made by members of Congress.

North Carolina’s congressional delegation has not shied away from the trough, as representatives have made 660 requests totaling more than $9.3 billion. It is a staggering sum, and citizens and lawmakers alike should scrutinize that list carefully to make certain each is a necessary expense at a time of financial hardship.

The Raleigh News & Observer recently compiled a list of earmarks requested by North Carolina’s delegation to the U.S. House, using lists recently released by members of Congress to identify the state’s totals. Though three members of the House had not responded, appropriation requests from Pitt County’s U.S. Reps. G.K. Butterfield and Walter B. Jones Jr. can be viewed on each representative’s Web site.

Jones pledged in January to not request new appropriations, and his 11 earmarks totaling $48.7 million, drawn from previous requests, represent the smallest numbers among North Carolina representatives. They include $1 million for Greenville’s 10th Street connector project and nearly $900,000 for the Metabolic Center at East Carolina University’s Brody School of Medicine, as well as several coastal projects and a $1.2 million funding request for the N.C. Counter Drug Task Force.

Butterfield, in contrast, lags behind only U.S. Rep. Larry Kissell in the number of requests but is second to none in the sum of his earmarks. Unlike his Republican colleague, the Wilson Democrat has requested a whopping $7.2 billion from 98 earmarks. That includes numerous law enforcement, health care and municipal improvement projects for Greenville, Farmville, Ayden and other Pitt County communities, and is skewed somewhat by nearly $3 billion in defense appropriations.

Butterfield’s 1st District is among the poorest congressional districts in the country, one devastated for generations by job losses, poverty and inadequate access to health care. But this is also a time of shared sacrifice, when all Americans must do their part to right the nation’s listing economic ship.

A strong argument can be made that these projects, requested on behalf of districts struggling in this recession, are appropriate to stimulate job growth and strengthen communities. But lawmakers in Washington should carefully measure each request they make against the guidelines of frugality and restraint in the hope of reversing the nation’s perilous course.

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Letter: The evolution of Bible studies at UNC

Thursday, April 09, 2009

In the movie “Oh God” (circa 1985), God is asked by a television evangelist about his role in revealing the true word of God.

God, played by George Burns, replies, “If you want to get rich, sell Earth Shoes.” Today, that would translate to Crocs instead of Earth Shoes, but is still good advice for Bart Ehrman, best-selling author and latest religious shock jock at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Ehrman’s shameless exploitation of Sunday School theology is symptomatic of an academic system that holds professors in high esteem who garner lucrative grants or write something that gets published. This system perpetuates an academic status quo, leaving students with huge government loans and very limited problem-solving skills.

Before Ehrman was born, Professor Bernard Boyd taught Bible studies at UNC Chapel Hill. His popularity was legendary and his classes were only available to upper classmen, and when guests attended on Saturdays, there was standing room only. From Boyd, we learned Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Perhaps the story was an allegory.

Many theologians believed the story of Jonah was the unerring word of God. Others believed the story was divinely inspired. Perhaps the story was one man’s attempt to escape the deity. He never told us what he thought.

Boyd probably never garnered lucrative grants for the university. I would wager he never got rich teaching Bible at UNC.

We didn’t know at the time that Boyd was on a far more important mission: He was teaching us how to think rather than what to think.

JOE EXUM

Snow Hill

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An 'A' project

Comment on this story

It is a pretty amazing thing, yes it is. Three undergraduate students at N.C. State University have invented a small device that looks like a little microscope that might one day change the world. It’s designed to diagnose tuberculosis in a matter of seconds, for less than one dollar.

The device is connected to a computer. A stained slide smeared with a person's sputum goes in the device, and if the person is infected, the TB bacteria glow white on a black screen. If no bacteria are present, the screen remains black. The invention came about as part of a senior project in an engineering entrepreneurship program. Now the students, seniors Daniel Jeck, Pavak Shah and Hersh Tapadia, are developing a business plan.

Here's the difference in their test and others: As opposed to a diagnosis in seconds, there can be months of waiting for lab results if the regular tests are performed in poor countries without enough scientific knowledge on hand. And a failure to diagnose quickly could mean the disease becomes advanced and very contagious. Treatment is not hard to find, but early diagnosis is important, and in poor countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, the disease can cut a wide, deadly swath.

The students obviously have taken their work seriously, and they've explored the possibilities with laboratory scientists and even with researchers from Harvard. The head of the university’s engineering entrepreneurs program, Stephen Walsh, had high praise: "You can go out there and go after your meaning. We want them to figure out, how do you make meaning with your life while making a living?"

It would appear that, as is the case with so many of the creative minds at NCSU and other universities in this region, the message has been received.

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Smith's scheme modernized by Williams

A.J. CARR, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

Dean Smith's "system" worked in 1982, when the famed basketball coach guided North Carolina to the national championship.

And it still works in 2009, as evidenced by the Tar Heels' march to their fifth NCAA title Monday night in Detroit.

While coach Roy Williams has put his own indelible stamp on UNC's basketball program with subtle changes and two national crowns, Smith's imprint remains visible in his former assistant's philosophy.

The current Tar Heels' scheme still includes a flowing, freelance-style offense, the scramble defense and the secondary break.

Like Smith, Williams also gives his players a "Thought For the Day," and his practice plans are patterned after the meticulous form of his mentor.

Seniors still get a few favorable perks, such as the first spot in line for water or meals.

It's all part of the Carolina Way, a dutifully followed formula.

"There are a lot of similarities [with the past], but Roy is his own man," said Bill Guthridge, who guided Carolina to 80 wins and two Final Fours in three seasons as head coach after serving 30 years as an assistant on Smith's staff.

Guthridge added that Williams has made a lot of subtle changes, most notably to an up-tempo offense.

Upon returning to campus after a successful 15-year tenure at Kansas, Williams has had the Tar Heels running on their toes at a faster pace. They go full bore after made and missed baskets, as well as after opponents' turnovers.

Williams also has added several more options off the secondary break, a few of which are
shown on his instructional film.

Defensively, his Tar Heels play mostly man-to-man defense, sprinkled with timely scramble traps. Philosophically, Smith favored a multiple scheme and changed defenses more frequently to keep opponents guessing and out of rhythm.

At one juncture in his 879-win career, Smith would use five different defenses in the first half, then choose the three most effective ploys to throw at an opponent in the final 20 minutes.

"Our point guard called defenses," Guthridge said. "Teams knew we were changing, and it [was successful]. Roy does it in a subtle way. When other teams expect a normal defense, all of a sudden they double-team. What he does is effective."

East Carolina athletic director Terry Holland, who coached against Smith's Carolina teams for 16 years while at Virginia, sees the similarities along with a few differences.

He noticed the current Tar Heels take quicker shots off the break and appear to be more focused on establishing rebound position.

"Both [coaches] are innovative," Holland said. "Roy's is a modern version of what coach Smith did."

The mentor and the pupil -- each in the Basketball Hall of Fame -- each have won two national championships, but they didn't do it with just schemes and strategies.

Over the years, they both consistently recruited much of the nation's top talent.

Smith's signees included stars such as Michael Jordan, James Worthy, Sam Perkins and Phil Ford. Williams' roster has been dotted with the likes of Tyler Hansbrough, Ty Lawson and Ed Davis, as well as holdovers such as Raymond Felton and Sean May, recruited by former UNC coach Matt Doherty.

"Recruiting has changed the last five, 10, 15 years," Guthridge said. "You don't know when players are going pro. Roy has handled that well. ... He has certainly led the way."

Smith, 78 and retired since 1997, is happy to see his protege further embellish the championship tradition. Smith began devising the "system" almost 50 years ago, and the telltale signs are still there in Williams' work.

"He's doing a great job," Smith said.

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UNC Health Care eyes Hillsborough

BY MARK SCHULTZ, Staff writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - UNC Health Care is expected to ask the state next week for permission to build a 100-bed hospital or other medical facility in Hillsborough, 12 miles and 20 minutes from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill.

"It's not finalized," spokeswoman Karen McCall said Wednesday. "We're looking at different kinds of things. I'm not ruling out a hospital."

UNC Health Care has a letter of intent to purchase land in the Waterstone development south of downtown Hillsborough for about $17 million, McCall said. The area houses the Orange County campus of Durham Technical Community College and is close to interstates 40 and 85.

McCall would not comment on whether the new hospital would replace plans for an expansion of the main hospital on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus.

UNC Hospitals' 725 beds have been running close to 90 percent capacity, she said. "Many times we are not able to take transfers. We're having to divert traumas. We are not able to take patients into our intensive care units."

Mike McKillip, project analyst with the N.C. Division of Health Service Regulation's certificate of need section, confirmed the state expects to receive UNC Health Care's application next week. The state could take up to 150 days to decide whether the county needs another hospital.

UNC's plan reflects an industry trend of large hospitals seeking to extend their reach, a consultant said. "There has been a movement to migrate beds out of large flagship hospitals, out of city centers," said David Meyer, senior partner with Keystone Planning Group in Durham.

Regional hospitals serving Charlotte and the Triad area have proposed 50-bed hospitals.

"The motivation is marketplace," Meyer said.

The Waterstone area is in an economic development district that Orange County established years ago to promote industrial and commercial activity.

Already some local elected leaders fear the public hospital taking land off the tax rolls.

At a meeting Tuesday, county Commissioner Barry Jacobs asked the county staff to look into UNC's plan. But Commissioner Mike Nelson said the hospital could be an economic magnet even if it is tax-exempt.

"When you locate a hospital somewhere, there are lots of other entities that cluster around it," Nelson said.

Hillsborough Mayor Tom Stevens hasn't seen the details yet. If a hospital were built, he said,
UNC Health Care might be able to offset any property tax loss with contributions to the town's fire fund or infrastructure.

Hillsborough, the county seat, has 40 percent of its tax base in commercial property, "but we are carrying a lot of property that's not on the tax rolls," he said. "That's the issue to work out."

Staff writer Jesse James DeConto contributed to this report.

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The big men on campus

BY JIM JENKINS, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

If I hadn't feared being called "Pops" and it hadn't been past my bedtime, I'd have been right out there with the kids on Franklin Street Monday night, being a Carolina grad and all. But there are others things stirring in the world of big-time college basketball that are, at the very best, unsettling. And perhaps one reason that's so is because there are no simple solutions.

First, look at the case of now-former Memphis basketball coach John Calipari, a whiz who's accepted a proposal of marriage from the University of Kentucky, which popped the question on both knees and offered a dowry of $30-plus million over several years, plus a variety of perks.

University President Lee T. Todd Jr. told The New York Times he looked fondly at the championship banners hanging in the basketball palace and he added, "Every now and then I look up there and I kind of wish we can add another one before I leave this position."

Let's hope he's as passionate about adding a Nobel Prize or two before he leaves, too.

I know, I know. The field is competitive, successful athletics boosts applications, the money is mostly generated from private sources, coaches are the key and the market for them is competitive.

But the whole situation has gone crazy, and the fear is what the long-term implications are going to be. Because every college president who's ever signed a giant contract has offered the usual response to questions about it, something like, "Well, I do worry about it, but I think the ceiling will be reached one day." (What's that song, "How High the Moon?")

Now it used to be that one justification for big salaries and ever-expanding facilities and what'all went something like: "Well, sure, it's expensive. But we are giving an opportunity for an education to kids, many of whom might not have the chance otherwise. So we're very noble."

Some folks still sing the song, but it's faded from the Hit Parade. The top recruits from the high schools are looking for big-profile institutions that can provide them a spot on the marquee that will get them attention from the professional teams. Some, and the latest championship edition of the UNC-Chapel Hill team is an example, stick with a program despite flirtations from the pros in order to win a championship and a degree. But mostly, it seems, the college tour is about a tradeoff: a school gets a star player for a year or two, the player gets his value to the pros raised.

A case in point: John Wall of Raleigh's Word of God Christian Academy, perhaps the most highly recruited basketball player in the country. All those around Wall forecast that he will be a "one and done" college player, that he will attend a college for one year, and then depart for the professional ranks and millions of dollars that will guarantee lifetime security
for him and his family.

Even knowing that the youngster is likely to do that, schools such as N.C. State University and Duke University are panting to sign him up.

Make no mistake: John Wall can't be blamed for wanting to get those millions as soon as he can. He has a marketable talent that could vanish in a flash with one injury. He is just working within the system, part of which is a rule of the National Basketball Association, the professional league, that players must be 19 to be eligible, which eliminates for most the chance to go pro right out of high school.

One who has seen the evolution of major college athletics into a farm team system for pro sports is Sonny Vaccaro, who made his name as a representative of shoe and apparel companies orchestrating lucrative side deals for colleges and coaches. With perspective (expressed in a recent presentation in Chapel Hill), Vaccaro's now a reformer who believes, among other things, that players like Wall should be able to go pro right out of high school, that colleges should eliminate varsity freshman eligibility for athletes (thus encouraging recruits to stay for a while), that scholarships should be multi-year and not year-to-year, that schools should control their schedules, not turn them over, essentially, to television networks.

His ideas make pretty good sense. But they go against a tide that has washed a lot of money into a lot of places.

Still, the conclusions of Times columnist William C. Rhoden, who did the piece on Calipari, are hard to escape. In the end, Rhoden quotes Kentucky President Todd as saying, "What would universities be if you didn't have some of those athletic opportunities?"

After which Rhoden concluded: "If the economy continues a downward spiral and athletic salaries soar, we may soon see."

Deputy editorial page editor Jim Jenkins can be reached at 829-4513 or at jjenkins@newsobserver.com.

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Top-heavy at N.C. State

By Jerry L. Whitten and Marie Davidian

We all cheer for the university — on and off-court. So when there is a budget crisis people rush to help, including, of course, the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina system. The board has urged the General Assembly to allow the university full flexibility in managing impending budget reductions.

Normally, most would agree that local flexibility allows administrators who should have a thorough understanding of their institutions to make the optimum choices. However, we should examine the situation at N.C. State University and ask whether our administration is up to that challenge.

During the five-year period 2002-2007, the N.C. State budget increased from $337 million to $512 million while the number of full-time tenure track faculty at the university decreased from 1,322 to 1,314. While the number of faculty increased slightly in 2008, some of the increases were the result of specific legislative initiatives.

In order to reduce instructional costs, the university increased its reliance on temporary or term-contract faculty. In contrast, the size and cost of administrative activities grew from 447 full-time personnel classified as administration in 2002 to 532 in 2007 (a 19 percent increase). Administrative offices have spawned other administrative offices and many of the resulting functions are regarded by faculty as being of marginal value.

Typically, a response to such criticism is to argue that data can be misleading. Of course that is true, but not in this case. The data are a matter of public record, and their interpretation is unfortunately clear: left to manage its own affairs, N.C. State decided that administration and other related functions were more important than teaching.

Worse yet, according to interviews reported recently in The N&O and in the campus newspaper, the provost and other officials at N.C. State have threatened to respond to budget reductions by cutting classes and reducing teaching personnel. The president of the system recommends furloughs. Reducing administrative costs does not seem to be at the forefront of administrative thinking.

It is obvious why. The administration proposes to cut what will alarm people the most. No one wants educational opportunities diminished for our students. Suppose, instead, the university were to announce that it was cutting costs by improving management practices and reducing unnecessary administrative costs. The public response would be enthusiastic and the university would be showered with accolades. Alas, in some circles it is apparent that “alarm” trumps “accolades.”

The Board of Governors and the General Assembly could send a constructive message by requiring that N.C. State, and possibly all units in the UNC system, defend their budget allocations during the past six years before being granted permission to manage their assigned budget reductions. Specifically, defend the use of funds that were originally appropriated for student enrollment increases.

Further, to meet budget reduction targets, campuses should be required to reduce administrative costs first before reducing educational services. Those who cannot clearly articulate and satisfactorily defend their past budget decisions should be required to roll back their administrative costs to the 2002 level, an approximately 20 percent reduction.

We should also focus on the future. Consider the benefits that would accrue if the university system were truly to commit to increasing the quality of education whether in the classroom for undergraduates or in advanced research laboratories for graduate students. Consider how differently the future would be shaped if a balance between administrative functions that are truly essential and the instructional and research functions that are vital to the mission of the system's institutions could be achieved.

During this period of budget stress, as we watch the behavior of our elected and appointed representatives and those entrusted with oversight responsibilities, we will have a clear reading on the future of N.C. State and other units in the UNC system.

Jerry L. Whitten is professor of chemistry and a former dean at N.C. State University. Marie Davidian is William Neal Reynolds professor of statistics.

The News & Observer
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No fad diet: ‘Good’ body fat burns more calories
Scientists hope findings lead to pill that helps shed pounds, control diabetes

The Associated Press
updated 7:24 p.m. ET, Wed., April 8, 2009

Fight fat with fat? The newest obesity theory suggests we may one day be able to do just that.

Just like good and bad cholesterol, there apparently are good and bad types of body fat. Scientists until recently believed this good fat, which spurs the body to burn calories to generate body heat, played an important role in keeping infants warm but by adulthood was mostly gone or inactive.

Now three studies — from researchers in Boston, Finland and the Netherlands — show that some good fat remains in adults, affecting metabolism and potentially offering a target to help people shed pounds.

Dr. Francesco Celli, an endocrinology and metabolism researcher at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, said the studies show this fat burns large amounts of energy.

"So it could be used as a target" for a pill that would somehow rev up the fat, he said.

Dr. Louis Aronne, former president of the Obesity Society and a weight control expert at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York, said the findings are the most conclusive evidence so far of the role of such fat in regulating body temperature and weight.

"I don't want to use the word 'exercise-in-a-pill,' but it's doing something (that's) getting rid of calories," he said, adding that any obesity treatment developed around the fat could be a potential treatment for diabetes as well.

The studies were published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

Brown is good

The good fat is actually brownish, while the more predominant bad fat is white or yellow. Brown fat is stored mostly around the neck and under the collarbone. White fat tends to concentrate around the waistline, where it stores excess energy and releases chemicals that control metabolism and the use of insulin.

All three research groups documented the presence and activity of the brown fat by examining tissue samples from some patients and using high-tech imaging that indicated how much sugar, and therefore calories, the fat burned.

One group from Joslin Diabetes Center, Harvard Medical School and three hospitals in Boston looked at scans done on nearly 2,000 patients to diagnose various health problems. The other two groups scanned small numbers of patients, first at room temperature and then after a couple hours in mild cold, about 60 degrees.

Here's what the scientists learned about brown fat:

- Lean people had far more than overweight and obese people, especially among older folks.
- It burns far more calories and generates more body heat when people are in a cooler environment.
- Women were more likely to have it than men, and their deposits were larger and more active.

A Holy Grail

Finding a successful treatment for obesity would be a Holy Grail for scientists. Most obese and overweight people are unable to shed pounds and keep them off with dieting and exercise.

And despite plenty of effort, pharmaceutical companies have been unable to develop a medicine that helps people safely lose and keep off a significant amount of weight. Any drug that could do that would be a guaranteed blockbuster.

Aronne said the findings likely would renew interest in the area of brown fat among drugmakers; at least one briefly studied a treatment in lab animals several years ago.
So how could researchers use these basic findings about good fat to eventually come up with a weight-loss medication?

One possibility would be a pill to stimulate a specific protein to release more energy from the fat cells in the form of heat rather than storing it for future energy needs, Aronne and Celi said.

Finding a way to increase the amount of brown fat in a person would be another strategy. Researchers at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston have been injecting certain genes into mice to try to produce brown fat cells instead of white ones.

Celi said researchers also could try to make a pill that stimulates nerve endings inside brown fat to make it burn more calories.

Or overweight people could simply try turning down the thermostat to see if it makes them burn more energy and lose weight — a strategy that Celi and researchers are testing in a small study that could produce results by the end of the year.

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