THE DAILY CLIPS

April 22, 2009

News, commentary, and opinion
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Pitt County beginning a new grading system

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, April 21, 2009

Students in Pitt County schools will have their grade-point averages calculated differently next year when the district begins a new grading system.

As part of a transition to statewide student information software, Pitt County school officials were told recently by the state Department of Public Instruction that the district must begin using one of three grading methods the state has approved.

Pitt County Schools, which officials say is using a hybrid version of the grading options, has chosen the percentage grading system which officials contend is a more accurate way of reflecting a student's performance.

Under the new system, the conversion of grades to quality points is standardized and equivalent, officials say.

"This new method is going to be much more fairer across the board for students so it accurately reflects a 92 as a 92 and a 93 as a 93," Travis Lewis, executive director of student services, said. "You will not have those huge jumps in GPA when you move from an A to a B and a B to a C."

The state is requiring that the school system convert all previous high school grades earned by a student to the new standardized scale.

School officials say the conversion will increase the overall GPA for students in grades 9-11, but some students could see their averages drop slightly due to the change.

"The majority of our students are benefiting," Lewis said.

After speaking with officials from East Carolina University, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University to inquire about their acceptance policies, Pitt school leaders say the change should not have much impact on college applicants.

Duke, UNC and N.C. State officials each stated that neither GPA nor SAT scores were the top components of a student being selected for enrollment.

Those universities said they look at the overall application, end-of-course test scores and strength of schedule along with GPA and SAT scores.

They also consider the student answers to essay questions and extra-curricular activities.

ECU officials told Pitt County Schools they strictly look at numbers such as the GPA and SAT.

Other grading options for Pitt County Schools were standard letter grades or the plus-minus grade method.

"The state says we have three options for how we do grades and grade point averages," Pitt County Schools Superintendent Beverly Reep said. "We're not using any of those three right now. We didn't have the ability to say we are currently using option 1 so we are going to stick with it."

Pitt County uses the percentages for report cards but GPAs are calculated based on the letter grade.

For an example, students with a 93-100 average get an A and boast a 4.0 grade-point average in standard courses. Students with an 85-92 receive a B and a 3.0 GPA.
The new system narrows the gap between students who are bordering on another letter grade, Lewis said.

"The current system can cause some unfair practices in my opinion," Lewis said. "For example, a student with a 92 and a student with a 93, the difference between their GPA will be a whole point. With the new method, it will only be .125."

Other North Carolina school systems, besides Pitt County, using the percentage option include Beaufort, Brunswick, Lenoir, Martin, Nash-Rocky Mount, Wayne, Halifax, Hertford, Onslow, Orange, Rockingham, Wayne and Bertie.

School officials advise anyone wanting more information about the new grading system and its impact on a child to contact the student's school.

Contact Brock Letchworth at bletchworth@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9574.

96-100 percent = 4.000
95 = 3.875
94 = 3.750
93 = 3.625
92 = 3.500
91 = 3.375
90 = 3.250
89 = 3.125
88 = 3.000
87 = 2.875
86 = 2.750
85 = 2.625
84 = 2.500
83 = 2.375
82 = 2.250
81 = 2.125
80 = 2.000
79 = 1.875
78 = 1.750
77 = 1.625
76 = 1.500
75 = 1.375
74 = 1.250
73 = 1.125
70-72 = 1.000
Eyes on UNC for speech tonight

Student protest halted earlier talk

BY MARTHA QUILLIN, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - Undeterred by a protest that derailed a planned speech by former congressman Tom Tancredo last week, a UNC student group has invited another conservative former lawmaker to campus tonight.

Former U.S. Rep. Virgil Goode Jr. was invited by the UNC chapter of Youth for Western Civilization. The former Virginia congressman opposes amnesty for immigrants, doesn't think children of illegal immigrants born in this country should be American citizens, and was an early sponsor of legislation to build a fence along the U.S-Mexico border, according to his Web site.

Tancredo, national chairman of Youth for Western Civilization, came to Chapel Hill on April 14 but left amid a disturbance involving dozens of student protesters and campus public safety officers.

Protesters claimed the incident turned ugly because officers used excessive force, pushing students, pulling one by the hair and spraying mace into some students' faces.

Randy Young, spokesman for the public safety department, said that incident is under investigation.

"We have full hope and expectations that it's going to be civil and met with intelligent
discourse," he said of tonight's speech.

Goode represented the 5th Congressional District of Virginia from 1997 to 2009, first as a Democrat, then as a Republican. He lost his seat in 2008.

In a phone interview, he said he was already scheduled to speak before the Tancredo incident.

"UNC is a beautiful campus, and I know the overwhelming majority of students and faculty and persons in the community will welcome an open dialogue," he said from his home in Rocky Mount, Va.

"We may not agree on everything, but if things go as planned, I'll make some comments and open it up for questions, and if people disagree, they can do it then."

Goode said he planned to talk about affirmative action and touch on immigration if he has time. He said he wasn't sure who would be paying his speaking fee, or whether it would be $500 or $1,000, including travel cost.

Riley Matheson, Youth for Western Civilization's UNC chapter president, could not be reached Tuesday, nor could members of student groups involved in last week's protest.

Youth for Western Civilization's Web site says its purpose is to defeat leftism on campus.

"This movement is focused on the support of Western history, identity, high culture, and pride and opposition to radical multiculturalism, political correctness, racial preferences, mass immigration, and socialism," the site said.

Goode's speech, "Hate Speech, Free Speech and the Multiculturalism," was scheduled for Gardner Hall but moved to the student union auditorium, which can hold more people. The event is scheduled for 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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Slime-fighting molecule may rearm antibiotics

BY SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer

A slime-busting substance developed at N.C. State University could help restore potency to antibiotics that have lost their punch against deadly germs.

"Splash some of our magic juice, and it makes antibiotics potent again," said John Cavanagh, a professor in NCSU's department of molecular and structural biochemistry and one of the developers of the novel molecule.

They hope to market the substance for medical, agricultural and industrial uses.

The molecule, isolated from a sea sponge, doesn't kill bacteria. Instead, it keeps them from forming colonies known as biofilms. These slimy bacterial communities - think plaque on teeth or the gunk that fouls ship bottoms - feature an interlocking mesh that protects them from outside attack.

Clumped as a colony, bacteria are 10,000 times more resistant to drugs. Unclumped, even killers such as antibiotic-resistant staph infections are vulnerable to penicillin, an old-line antibiotic that many germs outmaneuvered long ago.

Cavanagh and his colleague, Christian Melander, an assistant professor of chemistry, discovered the molecule after observing how a species of sponge remained free of the slimy buildup that bogs down other underwater organisms.

"The sponge had it figured out," Melander said.

But it took scientists years to catch up to the simple sea creature. Turns out the molecule produced by the sponge is highly complex and difficult to recreate in the lab.

What Melander and Cavanagh did was find a way of simplifying the molecular structure, tinkering with hundreds of different chemical formulas to find one that preserves the sponge's slime-busting qualities but is simpler and easier to mass produce.

That molecule, which they call Agilyte, is now the subject of a pending patent and the basis of a company they've formed called Agile Sciences, which is working with medical researchers, agriculture businesses, chemical companies and others to develop products.

Not ready for slimestime

Much remains to be proved, however, especially if the molecule is used in pharmaceuticals as an additive to antibiotics. Approval by the Food and Drug Administration could take at least seven years and involve dozens of studies on animals and then people.

But preliminary findings are promising. In initial studies, a test tube of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) was untouched by penicillin alone. When the NCSU scientist's molecule was added, however, the MRSA bugs died en masse.

Dr. David Weber, an infectious disease specialist at UNC-Chapel Hill, said a substance that
prevents biofilms could be especially useful on medical devices, including intravenous lines, prosthetic joints and heart valves that can easily become infected. When MRSA or any other bacteria grows into a biofilm on the surface of a prosthetic joint, for example, it's almost impossible to eradicate.

Doctors spend millions of dollars each year removing bacteria-laden devices implanted in patients.

"Everything we can add to the armamentaria would be useful," Weber said, noting that 59 percent of skin infections treated in emergency-room patients are MRSA. But he said the long approval process that faces the NCSU molecule dampens his enthusiasm for the approach.

Debugging the hospitals

Cavanagh said there may be a quicker route to the marketplace. He said the molecule could be added to disinfectants used at hospitals, so that MRSA and other bugs could be wiped off - and wiped out - before they had an opportunity to infect people.

That approach could take just a couple of years and go a long way toward improving health.

"Our molecule is able to get rid of stuff on surfaces very, very well," Cavanagh said. "It's amazing."

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ABOUT MRSA

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is a type of bacteria that has become resistant to many antibiotics.

Staph infections, including MRSA, commonly occur in hospitals and nursing homes, but are increasingly being transmitted throughout communities.

An estimated 94,360 people were diagnosed with serious MRSA infections in 2005, with approximately 18,650 dying.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Project helps open communication with deaf-blind children

By MARGARET STAFFORD
The Associated Press

In his first five years of life, Lance Roth spent his days in a quiet and mostly dark world.

Born totally deaf and nearly blind, with accompanying physical disabilities, the boy was unable to tell his parents or teachers what he wanted or how he felt.

“At that time, he had no communication at all,” said Lance’s mother, Danette Roth of Parkville. “He was not gesturing. He had nothing. We were kind of at a loss what to do.”

The Roths turned to a research project advocates say offers strong evidence that current methods of trying to communicate with deaf-blind children may have to change.

The recently completed five-year study, conducted through The Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies at the University of Kansas, adapted the gestures and noises used by typically developing infants to form a communication system for deaf-blind children.

“Kids don’t just not communicate until one day they start talking,” said Nancy Brady, a speech pathologist and principal investigator in the study. “In reality, they’re communicating like crazy with gestures and vocalizations almost from birth.”

The study adapted those movements and noises to overcome the obstacles deaf-blind children face when trying to communicate. Teachers and parents can’t point to things or use eye contact, so the researchers tried different methods during intensive one-on-one sessions three of four times a week.

The researchers had to find a way to make the children want to communicate a need or desire, said Susan Bashinski, another principal investigator who is now a special education associate professor at East Carolina University.

For example, they made a child aware that a toy was nearby, either by touch or by using vibrating toys. Then, they would teach a child a gesture to indicate he or she wanted the toy.

Learning such skills is critical for children who often just lie or sit in one place and do nothing, Bashinski said.

Many deaf-blind children barely communicate until they are old enough to start learning sign language. But they often struggle with that because they didn’t first learn the gestures and noises that are the foundation for communication in normally developing infants, Brady said.

Those gestures and noises have been adapted to help developmentally disabled children who can see and hear — a method called Prelinguistic Milieu Teaching. The new study adapted that method for nine Kansas children between the ages of 3 to 7 with varying degrees of deaf-blindness.

Working at the children’s schools, researchers sought to increase the number of times the child communicated per minute and the number of gestures.

It worked for Lance. Since being in the study, the now 10-year-old can use gestures, noises and special cards to tell such things as which video he wants to watch, a light he wants turned on or what mood he’s in.

Two years after he left the study, Lance can understand about 100 words his parents sign to him and is starting to form the shapes to sign.
Accepting rejection

High-flying Harvard students get tips on how to rebound from the inevitable ‘thanks but no thanks’

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | April 21, 2009

CAMBRIDGE - They have managed to get into one of the world’s most selective colleges. Opportunity is knocking at their door.

But at some point in their life, though perhaps later than most, Harvard students will face the stinging slap the rest of the world feels regularly: rejection.

The dirty secret is out. Harvard students fail sometimes. They are denied jobs, fellowships, A’s they think they deserve. They are passed over for publication, graduate school, and research grants. And when that finally happens, it hurts. Big time.

To help students cope, Harvard’s Office of Career Services hosted a new seminar last week on handling rejection, a fear job-seekers are feeling acutely in the plummeting economy. The advice from panelists could have come from a caring, patient parent. No rejection is the end of the world, they said, even though it might feel that way at the time.

Participants, who wore snappy buttons with the word rejected stamped in red, also received a road map of sorts on handling failure, a pink booklet of rejection letters and personal stories from Harvard faculty, students, and staff members.

Among the tales of woe: the 2004 alumnus and aspiring actor rejected for a barista gig at a Los Angeles Starbucks for being overqualified and the medical school professor who was wait-listed at every medical school he applied to.

Senior Olga Tymejczyk arrived at the seminar early. With just a month and a half until graduation, Tymejczyk has applied for 10 jobs, but has no offers.

"Rejection is inevitable sometimes, even if you go to Harvard," said Tymejczyk, a Latin American studies major who wants to work in higher-education administration or healthcare research. She has two more interviews this week, and she is hoping for the best but bracing for more bad news.

Panelist Pat Hernandez knows a thing or two about setbacks. The 2004 Harvard graduate was rejected by all three graduate schools she applied to two years ago, after losing out on numerous consulting jobs.

"It’s something many people are ashamed or reluctant to talk about," said Hernandez, who serves as a resident tutor for Harvard undergraduates. "Those who deal with rejection more frequently take it in stride and bounce back better."

Hernandez spent the last two years conducting academic research and applied to graduate schools again. She plans to attend Harvard Business School in the fall for a doctorate in organizational behavior and management.

Another panelist, Harvard statistics professor Xiao-Li Meng, took a humorous approach on the sore subject. His two-page take on rejection, printed in the pink booklet, starts with this theorem: "For any acceptance worth competing for, the probability of a randomly selected applicant being rejected is higher than the probability of being accepted."

Hernandez and Meng said students should learn to see rejection as an opportunity to improve themselves, so that by the time they summon the courage to try again, they will be better candidates. Or
they can view failure as a blessing, like the would-be barista who reconsidered his goals and launched a tutoring company called, appropriately enough, Overqualified.

But how does one move forward, implored another graduate student facing rejection after rejection, when everyone else in the world thinks: "Surely, you have a Harvard degree. You'll get a job."

Abigail Lipson - director of the Bureau of Study Counsel, which cosponsored last week's seminar - had some advice in the pink bulletin: "We learn to recognize our bad feelings as an indication that we care, we have high standards and high hopes, and we expect a lot of ourselves and of the world, rather than assuming that we are hopelessly untalented or unworthy."

Hard as it is for some to believe, there are candidates more worthy than Harvard students, Professor Meng quipped, in language befitting his field. "Statistically you are rejected, and probabilistically it is fair."

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