ECU releases statement on adviser firing
Friday, April 20, 2012

Officials at East Carolina University released the following statement Friday afternoon regarding Paul Isom, the adviser of The East Carolinian newspaper the university fired in early January, citing personnel issues. The firing occurred two months after the student newspaper ran nude photos of a streaker at a football game in November.

Statement:

East Carolina University’s former director of student media has agreed to drop efforts to get his job back. The university has stated Paul Isom’s separation from his role was because of a difference in philosophy, not for cause and has agreed to accept his resignation, according to ECU’s attorney and attorneys representing Isom.

Isom’s departure on Jan. 4, 2012, came two months after the student-run newspaper, the East Carolinian, published photos of a streaker at an ECU football game that showed full frontal nudity. While the timing drew some criticism from First Amendment advocates, Isom has acknowledged that it resulted from a difference in his professional philosophy and the expectations of the university.

While Isom said he disagrees with his termination, he believes this resolution is best for both parties. “This allows us all to get on with our lives, without having to drag this out indefinitely,” Isom said. “I truly enjoyed my time at ECU. The students were eager to learn, and were always very professional.” Isom noted that under his guidance, the East Carolinian newspaper, and the Rebel, a literary magazine, each received national awards from student media organizations.
“While I am proud of the fact that these awards occurred during my tenure, it was the hard work of the students that garnered the well-deserved recognition,” Isom said. “While I regret that I will no longer be directing the student media, I am encouraged by the University’s statement that it will remain focused on providing students with a quality environment to learn journalism and exercise their First Amendment rights,” Isom said.

“This separation reflected a difference in philosophy and a desire to take student journalism at the East Carolinian in a new direction,” said Dr. Virginia Hardy, ECU’s Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs. “East Carolina University acts in ways that demonstrate strong support for the First Amendment rights of its student journalists and has shown it is respectful and protective of those rights,” said Hardy. “The interim advisor appointed for the East Carolinian is an impressive newspaper editor with a national reputation for journalistic integrity and accomplishment,” she added.

Isom will receive $31,200, which is the cost of health insurance and salary for six months at Isom’s former rate of pay. According to Donna Gooden Payne, university attorney for ECU, and Isom’s attorneys, John Hoomani and Amanda Martin, Isom and the university agreed to issue this joint statement.
Adviser, university agree to settlement
By Jackie Drake
The Daily Reflector
Saturday, April 21, 2012

A settlement has been reached between East Carolina University and the student media adviser it fired in January.

Paul Isom, former adviser of The East Carolinian newspaper, will receive $31,200 and the university will accept his resignation, according to a joint statement prepared by both parties’ attorneys released Friday. Isom initially was terminated in early January, with the university citing personnel issues. In November, the student newspaper printed nude photos of a streaker at a football game.

While the timing drew criticism from free speech advocates, the university said at the time that the termination was not a First Amendment issue. Friday’s statement attributed the separation to a difference of philosophy. Isom said he disagrees with his termination, but believes this resolution is best for both parties and acknowledges different professional philosophies, according to the statement.

“This allows us all to get on with our lives, without having to drag this out indefinitely,” Isom said in the statement. “I truly enjoyed my time at ECU. The students were eager to learn, and were always very professional.”

Reached by phone Friday, Isom confirmed the statement released by the university but declined to comment further.
The amount represents the cost of health insurance and salary for six months at Isom’s former rate of pay.

“This separation reflected a difference in philosophy and a desire to take student journalism at the East Carolinian in a new direction,” Virginia Hardy, ECU’s Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, said. “East Carolina University acts in ways that demonstrate strong support for the First Amendment rights of its student journalists and has shown it is respectful and protective of those rights.”

Under Isom’s guidance, the East Carolinian newspaper and the Rebel literary magazine each received national awards from student media organizations, the statement noted.

“While I am proud of the fact that these awards occurred during my tenure, it was the hard work of the students that garnered the well-deserved recognition,” Isom said. “While I regret that I will no longer be directing the student media, I am encouraged by the university’s statement that it will remain focused on providing students with a quality environment to learn journalism and exercise their First Amendment rights.”

An interim adviser for The East Carolinian began in February. Isom continues to teach one introductory reporting class at ECU, which will conclude at the end of this semester. He continues to work part-time from his home in Farmville and is seeking other employment.

Contact Jackie Drake at jdrake@reflector.com or 252-329-9567 or follow her on Twitter @JackieDrakeGDR.
OAR Lab Director and Chief Conservator Sarah Warkins-Kenney looks over artifacts found at The Queen Anne's Revenge site, which are going to be on display during the Conservation Lab open house at the ECU Wests Research Campus on Friday, April 20, 2012. (Aileen Devlin/The Daily Reflector)

Revenge’s splendors to be showcased
Saturday, April 21, 2012

What happens to a 12-foot anchor and 2,000-pound cannon that have been recovered from the Atlantic Ocean after nearly 300 years?

Visitors to the Queen Anne’s Revenge Conservation Lab open house on Saturday will find out.

The event, scheduled from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today as part of the N.C. Science Festival, will showcase the science of conservation and the information artifacts can reveal.

Archaeologists, conservators and other scientists will explain their work and have interactive demonstrations.

A cannon, anchors, hull structure, and other recovered artifacts will be presented in various stages of conservation.

Visitors can look through a microscope at some of the smallest artifacts, learn to identify biological life on concretions, see artifact X-rays, take a picture with the anchor and other activities.

Blackbeard’s flagship, Queen Anne’s Revenge, ran aground near Beaufort in 1718.

The shipwreck was located in 1996 by Intersal Inc. of Florida by Operations Director Mike Daniel through research provided by Intersal President Phil Masters.
The Queen Anne’s Revenge Conservation Lab Open is located at the West Research Campus, 1157 VOA Site Road, East Carolina University.

The Queen Anne’s Revenge Shipwreck Project is part of the Office of State Archaeology in the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources.

For more information, www.ncculture.com or call 744-6721
‘Making Pitt’s Babies Fit’
By K.J. Williams
Monday, April 23, 2012

It’s been two decades since the Pitt County Health Department helped give birth to the annual “Making Pitt’s Babies Fit” maternity fair.

The free event has grown during that time, in size and scope, and these days it typically attracts about 1,000 people to the Greenville Convention Center, said Amy Hattem, coordinator of Women’s and Children’s Health Education Programs at the health department. Sunday’s fair was a joint effort with the Pitt Infant Mortality Prevention Advisory Council, along with several sponsors.

The fair’s focus is to inform women who are pregnant or who have babies about the programs available to help them give birth to healthy babies and keep their babies healthy, especially during the baby’s first year.

Different booths offered information from preventing Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) to providing the right diet for the baby, and the baby’s stages of development. A booth on pre-pregnancy “helps men and women to be healthy even before they conceive,” Hattem said.

Greta Wilkes brought her son, Christopher Stanley, a new father to an 11-month-old boy, to help prepare him for fatherhood. “And it helps you in raising your child better if you’re a new parent — young parent,” she said of the fair.
A health department booth on smoking made an impression on her 25-year-old son.

“I need to stop smoking for my son,” he said, adding that he wasn’t aware of all the health hazards of second-hand smoke.

Expectant mother Emily Albanese, 19, came to the fair with her mother, Susan Moss, and the father’s mother, Lisa Fitzgerald.

Albanese, who doesn’t smoke, took photographs of the pictures of smoker’s lungs she said resembled “burnt pork chops” to show the baby’s father. He usually smokes outside, but she wants to tell him about what she’s learned about smoking causing birth defects.

Catherine Taylor, resource mom with Healthy Beginnings at the health department, said some people aren’t aware that second- and third-hand smoke can cause SIDS.

Albanese also learned how to handle a baby’s crying and tips on soothing those sobs at the booth manned by Donna Rea, 22, an East Carolina University student from the peer education group, Healthy Pirates.

“It’s OK to let the baby cry,” Albanese said. “I thought I had to come to the rescue at every point.”

Octavius Taylor, 30, came to the event with his pregnant fiancée, Cilicia Jones, 32. He said men should attend the fair, too.

“Because fathers get to know everything about taking care of the babies and what the babies need,” he said.

Another topic was stress reduction. Minerva Freeman, a social worker with the health department, talked to pregnant women about ways to relax — one way to prevent premature births. Playing paddle ball or using a hula hoop are ways to head off stress, she said.

Hattem said the event is aimed at improving health outcomes.

In 2010, Pitt’s infant mortality rate at 9.3 per 1,000 live births was higher than the state’s rate of 7.0 per 1,000 live births, Hattem said.

“In Pitt County, we are coming down, but we’re not coming down very fast, and there’s still that disparity between African-American babies and Caucasian babies,” she said, adding the mortality rate is twice as high for black babies.

Contact K.J. Williams at kwilliams@reflector.com or 252-329-9588.
Nursing student Courtney Draz checks the vitals during a practice CPR scenario on a simulator. (Aileen Devlin/The Daily Reflector)

**Devices help students hone clinical skills**

By **K.J. Williams**  
Sunday, April 22, 2012

It’s not playacting for these medical and nursing students — it’s realistic, and it resembles a life-and-death situation.

Still, by learning on mannequin-like simulators, the students at East Carolina University get plenty of practice before treating real-life patients. It’s like having lots of dress rehearsals before the curtain goes up.

To add to this drama, the simulators are becoming increasing lifelike.

Dean Gainey, a junior at East Carolina University’s College of Nursing, said he was introduced to simulators his first semester.

He started out learning how to assess a patient’s vital signs.

“I was surprised by how real it was,” Gainey said. “You could actually hear the heartbeat; you could hear the lungs.

“It’s pretty much as real as you can get as opposed to working in the hospital.”

One of the tasks is inserting IVs into mannequin arms.

“The arms are pretty realistic as well — the arms can bleed,” Gainey said.

A computer screen is attached, and the system can evaluate your skills.

Nursing student Courtney Draz said working with the simulators has given her confidence and has made her calmer in real-life medical situations. “You
can kind of work as a team, simulate what you would do in an emergency,” she said. “That’s someone’s life in your hands. That’s why you take labs seriously.”

Laura Gantt, director of the simulation lab, said the simulator is programmed to match the lesson plan. “We make up different cases based on what we want to teach the students.”

As the students worked on the simulator, the attached monitor flashed and continually changed its data. If the simulator stops breathing, the pulse stops. One of the nursing simulators can even give birth.

Gantt said the most advanced simulator at the College of Nursing is wireless, and cost about $75,000. “He has an eye blink. He has pulses all over his body.”

“The more stuff the mannequin can do, the easier it is for the student to think that the simulator is a real person,” she said.

The downside is these high-tech models are complicated to operate and high maintenance, she said.

Still, the simulators have improved training. “There’s less practice on patients,” she said. “Now, they practice in the lab. You get a better learning experience if you actually look at the mannequin and see what needs to be done.”

The simulator will respond to the students’ actions. Its breathing or pulse can change, as well as its respiration, heart and lung sounds.

Gantt said the experience can become almost real for the students, giving them an adrenaline rush.

“The need for simulation increases every semester,” Gantt said, adding that over the years, the simulators have become more complex.

Simulators are in use across the ECU campus, including at the School of Dental Medicine, where simulator heads have fake teeth, tongues and gums.

The simulators at Brody School of Medicine also are used to train medical providers, from employees of Vidant Medical Center to emergency medical technicians and paramedics, said Angelic Sorrell, program and operations manager of the clinical simulator program.

At a training session at Brody earlier this year, neonatal intensive care nurses from Vidant were paired with third-year emergency medicine resident Yousif Alkadhi to perform CPR on a three-day-old “baby.”
The programmed “baby” was seriously ill.

“Oh, dear,” nurse Melissa Smith said as she took the baby’s pulse.

A computer-generated blue light around the baby’s mouth signified a lack of oxygen.

Alkadhi instructed the nurses to resume compressions and asked for another dose of epinephrine.

“We saved him,” Smith said when the revived baby began to cry.

**Student laboratory**

Later that day, Dr. Walter “Skip” Robey III, director of the clinical simulation program at Brody, assisted at a physiology lab of first-year medical students learning how to use an adult simulator to evaluate a patient’s condition.

Their professor, Robert Carroll, demonstrated, then quizzed the students. One student was asked to use the pulse oximeter to measure the oxygen saturation in the simulator’s “blood,” reading the results on the attached monitor.

Another student checked the simulator’s pulse.

After class, student Andrew Heiser said the simulators help them learn the procedures.

“It’s good that it doesn’t have the pressure that’s involved with a real medical event,” he said.

Heiser also notes the limitations of the simulators. “You’re not interacting with a real person,” he said.

That same distinction was made by Draz at the College of Nursing. “They can’t give me a hug and say ‘thank you,’” she said. “At the hospital, I’m always getting hugs.”

**Types of simulators**

Brody’s medical students start with simple models or basic simulators, moving up in complexity, to the ones that can be programmed to exhibit a range of symptoms.

At first, students could practice an IV procedure using a needle inserted into a tube filled with liquid installed on a wooden board.
“You can get your basic skills down with this, then you can move them to these other ones that actually pump (substitute) blood,” Robey said. “It’s all about repetition in a safe environment.”

Later, the students will work with a $2,500 ultrasound IV arm simulator that helps locate veins in patients. They can watch the needle go into the vein on the vascular ultrasound.

Sorrell said students are encouraged to act as if the simulator or model is a real person. “We try to make it a personal approach, so that way they’re practicing their communication skills and teamwork,” she said.

Sorrell demonstrated how some simulators, like the one that represents a back, have different “blocks” inside that can be switched to mimic different patients. For example, a block could transform the simulator into an elderly person’s back with less elastic “skin.” Another block is designed for giving a pregnant woman an epidural.

Replacement parts can be expensive, another reason for starting students off on basic models.

“You learn a skill and then you move to the next level of simulator,” Sorrell said.

Before students use a simulator in an obstructed airway scenario, they might start with a homemade model of duct tape with ketchup packets underneath. Sorrell has made a “uterus” out of a Gatorade bottle.

With the high-fidelity simulators that blink and breathe and talk, the students practice scenarios, learning how to react in a wide-range of circumstances.

“So you can kind of drive home these clinical skills to put them in a clinical context,” Robey said.

The high-fidelity models can cry, sweat, have nasal “secretions” or froth at the mouth during seizures. Students practice inserting breathing tubes, CPR and using defibrillators.

The programing dictates the simulator’s symptoms to “bring the scenario to life,” Robey said.

The most high-end simulator at Brody, a wireless model that cost about $72,000, can become male or female by switching its genitalia, just like the most advanced model at the College of Nursing.
With the simulators, students aren’t practicing at a patient’s bedside. They’re skills already were honed in the lab, in a nonthreatening environment, Robey said.

The simulator also lets the students know how they’ve done. For example, if they intubate, or insert the breathing tube correctly, both lungs will inflate with oxygen, Sorrell said. “They get immediate feedback.”

Contact K.J. Williams at kwilliams@reflector.com or 252-329-9588.
Squeals and laughter erupted from the gym of East End Elementary School in Robersonville recently as second-graders learned about healthy foods from East Carolina University students.

In a modified “red light, green light” nutrition game, the children were challenged to move a little or a lot when the ECU students called out a food name. For “green” or healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, the students walked or ran to the opposite side of the gym. For “red,” or foods that should be eaten sparingly like brownies or cake, the students moved slowly or almost stood still.

The community service project was designed and led by freshmen in ECU’s Wellness Living Learning Community.

In its second year, WLLC is a residential learning opportunity open to all incoming freshmen who have an interest in health and wellness and in helping to improve the health of others. Selected students live in Garrett Hall and receive personal wellness coaching and health classes. They also share what they have learned with undeserved youth in eastern North Carolina.

Tywanna Purkett, assistant director of campus wellness and co-creator of the program, said similar programs exist at other universities, but ECU’s service learning component is unique.

“We take it a step beyond and teach them how to give back to the community,” Purkett said.
Students in the wellness community connect through social media and orientation before they move to campus. The sense of belonging helps them adjust to freshman year.

“The students tell us they get so much out of it,” said Karen Warren, director of campus wellness.

Ashley Adair, 18, of Harrisburg, dressed as a bunch of purple grapes, held hands with second-graders as they made their way across the gym. A child life major, Adair eventually wants to be an occupational therapist. She was drawn to the wellness community and liked getting to know fellow students before classes started last fall.

Treston Youngblood, 7, said he learned about the types of food he can eat and what he shouldn’t eat. He even decided he will try a new green vegetable: celery. His teacher, Winifred Williams, said showing the children foods they should eat is a great first step. She hopes parents can learn from it, too.

Media resource teacher Mary Tyndall and third-grade teacher Stephanie Woolard said the ECU students were doing a great job of getting the students’ attention with the activity.

The ECU students decided to adopt East End Elementary, which has about 300 children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade in Martin County, after learning the school doesn’t have an afterschool program and a majority of the students are eligible for free lunch.

“It’s a community that needs more attention, and our students really embraced that,” Warren said. The hope is that the elementary students will be encouraged to go to college through their interaction with and exposure to ECU students, she said.

Working with school nurse Amy Guard and social worker Kim Haddock, ECU wellness students have directed other projects at the school like a hand-washing hygiene program and a parents’ night activity on nutrition. They collected and donated more than 200 children’s books and adopted a family for the holidays. Students also are painting a mural on healthy eating in the cafeteria.

Brandon Riley, 19, of Raleigh, enjoys working with kids and said it is important to teach them about healthy eating at a young age.

“I wish it was put to me that early,” he said.

Scholarship honoring fallen Marine awarded
ECU honored a fallen Marine recently by awarding the first scholarship given in his memory.

Sgt. David J. Smith enrolled at ECU in 2003 after enlisting with the Marine Corps Reserves. The Maryland resident majored in industrial distribution and logistics in the College of Technology and Computer Science but put his studies on hold twice — once for a tour in Iraq in 2006 and again in 2009 when his unit was called to Afghanistan.

Smith died Jan. 26, 2010, after falling victim to a suicide bomb attack in Helmand province. He was 25.

“We lost one of our own in Afghanistan,” Dean David White said at the Robert E. and Betty S. Hill Recognition of Excellence Awards Breakfast on April 13. “He brought light to everybody around him.”

Christopher Morgan, a junior design major from Virginia, is the first recipient of the David J. Smith Leadership Award. The honor comes with $1,000 and a coin created in Smith’s memory.

“David Smith personified all that is right about this nation,” said Steve Duncan, assistant vice chancellor for administration and finance and military programs. “Use this support to continue to build the better world that David sacrificed for.”

The award is based on three criteria administrators say Smith exemplified: leadership, integrity and service. Morgan is juggling 18 credit hours, works more than 20 hours weekly in the dean’s office and heads or participates in several organizations including the American Design and Drafting Association, the Dean’s Student Leadership Advisory Council and the Bachelor of Science in Design Advisory Board.

“He is one fellow who is always willing to lend a helping hand,” White said. “He always has a smile on his face.”

The room fell silent as attendees viewed a slideshow of photos from Smith’s years ECU. His family thanked the university and congratulated Morgan on the award.

“(David) joined the Marines because he felt he needed to do service for his country,” said his father, Leonard Smith, “and he paid the ultimate sacrifice for it.”

“The first recipient? You couldn’t have picked a better one,” he said.

“I’m proud to represent the college as well as David,” Morgan said. “It’s truly an honor. I wish I could have met him.”
Most students and parents worry about the rising costs of tuition and stress over making the tuition payment each semester. But when you break it down, for many in-state students the tuition bill is the easiest part of paying for college. For instance, at East Carolina University, in-state tuition per semester for spring 2012 is $1,674. The fees were an additional $1,008. Room rates for on-campus housing averaged about $2,400 and meal plans averaged $1,600. Add in the $442.50 Student Health Insurance Plan that only is avoidable through a hard-waiver, and you are looking at a total bill of $7,124.50. The $1,674 tuition represents less than a quarter of the total cost.

Now, let’s throw in $700 for dining out and snacks (yes, this is for on-campus residents), another $600 for books, and $700 for personal expenses such as clothes and toiletries and you are looking at more than $9,100 per semester. What if students want a car while going to college? In addition to the $100 parking pass, they are looking at $600 worth of car insurance, and about $3,000 in other vehicle costs including car payment, depreciation, maintenance, gasoline, etc.

At the end of the day, an in-state student who owns a car and lives on campus can expect to spend more than $12,800 per semester. Suddenly that $1,674 tuition bill seems like peanuts compared to everything else. To really keep costs down, students and parents should focus on categories of expenses that can be controlled.

For instance, if your school has a hard-waiver policy for health insurance, and the student is covered by his or her parents’ plan, then submit the waiver and save several hundred dollars. Consider not owning a car while in college. The costs are extremely high and most students only need the car to get to a job which they only need to pay for the car. That could save thousands.

If students really are on a tight budget, then gourmet coffees, energy drinks and power smoothies may be robbing them of hundreds of dollars each semester. At $3 to $5 each, these beverages literally can wash away any student’s budget. Instead, they should opt for one gourmet treat per week, or buy in bulk and drink from their own refrigerator.
And let’s face it, what student doesn’t want to dine out with their friends? After all, it’s as much about the socializing as it is about the food. Students should consider dining out a little less often, or sticking with the just the nachos while out with friends, and eating the meals on campus or at their apartments.

A basic budget will do the trick. Nothing scary or complicated here. Students simply figure out what bills must be paid each month, subtract that from the total amount of money they have available from part-time work, summer jobs or student loan reimbursements, and what is left over is theirs to do what they want with.

Keep in mind that a student loan reimbursement is not really a reimbursement at all if it is money from loans. It is really just access to cash that is being loaned and will have to be repaid, usually over a 10-year period.

The key is for students to stick to a number that is reasonable and will not result in student loan payments that are way too high when they graduate. Making payments every month for books and tuition during the 10 years of student loan repayments after graduation is one thing; paying for cups of coffee, movie tickets and burritos is quite another.

Bill Pratt is a teaching instructor and the assistant director of the Financial Wellness Initiative at East Carolina University’s College of Business. He is the co-author of How to Keep Your Kid from Moving Back Home after College.”
April 23 — People in the News

Award

Alice Arnold, professor of art education at East Carolina University, has been named the 2012 Southeastern Region Higher Education Art Educator of the Year by the National Art Education Association.

The award recognizes exemplary contributions, services and achievements of an NAEA member. Arnold’s award was presented during the NAEA national convention in New York. The Southeastern Region is composed of 10 U.S. states and two territories.
RALEIGH, N.C. -- Supporters in Chapel Hill sought shelter from the rain under tents, blankets and umbrellas Sunday as they lined up for tickets to see President Barack Obama speak about student debt this week at the flagship public university in a state at the heart of this year's presidential election.

Obama visits the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on Tuesday and similar colleges in Colorado and Iowa as he woos young voters by talking about student loans and the rising cost of education. All three are in states Obama won in 2008 but which could go to the likely Republican nominee, Mitt Romney. The Obama campaign sees college-aged voters as a critical constituency.

A line of students seeking tickets to hear Obama in Chapel Hill camped out overnight in front of the box office of the university's former basketball auditorium, where he'll speak. The line later snaked down the bleacher steps of the adjoining soccer stadium and curled along the running track encircling the field.

"People started lining up to wait for tickets last night, so it is evident that the student body is excited for him to come," said Anna Ollinger, a 19-year-old sophomore from Barrington, Ill., majoring in linguistics and Spanish. "Obviously, lower interest rates will have a huge impact on many students, so it's an issue that needs to be addressed."

Obama is in the midst of a push to get Congress to extend a law that cut interest rates on a popular federal loan program for low- and middle-income undergraduates. If the law expires, the rates on subsidized Stafford loans will double on July 1, from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent.

More than 7 million students would be financially squeezed if rates rose, to the cost of an additional $1,000 on average, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said Friday.

But the cost of keeping the interest rates frozen could run $6 billion a year.
The president's visit comes two months after scores of angry students held a raucous protest as the University of North Carolina Board of Governors voted to increase tuition across the system of 16 university campuses by an average of nearly 9 percent, or over $400 a year.

The undergraduate North Carolina resident student currently pays an average tuition and fees of $5,294 a year, not including books and living expenses. It is higher at the system's two flagship schools, with UNC-Chapel Hill students paying $6,823 and North Carolina State University charging $6,964. Average annual tuition and fees at public four-year colleges in the U.S. rose 8 percent this year to $8,244 for in-state students, according to the College Board.

The North Carolina schools remain a bargain compared to other states. The University of Virginia charged new in-state students $11,794 for the 2011-12 academic year, while Penn State University charges underclassmen $15,100.

Perhaps because of the relatively low cost, only half of the 155,263 in-state undergraduates enrolled in the UNC system's schools took out federal student loans in the fall semester of 2010, the last period for which data is available. The 78,497 North Carolina resident undergraduates borrowed a total of just under $254 million in federal loans, or an average of $3,236 per student.

Freshman David Ortiz, 18, of Potomac, Md., said he's among the lucky ones since he landed a scholarship that will allow him to graduate without borrowing. It's too early for most of his classmates to start worrying how they'll pay off loans after graduation, he said.

"It's not a huge issue that's dominant or looming over people's minds. But definitely I think it will always be an area of concern. Nobody wants to pay higher loans, that's for sure. But I think most people just don't understand extremely well how this will impact them," Ortiz said.

He said he's been watching some of the Republican primary debates and expects to pay increasing attention to the presidential campaign as the time for him to cast his first votes nears.

Obama campaign officials estimate about 8 million voters between the ages of 18 and 21 weren't old enough to vote in 2008 but could be swayed to support the president this time. Whether students will vote in large numbers for Obama again will depend on how their personal finances stack up against others since college graduates have faced high levels of unemployment.
Emery Dalesio can be reached at http://twitter.com/emerydalesio

Read more here:
http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/04/22/2018075/interest-high-at-unc-campus-for.html#storylink=cpy
RALEIGH, N.C. -- A Raleigh man accused in the death of a member of North Carolina's State Board of Education is going on trial for his life. Opening statements are scheduled Monday in the trial of 32-year-old Jason Williford. He has pleaded not guilty to charges that he raped and battered 62-year-old Kathy Taft. Williford could face the death penalty if he is convicted.

The Greenville resident and grandmother was recovering from surgery at a friend's Raleigh home when she was killed in March 2010.

Williford was arrested the following month after police say DNA evidence on a cigarette butt they found linked him to the crime. His attorneys tried unsuccessfully to have that evidence thrown out, arguing police should have obtained a search warrant before picking up the evidence.

Read more here:
Doris Betts, the celebrated Southern writer who for decades nurtured others as a creative writing professor at UNC-Chapel Hill, died Saturday at the age of 79.

Betts passed away at her home, Araby Farm, near Pittsboro, more than a year after being diagnosed with lung cancer.

The author of six novels and three collections of short stories, among other works, Betts was sometimes compared to the great Southern writer Flannery O’Connor.

Her novel “Souls Raised from the Dead” won the Southern Book Award and was named one of the 20 best books of 1994 by The New York Times. Her most widely known short story, “The Ugliest Pilgrim,” was made into an Academy Award-winning film and a musical that won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1998.

She received a slew of other honors, including the N.C. Award for Literature, the John Dos Passos Prize and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Medal of Merit for her short stories. She was a three-time winner of the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction from the N.C. Literary and Historical Association.

Despite the long list of honors, Betts was anything but uppity. Those who knew her described her as homegrown, joyous, witty and wise.

For 32 years, she taught fiction writing at UNC-CH and was beloved by aspiring authors who came through the program. When she won UNC-CH’s highest award in 1999, her colleague Marianne Gingher wrote: “No one who knows her life’s work and is familiar with the marvelous pantheon of living North Carolina writers would contest her place as First Lady if not President of them all.”
Betts was a legendary figure at the university, which established a $1 million endowed professorship in her name in 1998. Her love for books and writers was infectious, and she helped her students believe that they had potential.

The late Max Steele, former head of the creative writing program, once said she was the most popular teacher there. “I could never get into her office to talk with her,” he said. “There was always such a line of students waiting to see her that I had to go back to my office and phone her.”

Tara Powell was one of those students who sat outside Room 230 at UNC-CH’s Greenlaw Hall, anticipating her turn to talk to Betts. “You could hear her voice and her laughter down the halls,” said Powell, now an associate professor of English and Southern studies at the University of South Carolina.

Powell wanted to enroll at UNC-CH partly because she was awed by Betts’ work. Once there, the young undergraduate was too shy to approach the famous professor; later, though, Betts would become her mentor and Betts’ writing would be the subject of Powell’s master’s thesis. “I always felt like I had something to learn from her,” Powell said.

**A source of inspiration**

There were thousands of others who looked to Betts for guidance and inspiration.

Bland Simpson, UNC-CH professor and longtime colleague, said Betts managed to be warm and supportive even as she critiqued students’ work, writing “vague,” “weak” or “unbelievable” in the margins.

Students often took their problems to Betts. One might appear at her door, tearful or fretful, and would quickly be disarmed by Betts’ direct approach, Simpson said. “She’d say, ‘Who are you and what is your sad story?’”

She was a teacher of students, and a teacher of teachers, too. Writer Jill McCorkle, a former colleague, said she gained insight as she watched Betts work with students.

“She did so with great honesty,” McCorkle said. “She did not sugarcoat it, but she also made it so important and worthwhile in a way that I think people eagerly accepted her advice and criticism.”

And then there was Betts’ wicked sense of humor. At one point, her email address was “dragonlady@email.unc.edu,” said Bill Andrews, UNC-CH’s senior associate dean for the fine arts and humanities.
“This was a tremendously ironic title to give yourself,” Andrews said. “She was the opposite of that.”

Others remembered moments when Betts delivered a line like no one else.

“As good Southern women we tend to say things like, ‘Now I don’t mean to be ugly ...’” McCorkle said, recalling that Southern euphemism that often precedes a disparaging remark or a delicious slice of gossip. “I remember one time, I leaned in to Doris and I said, ‘Now I don’t mean to be ugly ...’ and she said, ‘Like hell you don’t.’”

“We got a big laugh out of that, and I said, ‘You’re right!’” McCorkle recalled. “I never say that but what I don’t think of her. She just blew the whistle in a hurry.”

**Humble beginnings**

There was no pretense to Betts, perhaps due to her humble roots.

She was born Doris June Waugh in Statesville, the only child of mill workers. She attended UNC-Greensboro, where as a student she wrote a collection of short stories and won a college fiction award from Mademoiselle Magazine. It would be the first of many prizes.

She married Lowry Betts, a lawyer who would later serve as chief judge in Orange and Chatham counties. The two had met as teenagers at a summer church retreat and kept in touch through letters. “He was the smartest boy I’d ever met,” Doris Betts said in a 2007 interview. “I thought, I’ll keep this one.” The couple had three children and shared a love of raising Arabian horses on their property.

She had a stint as a newspaper reporter before arriving at UNC-CH in 1966 to fill in as a lecturer for one semester. At 34, Betts hadn’t finished her college degree, but she already had published two novels and a collection of short stories.

She would spend her career at the university, where she helped build its reputation as a top-notch incubator for young writers. She served in a variety of roles at UNC-CH, where she directed the freshman writing program and the undergraduate honors program, was an assistant dean and in 1982 became the first woman to chair the faculty.

Despite her star status, Betts never hesitated to roll up her sleeves for mundane chores that were necessary to run the academic enterprise. She oversaw the first-year composition program and took on committee assignments with gusto. If the chancellor needed her to speak at a fundraiser,
she was there. It wasn’t unusual for her to go straight from her classes to a university event and then to an evening appearance at a book club or a library in a distant North Carolina town.

Her devotion to the university was evident during the past few months. Sometime in the 1970s, Boston University approached her and asked for her papers as part of a growing collection of records of academic women. She said yes, she once explained, because they asked.

But as her health declined, she desperately regretted the decision. So her friends and colleagues mounted a campaign and a legal process to transfer the papers from Boston to the archives in Chapel Hill.

“That was one of her goals,” said friend Carol Reuss, a retired professor of journalism at UNC-CH. “She would not be happy dying without knowing that those papers were back here.”

When the boxes arrived, she was too weak to visit the library, so the archivists took some of the papers to her Pittsboro farm, where she lived with her dogs Toby and Billy and a horse named Surprise.

**Extraordinary situations**

Her small-town upbringing infused her literary sensibility. She created ordinary characters and then took them on extraordinary, sometimes painful, journeys. One of her novels, “Souls Raised from the Dead,” opens with a vivid description of a chicken truck accident – like one she once encountered on U.S. 15-501 – in which a highway patrolman chases down the loose chickens. That character must eventually cope with the illness and death of his child.

In an excerpted interview published in The News & Observer in 1994, Betts talked about her book and explained that it was an exploration of how God can allow the innocent to suffer.

“I always am interested in whether or not you can deal with what I think of as the big questions at the level of ordinary working people. It seems to me that that’s essential in fiction in America,” she said. “If you really want to ask the questions that Job asked, why shouldn’t you ask them of a highway patrolman, a beautician, a shoe salesman at Belk’s ...?”

Late in her life, she had to travel the same road as the patrolman. Her daughter, LewEllyn, died of cancer last year, around the time Betts herself was diagnosed. Her husband died in 2007.
She is survived by sons, David Lowry Betts and wife Catherine of Pittsboro, and Erskine Moore Betts and wife Mary of Apex, and son-in-law Thomas Mroz of Clemson, S.C.; and grandchildren Anna Josephine Betts of Pittsboro and Matthew Palmer Betts and William Alston Betts, both of Apex.

In November, Betts will be honored when the South Atlantic Modern Language Association meets in the Triangle. One session will focus on Betts’ fiction, with four of her former students and admirers presenting papers on her work.

Joe Flora, UNC-CH professor of English emeritus, had told Betts about it last fall. The event would be wonderful, he said to her, and if she could come, it would be special.

But Betts, always dedicated to the truth, responded, “I will be there in spirit.”

Stancill: 919-829-4559

Read more here: http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/04/21/2015623/doris-betts-acclaimed-southern.html#storylink=misearch#storylink=cpy
Sarah Norris, a first-year law student at Campbell University, listens to a panel discussion during a Campbell Law Career Center program about federal judicial clerkships at Campbell University in Raleigh on Monday, April 16, 2012.

**Triangle law school graduates face tough job market**

Published Sun, Apr 22, 2012 12:00 AM
By David Ranii - dranii@newsobserver.com

For the hundreds of students poised to graduate from Triangle law schools this spring, the recession may be over but the damage it inflicted on their chosen profession lingers.

Whereas a decade ago many top law graduates would have had no shortage of job opportunities, today’s graduates face a far more uncertain future. Although the recession hit the legal profession particularly hard – forcing some firms to suspend the summer associate programs that serve as the gateway to entry-level hires – it didn’t reduce the number of people attending law school.

Moreover, several years ago some law schools were shocked when some law firms – realizing they’d made too many offers – took the unprecedented step of deferring by as much as a year the starting date for entry-level hires. That left graduates, who had received their job offers a year in advance after working as summer associates following their second year of law school, in the lurch.

The job market has improved since then, but it’s still anemic.

“It’s a fact: There are fewer legal jobs than there were (pre-recession), and there are just as many if not more law students,” said Bruce Elvin, assistant dean and director of the career and professional development center at Duke University’s law school.
Many law firms that suspended their summer programs have now reactivated them, but typically they aren’t bringing on as many summer associates as they once did.

“They are coming back smaller and more efficient because summer programs do not make money for anybody,” said Linda Wendling, assistant dean for career services at N.C. Central University. “They’re just expensive testing grounds.”

The difficult job market, combined with stagnating compensation, is a double whammy for law school students – many of whom amass more than $100,000 in debt to pay for their law school education.

Barry Porter, 26, who is about to graduate from N.C. Central and has two job offers on the table, said his approximately $100,000 debt weighs on him even though he has no regrets about going to law school.

“I feel like it was the right decision,” said Porter, who grew up in Atlanta. “I have a passion for law.”

**Great resume; no job**

The new reality facing graduates means simply having a stellar resume and academic record is no longer a guarantee that you’ll land a job with your desired firm or in your desired field.

Michael DeFrank, co-chair of the recruiting committee at Wyrick, Robbins, Yates & Ponton, which has about 65 lawyers in Raleigh, recalls that when he graduated from Emory University law school in Atlanta in 2000, it seemed as if jobs were falling out of the sky.

“It has been the polar opposite of that of late,” DeFrank said. “Honestly, it is difficult to watch these incredibly talented students struggle to find jobs.”

James R. Lawrence III, 27, a Raleigh native who is poised to graduate from UNC-Chapel Hill’s law school next month, is grateful that he has lined up a job with Coats & Bennett, a Raleigh intellectual property firm with 11 lawyers.

“I have friends of mine at UNC who are still looking for positions (even though they have) fantastic resumes and great work experience,” he said.

Lindsay Levine, a 25-year-old from Warwick, N.Y., who is about to graduate from N.C. Central’s law school, hasn’t snared a job yet. She is especially worried about her prospects because she’s limiting her search to the Greenville/Goldsboro/Kinston area so she can be with her boyfriend.
“It’s difficult,” said Levine. “A lot of the smaller firms are just not hiring.”

Although it may be hard for some frustrated third-years to believe, law school officials say that the market for new lawyers does seem to be improving.

**Fewer tears this year**

“There seem to be more opportunities; there seem to be more interviews,” Wendling said. “There are (fewer students) coming in and crying. I haven’t had a crier yet, which I have had in the past.”

James Leipold, executive director of NALP, originally called the National Association for Law Placement, says virtually all law school graduates do get jobs.

“The thing is, they may not get the jobs they want,” he said. “There are certainly fewer jobs with large law firms, so they may take a job in another setting where they don’t make as much money, and they may take longer to find a job.”

The data from local law schools – Campbell University, Duke, N.C. Central and UNC – reinforce the employability of law school graduates. For last year’s crop of graduates, the number of students who were seeking work and had landed jobs as of Feb. 15 ranged from 86 percent to 88 percent at N.C. Central – depending on whether you include those who are pursuing graduate degrees as well as those who chose not to seek work – to 95 percent to 98 percent at Duke.

Law schools report employment data as of Feb. 15 because many law school grads, especially those seeking to work as prosecutors and public defenders, don’t receive job offers until they pass the bar exam.

Where local law grads end up working varies depending on where they went to school.

Campbell and N.C. Central report that 90 percent or more of their law school grads typically get jobs in North Carolina. Meanwhile, for the class of 2011, 57 percent of UNC’s grads and 15 percent of Duke’s grads found jobs in North Carolina.

UNC reported that its class of 2010 ended up with starting annual salaries ranging from a low of $38,400 to a high of $160,000, which is what the top-tier New York law firms pay. The median starting salary for UNC grads who went into private practice was $107,500, while the median for those going into the public sector was roughly half that – $55,000.
The median starting salary for entry level lawyers at large and mid-sized law firms in the Triangle was $115,000 last year, according to NALP. A number of local firms that never suspended their summer programs – including Smith, Anderson, Blount, Dorsett, Mitchell & Jernigan and Wyrick Robbins – also say they benefitted by getting the cream of the crop.

“It was an intentional decision to make an investment in the future,” said Carl Patterson, managing partner of 122-lawyer Smith Anderson, which actually more than doubled its entry-level hires in 2010. “When other firms were not hiring as much, there was more talent available for us to look at.”

More law firms are hiring these days, but the job market remains a work in progress, said Johnny Loper, managing partner of the Raleigh office of Womble Carlyle, which has about 75 attorneys in the Triangle.

“I have heard it said that the train wreck is over, most of the train wreckage is off the track, but the trains aren’t running on time,” he said.

Ranii: 919-829-4877

Read more here:
http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/04/22/2012161/triangle-law-school-graduates.html#storylink=cpy
March jobless rate is N.C.'s lowest in three years

By John Murawski
jmurawski@newsobserver.com
Posted: Friday, Apr. 20, 2012

North Carolina’s jobless rate dipped to 9.7 percent in March – the lowest in three years – as the state’s stop-and-go economy continues chipping away at high unemployment that exceeds the nation’s average.

But at the same time, the state lost 1,300 jobs, according to data issued Friday morning by the state Division of Employment Security. The numbers are adjusted for seasonal fluctuations.

Last month’s job losses stall a whopping gain of 28,000 jobs in the previous two months. Even with the March losses, however, the state is off to a strong start for the year.

“When we have had a couple of months of big gains, we always seem to get a little bit of a payback,” said Wells Fargo economist Mark Vitner. “It is highly unlikely that we will add jobs every single month of 2012.”

The data also show that 7,852 fewer people were in the labor force either because they became discouraged, retired or moved. Had those people persisted in their job searches and swollen the ranks of the unemployed, the jobless rate would have taken a turn upward.

The contradictory trends suggest the economy is still plagued by lingering weaknesses.

“The drop in the unemployment rate gives a deceptively positive picture of a more complicated labor market,” said N.C. State University economist Michael Walden. “To me, this suggests an economy that is undergoing a dynamic overhaul.”

Walden noted that in February, existing businesses cut jobs, and more discouraged unemployed workers left the workforce.

The biggest losses were in construction, professional and business services, and government.

The biggest gains were in the financial sector and leisure and hospitality.
“We still have a long way to go to where we need to be,” said economist James Kleckley at East Carolina University.

Murawski: 919-829-8932

Read more here:
http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2012/04/20/3186967/march-jobless-rate-is-states-lowest.html#storylink=cpy
The advent of the GPS has been a boon for the scouting profession, but even those aren’t foolproof.

On one trip, Marty Miller, the Jaguars’ West Coast scout, followed a GPS on an Oregon road that turned into a dirt road, which turned into a road of gravel and grass, which led him to a body of water where it told him to board a nonexistent ferry.

Once, when he was still scouting the Northeast, Miller followed his GPS to what he thought was West Liberty University. It took him to the bottom of a hill somewhere in the mountains of West Virginia.

Not to a school. To a bar.

“It said arriving at destination,” Miller said. “And they said, ‘No, this is not West Liberty University.’”

Only one person has ever been drafted into the NFL out of West Liberty University. Randy Little was a Steelers 11th-round pick in 1975, back when the school that is an hour-and-a-half outside Pittsburgh was called West Liberty State.

But NFL scouts go. If there’s a chance that a school has a prospect, they’ll go.

This week, the Jaguars’ scouts will return from the various parts of the country where they live as they find players for general manager Gene Smith. It’s one of the few times of year they are all together.

The process starts long before mock drafts and all-star games raise the profiles of future NFL players. It’s not glamorous, but painstaking, filled with long days, weeks on the road and plenty of stays in tiny towns. The payoff comes when their work helps their team win.

The beginning
In his three springs as the Jaguars’ BLESTO scout, Jake Peetz has learned the importance of organization. It helps limit the chaos sometimes caused by other people’s schedules.

Once he showed up for a junior day at a major program, and the strength coach forgot to tell the players. Peetz waited as the school’s graduate assistants scrambled to locate the seniors-to-be so he could measure them and give them their first NFL grades. On one trip to Florida International, the school’s pro liaison was missing because his wife went into labor. That liaison offered to go over players from the hospital, but Peetz told him that wasn’t necessary.

While the rest of the scouts are working on the current year’s draft in January, February, March and April, Peetz and other BLESTO scouts are working on the following year’s draft, finding players who have one season of eligibility left and putting them through junior days. There he’ll measure underclassmen, weigh them and watch them run the 40-yard dash. The prospects will fill out a questionnaire and sometimes take the Wonderlic test. He scouts every starter on major programs and looks beyond that sometimes.

“NFL players stand out,” Peetz said. “If a guy has size and speed, if a guy has production. … Any doubts — you always write them. Especially if he has size and speed.”

BLESTO is one of two scouting organizations that gathers intelligence on underclassmen. Peetz reports to the Jaguars, and he also reports to BLESTO, an organization that was started as the Bears, Lions, Eagles and Steelers Talent Organization. In May, the BLESTO scouts gather at a conference in Orlando to present their reports to NFL executives from the teams who participate in BLESTO.

“One thing [Smith] tells me is it’s a good grassroots thing,” Peetz said. “If you’re good, seven teams will know it, and if you’re not, seven teams will know it.”

Smith began his scouting career as a BLESTO scout, so did Jason DesJarlais, the Jaguars’ Midwest scout. Andy Denglar, the Jaguars’ director of college personnel, began with the National Scouting Combine years ago, an organization similar to BLESTO that consists of 15 NFL teams.

**Nine months before the draft**

DesJarlais and Chris Prescott, the Jaguars’ Southwest scout, live in Jacksonville.

They gather in Jacksonville during training camp, which starts in late July, for about 10 days, getting to know their team while creating their fall schedules. Then it’s time to hit the road.

“If you don’t like to travel or being away from your family is a problem, you won’t be scouting too long,” said Tim Mingey, the Jaguars’ assistant director of college personnel who has been with the team since the beginning of the organization.

Denglar and Terry McDonough, the Jaguars director of player personnel who is just below general manager Gene Smith on the player personnel hierarchy, fly most places they go, having to cover the nation as a whole.

Area scouts have smaller regions to cover and often will drive to the school in the area closest to his home, travel in one direction, leave his car on the road, and fly home without it.

“If I have any neighbors who are astute and aware, they might think that my wife has a different boyfriend every other weekend because I just rent a car when I’m home,” Miller said. “Every weekend, there’s a different car in the driveway. We just leave our car out on the road, I fly back to Boise rent it for a few days and fly back out.”

They plan their visits geographically, hitting schools that are close together, starting with the biggest programs -- Southeastern Conference schools in the southeast, Big Ten and Mid-Atlantic Conference schools in the midwest, the Pac-12 on the west. The smaller schools they target are aided by the grades in the BLESTO reports. Simmons grew up in New Bern, N.C., about 30 minutes from East Carolina University. When he scouts that school, he tries to make time to see his mom.

A college scout will typically be home for three or four days in a two-week period, perhaps every other weekend.

"In my area, all your D-1 schools you know you have to go to those so that’s not even a question," said Simmons, who drives his truck on the road. "All the smaller schools kind of fill in the spaces. You look at a map and you kind of just connect the dots to what makes sense as far as driving. I start in North Carolina because that’s the furthest south in my territory. Some of it too is based off of restrictions. Some schools, there’s only certain weeks that you can get in there."
A visit to a school starts around 7 or 8 a.m., with film study of offense, defense and special teams that lasts until the afternoon. Then a scout will do some extra work, talking to his sources at the school to learn more about the players both on and off the field. Practices might start around 3:30 or 4 p.m.. The scout will leave the school around 5 p.m., drive perhaps two hours to the next school, check into the hotel and begin writing reports.

The work isn’t limited to just college players.

The Jaguars’ college scouts assist with evaluations of the team’s own players as well. When his son was born, Miller’s wife was set to have labor induced the day he had reports due on the Jaguars quarterbacks David Garrard and Byron Leftwich.

“I said, ‘OK I’ll write this player after you have this baby,’” Miller said. ‘She said, ‘No just do it now, you have time.’ … I had done Byron the night before in my house. While my wife was in labor, I was watching Garrard on tape, and we had the baby and [then I] sent it in. People would consider that a little bit over the top, but we just have so many deadlines.”

Sometimes, at Smith’s request, they’ll be sent on special background projects to do a little extra work on certain players.

“Bringing in a quality player and a quality person, that’s just the whole package. You want to invest as many resources as you can,” Denglar said. “I want to be proud of the people I bring in or have played a part in.”

The draft

This weekend, the scouts will gather in Jacksonville again, in preparation for the event they’ve been helping the Jaguars prepare for all year.

“You’re really working at it all the way up until now,” McDonough said. “Can’t really do much the next few days. The hay’s in the barn, as they say.”

Next week, they will watch how their work unfolds.

There is no instant gratification in scouting. It takes months to gather the information and years to determine how good a job someone did.

Read more at Jacksonville.com:
http://jacksonville.com/sports/football/jaguars/2012-04-20/story/scouts-honor-doing-whatever-it-takes-find-players#ixzz1srexPkVK
Ed Dept seeks to bring test-based assessment to teacher prep programs

By Valerie Strauss

The Obama administration wants to expand the use of standardized test scores as an accountability tool from K-12 into higher education.

The Education Department just tried — and failed — to persuade a group of negotiators to agree to regulations that would rate colleges of education in large part on how K-12 students being taught by their graduates perform on standardized tests. As part of this scheme, financial aid to students in these programs would not be based entirely on need but, rather, would also be linked to test scores.

The department’s plans assume that standardized test scores can reliably and validly be used for such accountability purposes. Most researchers in this field say they can’t — for a number of reasons, including the limitations of the tests themselves — and therefore shouldn’t be used for any high stakes decision in education anywhere. They say that making test scores so important is one of the negative consequences of the last decade of No Child Left Behind, and shouldn’t be continued.

But the Education Department thinks otherwise and has been pushing this kind of evaluation as a centerpiece of its school reform initiatives. In order to win federal funds, a number of states have approved new K-12 educator assessment systems that rely heavily on these “value added” formulas — which purport to be able to ascertain the amount of “value” a teacher adds to a student achievement based on test scores.

And now, the Education Department has higher ed in its sights.

Department officials put together a group of several dozen people to “negotiate” on proposed regulations on colleges of education, which have come under scrutiny as the issue of “teacher quality” has become front and center in the school reform movement.
Teacher quality, of course, is important. There are teachers in classrooms today who shouldn’t be, and there are teacher preparation programs that should be closed. The question is how to go about improving the situation.

Specifically department officials are proposing regulations that would rate teacher prep programs into four tiers through a number of measures — though heavily weighted — on standardized test scores. Only programs in the top two tiers would be allowed to offer federally funded teaching grants for students who agree to teach in high-poverty schools.

Some of the negotiators turned out not to be as infatuated with the highly controversial “value-added” assessment methods as are department officials. They believe there are better, fairer ways to determine quality of teachers and colleges of education.

When it became clear that some of the negotiators weren’t going to go along with the basic outlines of the department’s plan, department officials ended the negotiations over a conference call.

But don’t think that is the end of the effort.

Now we can expect Obama administration officials to issue regulations doing what they want — without congressional approval, or, for that matter, without having persuaded a group of negotiators they had selected themselves that what they want to do makes educational sense.

It should be noted that administration officials say that there is evidence to show that “value added” formulas can work for assessment. Justin Hamilton, press secretary for Education Arne Duncan, said in an email that some of the negotiators pointed to this evidence: “Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee have already implemented it and their work has been closely studied and documented.... And all the RTTT [Race to the Top] states are in process.”

Most researchers on the subject, however, have warned strongly against using value-added formulas for high stakes decisions of any kind in part because there is too much variability in the results. Good teachers can be evaluated poorly; and poor teachers can be evaluated as effective, they say, hardly a way to go about improving the teaching corps.

Let’s look at how this would work in another field. Take doctors. What if they were measured by the number of patients they save — and then the medical school where they trained gets graded on those numbers? And to top it off, student financial aid at medical schools become dependent on those numbers, too.
How do you think medical schools which seek to serve high need, high risk populations would fare in comparison to medical schools that produce doctors for the healthy and wealthy?

This point was not lost on minority-serving institutions, including the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, who called foul loud and clear in letters sent to the department. Other educational organizations, including groups of deans from well-respected colleges of education, all sent in concerns about the proposed regulations, including:

* They are a big expansion of the federal role in assessing teacher training programs. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, it is the states that have been given the authority by statute to evaluate and penalize teacher prep programs.
* They would require states and teacher preparation programs to report to the federal government on data that most do not currently have the ability to collect.
* They would require states to implement assessment programs that are costly, without providing any federal funds to help.

For the negotiations, the Education Department picked the negotiating team — and some of the selections, as well as the omissions, are interesting.

One might assume that one organization that would be selected to negotiate on the issue of colleges of teacher education would be the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. It wasn’t. Neither was the American Council of Education, the nonprofit organization that represents presidents and chancellors of colleges and universities.

Who was? Among the groups selected were Teach for America, the nonprofit organization that places new college graduates into needy classrooms with only five weeks of training. It has been a favorite of the Education Department, winning millions of dollars in federal grant month. And its founder Wendy Kopp, has been lavishly praised by Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

Also on the negotiating team was James G. Cibulka, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). He took on the role of trying to reach consensus on the panel, holding informal meetings with the dissenters to try to win them over.

It should be noted that he heads the only remaining accreditor of teacher preparation/teacher education programs (a result of a merger between
NCATE and the other specialized teacher accreditor, TEAC), and that he will thus be coming before the Department of Education’s panel – the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity — in the near future. This committee confers recognition to accreditors, and it’s rigorous scrutiny is something accreditors tend to dread because recognition equals legitimacy, rigor, and value.

It should also be noted that Cibulka had several institutional negotiators at the table who will be coming before his organization for re-accreditation within the next several months.

The negotiations frustrated some of the people involved — and some who weren’t invited.

“The Department of Education’s attempt to make sweeping higher education policy changes in 7 ½ days of negotiations, and ultimately, to make regulations via conference call makes a train wreck look well-planned,” said Becky Timmons, assistant vice president for government relations of the American Council on Education.

Apart from how the negotiations were conducted, the insistence of the department to pursue initiatives involving highly controversial assessment methods continues to astound people who had expected President Obama to make a sharp break from the No Child Left Behind mentality rather than to exacerbate some of its worst effects.
Ohio State’s Gordon Gee proposes “differential” tuition

By Daniel de Vise

What if public universities charged tuition at different rates according to how much each student’s courses cost the institution to teach?

“Differential tuition” as a pricing concept doesn’t get much discussion in higher education; it’s easy to get lost in the variables. But Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University and a national higher education leader, says he’s thinking about it. “We do have to start differentiating tuition costs,” he said, in a visit to the Post this week.

Maybe the practice isn’t so uncommon as we think.

A recent survey by the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, reported in Inside Higher Ed, found 143 public institutions that had differential tuition policies, meaning that they charge different rates for students with different majors.

Differential tuition is most common in doctoral institutions, the report found, with the highest surcharges in nursing, business and engineering, all fields that reward students with relatively high pay.
Tuition surcharges can be controversial, but they might also be the only way an institution such as Ohio State can tactfully recoup some of the money it’s losing by subsidizing the education of in-state students.

A quick read of the Ohio State Web site suggests that the institution already charges varying fees for students in different majors and programs. But the basic undergraduate tuition appears to be fixed. Ohio residents pay $19,926 in tuition and living expenses this year, for an education that costs closer to the $35,000 paid by nonresidents.

There has been much talk of how universities might recover the money they’re losing in an era of declining state support. The usual answer is to raise tuition; but schools that enact steep increases get pushback from parents and politicians.

Another tack is to jack up tuition for nonresidents and to increase their numbers on campus, because nonresidents generally pay the full cost of their study. But this can upset resident students, who find it correspondingly harder to get in.

Some higher-education thinkers have proposed progressive tuition: charging families on a sliding scale according to each one’s ability to pay. Top private universities already do this, in effect, with blanket need-based aid policies.

But Gee doesn’t think progressive tuition would work in Ohio. One of Ohio State’s peers, Miami University, already tried progressive tuition and gave it up after a few years.

“I’m a low tuition guy,” Gee said. At $9,711, Ohio State tuition is lower than the rate at Penn State or Michigan, but higher than at the University of Maryland.
Obama officials push Congress to block doubling of student loan interest rate

Published: April 20
By Daniel de Vise

The Obama administration on Friday urged Congress to step in to prevent a doubling of the interest rate on a massive federal student loan program this summer, affecting an estimated seven million borrowers.

Congress halved the interest rate on federally subsidized Stafford loans to 3.4 percent in 2007. If the legislation isn’t extended, the rate reverts to 6.8 percent in July.

In a news conference Friday, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the higher rate would add $1,000 a year to the repayment cost of the average loan.
“Families and students are struggling to meet these costs, and there’s no reason we should add to their burden,” he said.

Five years ago, the measure passed with bipartisan support. This spring, the legislature is divided along party lines. Republican leaders accused the president of amplifying that division because it is an election year.

“Bad policy based on lofty campaign promises has put us in an untenable situation,” Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), chairman of the House education committee, said in a prepared statement.

Student loan debt stands at $870 billion nationally, surpassing credit card and car-loan debt, according to a March report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The average loan has doubled in size since the mid-1990s, and the share of students who borrow has risen from roughly one-half to two-thirds, mirroring a sharp rise in college tuition.

“With today’s tough economy and high unemployment rate among young Americans, we should not be asking middle-class students and families to shoulder even more student loan debt,” Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chairman of the Senate education committee, said in a statement.

Congressional Democrats have introduced bills to extend the lower interest rate for another year at an estimated cost of $6 billion. But Democratic leaders have acknowledged that the measures might not pass.

Last month, student advocates presented congressional leaders with 130,000 letters protesting a higher rate. They would prefer something more than a one-year commitment.

But Rich Williams, of the U.S. Public Interest Research group, said, “We’d be happy if they’d take one step in the right direction.”
Does Congress know reading is fundamental?

Posted at 01:00 PM ET, 04/22/2012

By Valerie Strauss

This was written by Carol H. Rasco, president and chief executive officer for the non-profit Reading Is Fundamental, the nation’s largest nonprofit children’s literacy organization.

By Carol H. Rasco

Currently there are 16 million children in our nation living in poverty, the highest number in two decades, and in low-income neighborhoods, there is only one book for every 300 children. The most recently reported National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that students in the United States continue to struggle with the most fundamental educational skill — reading.

According to NAEP, more than a third of all fourth grade public school students cannot read at even the most basic level. Another third only reaches the level of “proficient.” We are in the midst of a reading crisis in America, and Reading Is Fundamental is taking a new approach to ignite a love of reading across the United States.

“Book People Unite” is a new awareness campaign created to focus a national spotlight on children’s literacy. The campaign, anchored by a new public service announcement (PSA) with beloved book characters and a star-studded soundtrack, aims to spark a movement to put books in the hands of children who need them most.

We believe a vital and necessary step to improving literacy rates in the United States is providing children in poverty with greater access to the building blocks for language education – books.

It is then of great concern to us in this time of great need for a focus on building stronger literacy skills, the Obama administration and Congress have significantly slashed funding for education initiatives, like RIF, which help to provide our students with books and their parents and caregivers with the tools needed to make the books the change factor research shows they can be in improving students’ reading abilities.
Although Congress created a new grant program last year to give literacy organizations and school libraries a chance to compete for federal funding, formal plans have yet to be announced. Meanwhile, the need continues to grow and RIF and many other organizations focused on education are still in need of both private and public support.

RIF alone has distributed more than 400 million free books to the nation’s neediest children; last year the program gave out 14 million books to more than 4 million children nationwide. This month marks the first in the last three decades at RIF that we’re operating without federal support – support that last year marked 80 percent of our budget, or $24.8 million.

It is imperative that RIF and other programs that effectively and efficiently put books in the hands of young children continue to receive the public/private support needed to bring the needed books to children.

A new report underscores another dramatic affect budget cuts like these are having -- pre-K funding is at its lowest levels in a decade. The influence on kids in low-income communities will be felt tenfold. No books and struggling programs already strapped for resources.

In addition to providing books to children, we must also continue to encourage parents at all economic levels but in particular those in lower income groups to take a highly engaged role and leading role in the education of their children. Decades of research has shown that when parents are involved, students have higher test scores, better self-esteem and increased motivation. And the value of community mentors and volunteers has been proven time and again in nurturing young minds at-risk.

Restoring funding for all these vital programs will be critical. But the truth is we must go beyond the state halls and Congress for the answer. Now is the time to spark a reading revolution in this country.

Students need access to books to be equipped for success in the classroom. Parents and communities need access to the tools and support needed to help foster children’s growth. While it is critical for Congress to restore funding to programs that have the ability to fulfill these needs for our nation’s students, it is also time for us all to reevaluate how we are contributing to the literacy education of our nation’s youth.

We don't just have an issue to solve. We have a movement to ignite. Together we can all make a difference. I’m a “Book Person.” Are you? Visit www.bookpeopleunite.org to learn more about the campaign and watch the public service announcements.
A question about a “talking pineapple” on a standardized reading test given to eighth-grade students in New York has sparked something of an uproar among students and adults who say it doesn’t make any sense. And because of all the fuss, now the state’s education commissioner says the question won’t be counted in students’ scores.

The question, first reported by the New York Daily News, referred to a story similar to the famous Aesop fable about the tortoise and the hare, but in this version, a talking pineapple challenges a hare to race. The rabbit wins, not surprisingly, as the fruit can’t actually move, and other animals, who have wagered on the winner, eat the pineapple, according to the paper.

Students were asked some perplexing questions: Why did the animals eat the talking fruit, and which animal was wisest?

The Daily News quoted a number of students and adults who looked at the whole reading sample and the questions and concluded that they make no sense.

Scarsdale Middle School Principal Michael McDermott was reported as saying that the question has been used on standardized tests created by the educational company Pearson and has “confused students in six or seven different states.”

The furor over the question led the Education Department to issue a statement Friday — with the headline “Statement from Education Commissioner John B. King, Jr. on the Hare and the Pineapple” — saying that while the pineapple-hare passage was not accurately portrayed in the media, the question would not be counted against students. (See full text of statement below.)

The problem, of course, isn’t one test question that people think was badly drawn, or the strong likelihood that other questions on these exams make little sense or actually assess only a small band-width of skills, concepts and knowledge that we want students to know.
The problem is that the results of standardized tests are being used in New York and other states to assess not only students but teachers, principals and schools through complicated formulas that purport to show how much “value” a teacher adds to a student’s achievement. Researchers say that “value-added” assessment models can’t do what supporters say they do and are unreliable accountability.

The stakes of these tests are getting higher as educator evaluation systems are being put in place that are based largely on how well a student does on these exams. The whole push for test-based school reform makes about as much sense as a talking pineapple.

**Here’s Education Commissioner John King Jr.’s full statement:**

First of all, the “passage” printed in the media is not complete. Although the questions make more sense in the context of the full passage, due to the ambiguous nature of the test questions the Department has decided it will not be counted against students in their scores.

It is important to note that this test section does not incorporate the Common Core and other improvements to test quality currently underway. This year’s tests incorporate a small number of Common Core field test questions. Next year’s test will be fully aligned with the Common Core.

This particular passage, like all test questions, was reviewed by a committee comprised of teachers from across the state, but it was not crafted for New York State. It’s a passage that has been used in other states and was included by Pearson Inc., the test vendor, to provide a comparison between New York students and students from other states. The passage and related questions are not reflective of the precision of the entire exam.

The accuracy and efficacy our state assessments are crucial to our reform efforts and measuring student academic growth. We will, as always, review and analyze all questions on every assessment we administer.
Facing a Robo-Grader? Just Keep Obfuscating Mellifluously

April 22, 2012
By MICHAEL WINERIP

A recently released study has concluded that computers are capable of scoring essays on standardized tests as well as human beings do.

Mark Shermis, dean of the College of Education at the University of Akron, collected more than 16,000 middle school and high school test essays from six states that had been graded by humans. He then used automated systems developed by nine companies to score those essays.

Computer scoring produced “virtually identical levels of accuracy, with the software in some cases proving to be more reliable,” according to a University of Akron news release.

“A Win for the Robo-Readers” is how an Inside Higher Ed blog post summed things up.

For people with a weakness for humans, there is more bad news. Graders working as quickly as they can — the Pearson education company expects readers to spend no more than two to three minutes per essay— might be capable of scoring 30 writing samples in an hour.

The automated reader developed by the Educational Testing Service, e-Rater, can grade 16,000 essays in 20 seconds, according to David Williamson, a research director for E.T.S., which develops and administers 50 million tests a year, including the SAT.

Is this the end? Are Robo-Readers destined to inherit the earth?

Les Perelman, a director of writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says no.

Mr. Perelman enjoys studying algorithms from E.T.S. research papers when he is not teaching undergraduates. This has taught him to think like e-Rater.

While his research is limited, because E.T.S. is the only organization that has permitted him to test its product, he says the automated reader can be easily gamed, is vulnerable to test prep, sets a very limited and rigid standard for what good writing is, and will pressure teachers to dumb down writing instruction.
The e-Rater’s biggest problem, he says, is that it can’t identify truth. He tells students not to waste time worrying about whether their facts are accurate, since pretty much any fact will do as long as it is incorporated into a well-structured sentence. “E-Rater doesn’t care if you say the War of 1812 started in 1945,” he said.

Mr. Perelman found that e-Rater prefers long essays. A 716-word essay he wrote that was padded with more than a dozen nonsensical sentences received a top score of 6; a well-argued, well-written essay of 567 words was scored a 5.

An automated reader can count, he said, so it can set parameters for the number of words in a good sentence and the number of sentences in a good paragraph. “Once you understand e-Rater’s biases,” he said, “it’s not hard to raise your test score.”

E-Rater, he said, does not like short sentences. Or short paragraphs. Or sentences that begin with “or.” And sentences that start with “and.” Nor sentence fragments.

However, he said, e-Rater likes connectors, like “however,” which serve as programming proxies for complex thinking. Moreover, “moreover” is good, too.

Gargantuan words are indemnified because e-Rater interprets them as a sign of lexical complexity. “Whenever possible,” Mr. Perelman advises, “use a big word. ‘Egregious’ is better than ‘bad.’ ”

The substance of an argument doesn’t matter, he said, as long as it looks to the computer as if it’s nicely argued.

For a question asking students to discuss why college costs are so high, Mr. Perelman wrote that the No. 1 reason is excessive pay for greedy teaching assistants.

“The average teaching assistant makes six times as much money as college presidents,” he wrote. “In addition, they often receive a plethora of extra benefits such as private jets, vacations in the south seas, starring roles in motion pictures.”

E-Rater gave him a 6. He tossed in a line from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” just to see if he could get away with it.

He could.
The possibilities are limitless. If E-Rater edited newspapers, Roger Clemens could say, “Remember the Maine,” Adele could say, “Give me liberty or give me death,” Patrick Henry could sing “Someone Like You.”

To their credit, researchers at E.T.S. provided Mr. Perelman access to e-Rater for a month. “At E.T.S., we pride ourselves in being transparent about our research,” Mr. Williamson said.

Two of the biggest for-profit education companies, Vantage Learning and Pearson, turned down my request to let Mr. Perelman test their products.

“He wants to show why it doesn’t work,” said Peter Foltz, a Pearson vice president.

“Yes, I’m a skeptic,” Mr. Perelman said. “That’s exactly why I should be given access.”

E.T.S. officials say that Mr. Perelman’s test prep advice is too complex for most students to absorb; if they can, they’re using the higher level of thinking the test seeks to reward anyway. In other words, if they’re smart enough to master such sophisticated test prep, they deserve a 6.

E.T.S. also acknowledges that truth is not e-Rater’s strong point. “E-Rater is not designed to be a fact checker,” said Paul Deane, a principal research scientist.

“E-Rater doesn’t appreciate poetry,” Mr. Williamson added.

They say Mr. Perelman is setting a false premise when he treats e-Rater as if it is supposed to substitute for human scorers. In high stakes testing where e-Rater has been used, like grading the Graduate Record Exam, the writing samples are also scored by a human, they point out. And if there is a discrepancy between man and machine, a second human is summoned.

Mr. Foltz said that 90 percent of the time, Pearson’s Intelligent Essay Assessor is used by classroom teachers as a learning aid. The software gives students immediate feedback to improve their writing, which they can revise and resubmit, Mr. Foltz said. “They may do five drafts,” he said, “and then give it to the teacher to read.”

As for good writing being long writing, Mr. Deane said there was a correlation. Good writers have internalized the skills that give them better fluency, he said, enabling them to write more in a limited time.

Mr. Perelman takes great pleasure in fooling e-Rater. He has written an essay, then randomly cut a sentence from the middle of each paragraph and has still gotten a 6.
Two former students who are computer science majors told him that they could design an Android app to generate essays that would receive 6’s from e-Rater. He says the nice thing about that is that smartphones would be able to submit essays directly to computer graders, and humans wouldn’t have to get involved.

In conclusion, to paraphrase the late, great Abraham Lincoln: Mares eat oats and does eat oats, but little lambs eat ivy.

A kiddley divey too, he added, wouldn’t you?

E-mail: oneducation@nytimes.com
The New York Times

The Preschool Race Is No Joke

April 21, 2012

By ROBERT H. FRANK

WILDLY implausible faux news stories appear each April Fool’s Day, some of which are taken seriously. This year’s clear winner was the National Public Radio feature about a preschool’s new requirement that all applicants submit DNA profiles.

As the segment begins, the host Guy Raz is greeted by Rebecca Unsinn, described as headmaster at a school called the Porsafillo Preschool Academy, located in a striking I. M. Pei-designed building in a leafy enclave on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Dr. Unsinn walks Mr. Raz through gleaming computer labs where toddlers master C++. She proudly describes the school’s Mandarin Chinese immersion program.

We are also told that Dr. Unsinn, a pediatric neurologist, was recruited to oversee the school’s new genetic tests, designed to help winnow 12,000 applications for 32 available spots in next year’s class. As she explains, “We now know that simple DNA testing can determine whether a child will end up at Yale or at Yonkers Community College.”

It’s a preposterous claim, of course, but some took it seriously. One Web site recounted the tale this way: “Parents being what they are today, the applicants to Porsafillo don’t even blink at the requirement, some going so far as to have the sample for the DNA test taken while the child is still in the womb, according to an NPR story.” Such reactions bespeak how bitterly competitive the battle for elite preschool slots has become in New York and elsewhere.

According to the invisible-hand theory of Adam Smith, greater competition generally promotes better outcomes for society. But not always. In particular, when buyers are competing for high-ranked positions in some hierarchy, the invisible hand often fails spectacularly.

In education, the problem is that a quality is inherently relative. A good school is one that compares favorably with other schools in the area. Although a school’s quality depends on much more than the size of its budget, additional resources can obviously help. And given the vast sums of
money that some parents now have at their disposal, an explosive — and largely unproductive — arms race is inevitable.

Tuition at elite preschools has been soaring, sometimes to much more than $30,000 a year and occasionally within sight of $40,000 — or above that of some prestigious colleges. Yet excess demand persists, and jockeying for acceptance is the subject of much New York lore.

In one notorious episode a decade ago, Jack B. Grubman, then a telecommunications analyst for Citigroup, told a friend in an e-mail that his boss, Sanford I. Weill, then Citigroup’s chairman, helped to secure spots in an exclusive Manhattan nursery school for Mr. Grubman’s twins after he began recommending that investors buy AT&T stock. (Mr. Weill said he put in a good word for Mr. Grubman only because he was a valuable employee.)

Mr. Grubman’s children attended the school, and Citigroup pledged $1 million to the organization that runs it, the 92nd Street Y. In the e-mail, Mr. Grubman described the school as “harder than Harvard” to enter.

WITH such stories in memory, it’s hardly surprising that many failed to spot the NPR report as a joke. The elite preschool market illustrates a simple but important truth: Contrary to the slogans of champions of minimal government, we don’t always get the best possible outcomes when people are free to decide for themselves how to spend their hard-earned money. When all wealthy parents raise their bids for slots in elite preschools, they succeed only in bidding up tuition levels. There are still no more slots than before.

Most societies take at least some steps to curb waste that results from arms races in education and other domains. Consider the practice of kindergarten redshirting — so called because of its resemblance to the practice whereby universities hold athletes out of competition during their freshman year so they’ll be bigger and stronger during their four remaining years of eligibility.

Ambitious parents might consider redshirting their kindergartners, because they would then be older, smarter and more emotionally mature than their classmates. And because school performance is graded on a curve, they would be more likely to win admission to an elite university. But the same option, of course, is available to other parents, and if all took it, no child would perform better in relative terms. We’d just end up with an older crop of kindergarteners.
That’s why parents have good reason to favor the laws in most jurisdictions that take the kindergarten start date out of their hands.

It would obviously be a much more radical step to impose limits on how much parents could spend on private schools. But what if we adopted the Buffett Rule, under which top earners’ tax rates would be no lower than those paid by middle-income families? That would reduce what top earners could bid for the scarce things they want. But because the allocation of elite preschool admissions, penthouses overlooking Central Park and other such prizes is settled by relative bidding, the question of who gets what would be unaffected. So with no real sacrifice, the rule would generate new revenue for reducing deficits and rebuilding tattered infrastructure.

Top earners, meanwhile, will continue to reap the bulk of all income growth, and the preschool admission battle will grow steadily more intense. The only reason that no elite preschool has adopted DNA tests is that no one has figured out how to use them to predict academic achievement. Yet.

Robert H. Frank is an economics professor at the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University.
On the night before opening day, the end of a baseball fan’s version of Advent, John Sexton entered his classroom at New York University to speak of Joe DiMaggio. He came to speak, too, of Ernest Hemingway and Gay Talese, of Lord Krishna and a sacred tree in the Amazon, and what he called “this notion of touching the ineffable.”

Around Dr. Sexton sat 18 undergraduates, some religious and some not, some bleacher diehards and some not, all of them enrolled in a course titled “Baseball as a Road to God.” It is the sort of course in which the teaching assistants go by the angelic designation “Celestials” and discussion sections are named for Derek Jeter and Willie Mays among other diamond luminaries.
As the president of N.Y.U., Dr. Sexton could certainly teach any course he wanted. And as the former dean of its law school and clerk to a chief justice of the United States, he might have been expected to hold forth on jurisprudence. However, as a child of Brooklyn, as a scholar whose academic robe bears the number 42 in homage to Jackie Robinson, and as a practicing Catholic with a doctoral degree in religion, Dr. Sexton has for more than a dozen years chosen baseball and God as his professorial focus.

“The real idea of the course,” he put it in an interview, “is to develop heightened sensitivity and a noticing capacity. So baseball’s not ‘the’ road to God. For most of us, it isn’t ‘a’ road to God. But it’s a way to notice, to cause us to live more slowly and to watch more keenly and thereby to discover the specialness of our life and our being, and, for some of us, something more than our being.”

Dr. Sexton’s own baseball career peaked as an all-star catcher in the B’nai B’rith Little League in the Rockaways — “Billy Ryan and I broke the religion line, we were the first two goyim” — and included being in a third-floor classroom in high school when a teenage Joe Torre broke the window with a home run from an adjacent ballfield. Over the passing decades, Dr. Sexton adapted to the Dodgers’ departure from Brooklyn by joining his son in rooting for the Yankees. Whether such a transfer of devotion constitutes heresy is a question, perhaps, for the magisterium.

The springtime class had its genesis in the challenge of a skeptic. In the 1998-99 school year, an N.Y.U. law student presented himself to Dr. Sexton to say, “I understand you’re a real baseball fan, and I don’t get it.” Dr. Sexton, invoking the words of his own long-ago mentor at Brooklyn Prep, replied: “Then you are among the great unwashed. But there is hope for your soul.”

By means of evangelism, Dr. Sexton oversaw an independent-study project for the law student, assigning him 100 books about baseball and theology. Word of mouth around campus led more students to ask for a similar tutorial. Dr. Sexton instead devised an entire class, and made it available to undergraduates.

The core of his original reading list — “The Sacred and the Profane,” by the religion historian Mircea Eliade — remains central to the class all these years later. Eliade’s essential insight, at least for Dr. Sexton’s purposes, is his concept of hierophany, meaning the manifestation of the sacred in the world. So, just as much as Stonehenge or the Kaaba or the Western Wall or
St. Peter’s Basilica, baseball in Sextonian teaching affords such a locus for faith.

And the metaphor of baseball as religion, in Dr. Sexton’s hands, is a long way from the cornball claptrap about stadiums being “green cathedrals.” Over the current semester, the students are reading and discussing the work of theologians and cultural historians like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Michael Novak, Robert N. Bellah and Johan Huizinga alongside novels and reportage by literary chroniclers of baseball like Robert Coover, W. P. Kinsella and Doris Kearns Goodwin. (Dr. Sexton is distilling his own ruminations into a book, “Baseball as a Road to God,” which will be published in early 2013.)

When the class met on the night before opening day this year, Dr. Sexton took out the intellectual version of a fungo bat to knock questions around the room: Was the fisherman in Hemingway’s “Old Man and the Sea” having a religious experience? If he was, how did that experience resonate for the students in the class?

“In the depth of his adversity,” said William Visone, a 19-year-old junior, “he keeps talking about how the big fish is out there. That’s a kind of faith. And it’s like last week when I said that I believe that in my lifetime I will see the Mets win the World Series.”

Another student, Nicole Greenhouse, talked about the “cardinal curse of despair” she had often felt as a Red Sox fan. Yet, she went on, when the team won the 2004 American League pennant with an epic comeback against the despised Yankees and then took the World Series, the achievement set a standard of ecstasy impossible to repeat.

All the talk of belief, disbelief and disappointment provoked an especially personal reaction from Emily Ruth Grose. A 21-year-old junior, she had grown up on family stories of near misses. One uncle, a pitcher, made it all the way to Class AAA before falling short of the major leagues. Her father, a star shortstop in high school and junior college, was enduringly embittered by his failure to be drafted by the pros.

“I always viewed baseball as kind of my family’s religion,” she added in an interview after class. “Baseball was filling a void in their heart, and when they didn’t have it, what did they fill the hole with? I really wanted to learn why baseball mattered so much to them. And I’ve come to really see that it doesn’t need to be an organized religion, that anything can serve as your religion.”
For Noam Mintz, who took the class last year and returned as a Celestial this year, the course helped resolve what had seemed like a conundrum. Why had he always considered the two most profound religious experiences of his life praying beside his father, an Orthodox rabbi, on Yom Kippur, and watching Game 7 of the 2003 American League Championship Series with his father, as the Yankees beat the Red Sox on Aaron Boone’s 11th-inning home run. (Sorry, Nicole.)

“In my life, Judaism and baseball had always played a central role,” said Mr. Mintz, 22, a senior. “But they always diverged from each other. They had different compartments. Now I can see where these passions might intersect.”

E-mail: sgfl@columbia.edu
Are College Entrants Overdiagnosed as Underprepared?

By JUDITH SCOTT-CLAYTON

Judith Scott-Clayton is an assistant professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

A few weeks ago, Dr. H. Gilbert Welch of Dartmouth College published an Op-Ed article in The New York Times critiquing the pervasive use of screening tests for early diagnosis in medicine. The rationale for widespread screening — to catch disease early, before people get really sick — is intuitively appealing.

But Dr. Welch cites evidence that aggressive screening often does more harm than good, saving few lives while dragging many others into “needless appointments, needless tests, needless drugs and needless operations.”

This continuing debate about early detection versus overdiagnosis in medicine is surprisingly relevant to a similarly critical debate in education: how to identify and “treat” students who enter college underprepared for college-level coursework.

Most community colleges and many nonselective four-year institutions require students to take placement exams in reading, writing and math before initial registration, even if they had good grades in high school, and even if they have done well in college courses at another institution.

Those that fail these exams are referred to remedial coursework — which costs money but does not count toward a degree — in the hopes that this will improve their likelihood of future college success.

In education as in medicine, the logic behind early detection seems unassailable: colleges want to catch the underprepared early, so students can get help before they begin to struggle. But in both fields, evidence is beginning to accumulate that early detection and treatment, in some cases, may harm the healthy more than it helps those truly ailing.

While remediation rates have risen slightly over time — to 22 percent of all first-time first-year students in 2003-4 from 18 percent in 1995-96,
according to Department of Education statistics — the increases have been striking for students with strong high school grades.

For students with high school grade-point averages between 3.5 and 4.0, remediation rates have more than doubled (see chart below). This is not a result of high school grade inflation – the percentage of students with G.P.A.’s in this range has not changed – but is consistent with increasingly ubiquitous placement testing.

Screening seemingly prepared students for remediation is questionable for at least two reasons. First, the benefits of remediation are far from obvious: remediation has been referred to as the Bermuda Triangle of postsecondary education, because the majority of those who enter never make it out.

Across several rigorous, quasi-experimental studies of the causal impact of remediation, only one found positive effects on college outcomes, while others found null to negative effects.

Second, the tests commonly used to screen for college readiness are only weakly related to college outcomes, as two recent studies by the Community College Research Center show. (Disclosure: I am a senior research associate at the center and the author of one of these studies.) Some students manage to pass the tests even though they are not ready for college-level work, while even more who are ready for college-level work are kept out.

My own research, using data from a large urban community college system with particularly high remediation rates, estimates that one in four students assigned to math remediation could have passed a college-level math course with a grade of B or better and one in three students assigned to English remediation could have passed freshman composition with a B or better.

Policy simulations suggest that exempting students with strong high school backgrounds from placement testing could lower remediation rates by 8 to 12 percentage points, without affecting pass rates in college-level courses.

No test can avoid making some mistakes in both directions, but in education as in medicine, the natural tendency is to worry more about missing a diagnosis than about treating those who may not need it.

Why? When decisions – like whether or not to undergo a test – involve uncertainty, human beings care not just about statistical odds, but also about the potential for regret. And when a diagnosis is missed – when a student proceeds directly into college coursework and fails, or when someone’s cancer is detected too late – the mistake is plainly visible, and the associated regret can be acute.
In contrast, while researchers can estimate the prevalence and costs of overtreatment in the aggregate, one can never identify with certainty, even in retrospect, whether a particular individual has been unnecessarily treated. If the ultimate outcome is positive, it could be because the patient wasn’t really sick, or because the treatment worked.

Even if the treatment fails or entails adverse side effects, the individual (or doctor or faculty member) can still believe that the outcome might have been even worse if not for the early screening.

This may help explain why so much more effort has been directed toward identifying and treating every last underprepared student than toward ensuring that all these tests and treatments do not create unnecessary obstacles for those who are prepared.

Recently, however, policy makers have begun to question the assumptions underlying widespread screening for remediation. Several states are looking for better tests; Connecticut, for one, has proposed eliminating remediation altogether, and instead using placement tests to select students for “embedded supports” in college-level courses.

“It’s easier to develop new ways of testing than it is to develop better treatments,” Dr. Welch said, adding: “The precept of early diagnosis was too intuitive, too appealing, too hard to challenge and too easy to support. The rumblings show that that’s beginning to change.”

*Copyright 2012 The New York Times Company*

*NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018*
1 in 2 new graduates are jobless or underemployed

By HOPE YEN | Associated Press
Posted April 22, 2012

WASHINGTON (AP) — The college class of 2012 is in for a rude welcome to the world of work.

A weak labor market already has left half of young college graduates either jobless or underemployed in positions that don't fully use their skills and knowledge.

Young adults with bachelor's degrees are increasingly scraping by in lower-wage jobs — waiter or waitress, bartender, retail clerk or receptionist, for example — and that's confounding their hopes a degree would pay off despite higher tuition and mounting student loans.

An analysis of government data conducted for The Associated Press lays bare the highly uneven prospects for holders of bachelor's degrees.

Opportunities for college graduates vary widely.

While there's strong demand in science, education and health fields, arts and humanities flounder. Median wages for those with bachelor's degrees are down from 2000, hit by technological changes that are eliminating midlevel jobs such as bank tellers. Most future job openings are projected to be in lower-skilled positions such as home health aides, who can provide personalized attention as the U.S. population ages.

Taking underemployment into consideration, the job prospects for bachelor's degree holders fell last year to the lowest level in more than a decade.

"I don't even know what I'm looking for," says Michael Bledsoe, who described months of fruitless job searches as he served customers at a Seattle coffeehouse. The 23-year-old graduated in 2010 with a creative writing degree.

Initially hopeful that his college education would create opportunities, Bledsoe languished for three months before finally taking a job as a barista, a position he has held for the last two years. In the beginning he sent three or
four resumes day. But, Bledsoe said, employers questioned his lack of experience or the practical worth of his major. Now he sends a resume once every two weeks or so.

Bledsoe, currently making just above minimum wage, says he got financial help from his parents to help pay off student loans. He is now mulling whether to go to graduate school, seeing few other options to advance his career. "There is not much out there, it seems," he said.

His situation highlights a widening but little-discussed labor problem. Perhaps more than ever, the choices that young adults make earlier in life — level of schooling, academic field and training, where to attend college, how to pay for it — are having long-lasting financial impact.

"You can make more money on average if you go to college, but it's not true for everybody," says Harvard economist Richard Freeman, noting the growing risk of a debt bubble with total U.S. student loan debt surpassing $1 trillion. "If you're not sure what you're going to be doing, it probably bodes well to take some job, if you can get one, and get a sense first of what you want from college."

Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University who analyzed the numbers, said many people with a bachelor's degree face a double whammy of rising tuition and poor job outcomes. "Simply put, we're failing kids coming out of college," he said, emphasizing that when it comes to jobs, a college major can make all the difference. "We're going to need a lot better job growth and connections to the labor market, otherwise college debt will grow."

By region, the Mountain West was most likely to have young college graduates jobless or underemployed — roughly 3 in 5. It was followed by the more rural southeastern U.S., including Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee. The Pacific region, including Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington, also was high on the list.

On the other end of the scale, the southern U.S., anchored by Texas, was most likely to have young college graduates in higher-skill jobs.

The figures are based on an analysis of 2011 Current Population Survey data by Northeastern University researchers and supplemented with material from Paul Harrington, an economist at Drexel University, and the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank. They rely on Labor Department assessments of the level of education required to do the job in 900-plus U.S.
occupations, which were used to calculate the shares of young adults with bachelor's degrees who were "underemployed."

About 1.5 million, or 53.6 percent, of bachelor's degree-holders under the age of 25 last year were jobless or underemployed, the highest share in at least 11 years. In 2000, the share was at a low of 41 percent, before the dot-com bust erased job gains for college graduates in the telecommunications and IT fields.

Out of the 1.5 million who languished in the job market, about half were underemployed, an increase from the previous year.

Broken down by occupation, young college graduates were heavily represented in jobs that require a high school diploma or less.

In the last year, they were more likely to be employed as waiters, waitresses, bartenders and food-service helpers than as engineers, physicists, chemists and mathematicians combined (100,000 versus 90,000). There were more working in office-related jobs such as receptionist or payroll clerk than in all computer professional jobs (163,000 versus 100,000). More also were employed as cashiers, retail clerks and customer representatives than engineers (125,000 versus 80,000).

According to government projections released last month, only three of the 30 occupations with the largest projected number of job openings by 2020 will require a bachelor's degree or higher to fill the position — teachers, college professors and accountants. Most job openings are in professions such as retail sales, fast food and truck driving, jobs which aren't easily replaced by computers.

College graduates who majored in zoology, anthropology, philosophy, art history and humanities were among the least likely to find jobs appropriate to their education level; those with nursing, teaching, accounting or computer science degrees were among the most likely.

In Nevada, where unemployment is the highest in the nation, Class of 2012 college seniors recently expressed feelings ranging from anxiety and fear to cautious optimism about what lies ahead.

With the state's economy languishing in an extended housing bust, a lot of young graduates have shown up at job placement centers in tears. Many have been squeezed out of jobs by more experienced workers, job counselors said, and are now having to explain to prospective employers the time gaps in their resumes.
"It's kind of scary," said Cameron Bawden, 22, who is graduating from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas in December with a business degree. His family has warned him for years about the job market, so he has been building his resume by working part time on the Las Vegas Strip as a food runner and doing a marketing internship with a local airline.

Bawden said his friends who have graduated are either unemployed or working along the Vegas Strip in service jobs that don't require degrees. "There are so few jobs and it's a small city," he said. "It's all about who you know."

Any job gains are going mostly to workers at the top and bottom of the wage scale, at the expense of middle-income jobs commonly held by bachelor's degree holders. By some studies, up to 95 percent of positions lost during the economic recovery occurred in middle-income occupations such as bank tellers, the type of job not expected to return in a more high-tech age.

David Neumark, an economist at the University of California-Irvine, said a bachelor's degree can have benefits that aren't fully reflected in the government's labor data. He said even for lower-skilled jobs such as waitress or cashier, employers tend to value bachelor's degree-holders more highly than high-school graduates, paying them more for the same work and offering promotions.

In addition, U.S. workers increasingly may need to consider their position in a global economy, where they must compete with educated foreign-born residents for jobs. Longer-term government projections also may fail to consider "degree inflation," a growing ubiquity of bachelor's degrees that could make them more commonplace in lower-wage jobs but inadequate for higher-wage ones.

That future may be now for Kelman Edwards Jr., 24, of Murfreesboro, Tenn., who is waiting to see the returns on his college education.

After earning a biology degree last May, the only job he could find was as a construction worker for five months before he quit to focus on finding a job in his academic field. He applied for positions in laboratories but was told they were looking for people with specialized certifications.

"I thought that me having a biology degree was a gold ticket for me getting into places, but every other job wants you to have previous history in the field," he said. Edwards, who has about $5,500 in student debt, recently met with a career counselor at Middle Tennessee State University. The counselor's main advice: Pursue further education.
"Everyone is always telling you, 'Go to college,'" Edwards said. "But when you graduate, it's kind of an empty cliff."

Associated Press writers Manuel Valdes in Seattle; Travis Loller in Nashville, Tenn.; Cristina Silva in Las Vegas; and Sandra Chereb in Carson City, Nev., contributed to this report.