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ECU hopes new day for graduation will boost attendance

By
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Spring graduation at East Carolina University will be held on a Friday this year in an effort to increase attendance at the university-wide ceremony, officials say.

The ceremony begins at 6 p.m. May 8 with a concert by the ECU Wind Ensemble. The student procession will begin at 6:30 p.m., rain or shine, at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium.

Almost 3,400 students have applied for spring graduation, according to the ECU registrar’s office. That number represents approximately 2,325 undergraduates, more than 1,000 graduate/professional students and 65 medical students.

Departments and colleges will hold individual recognition ceremonies on Saturday, May 9.

ECU has traditionally held the departmental ceremonies on Friday and the large ceremony on Saturday.

Spokesman John Durham said officials are trying to encourage better attendance at the large ceremony by having it before the individual department ceremonies this year.

"The university ceremony is the most important institution-wide event," Durham said.


North was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Air Force in 1976 after completing ROTC program at ECU. He is now responsible for the command of more than 350 aircraft and 24,000 active-duty and civilian personnel in the eastern United States.

He also oversees the operational readiness of 18 9th Air Force-gained National Guard and Air Force Reserve units comprising the Air Reserve Component. As the Air Component Commander for U.S. Central Command, the general is responsible for developing contingency plans and conducting air operations in a 27-nation area of responsibility covering Central and Southwest Asia and the Horn of Africa.

North has held numerous operational, command and staff positions, and has completed seven overseas tours. His last assignment was the Director for Operations at U.S. Pacific Command.

The general has served two tours on the Joint Staff, including executive assistant to the Joint Staff Director, and Director of Politico-Military Affairs for Asia-Pacific where he was responsible for regional planning and policy for the Asia-Pacific, South Asia and Central Asia regions. He also served as Deputy Director of Joint Matters at Headquarters U.S. Air Force.

North has commanded the 33rd Fighter Squadron at Shaw AFB, S.C.; 35th Operations Group at Misawa Air Base, Japan; 8th Fighter Wing at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea; and the 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base, Japan. He is a command pilot with more than 4,100 flying hours, primarily in the F-4, F-15 and F-16. He flew 54 combat missions during operations Desert Storm and Southern Watch.

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DEPARTMENTAL CEREMONIES
Saturday, May 9

Minges Coliseum
■ 8 a.m. College of Business
■ 11 a.m. College of Allied Health Sciences
■ 2 p.m. College of Human Ecology
■ 5 p.m. College of Health and Human Performance
■ 8 p.m. College of Education

Wright Auditorium
■ 8 a.m. Brody School of Medicine
■ 11 a.m. Department of Biology
■ 2 p.m. College of Nursing
■ 5 p.m. College of Technology and Computer Science
■ 8 p.m. School of Communication

Hendrix Theatre
■ 8 a.m. Department of Political Science
■ 11 a.m. School of Art and Design
■ 2 p.m. School of Music
■ 5 p.m. Department of Psychology
■ 8 p.m. Department of English

Fletcher Hall
■ 11 a.m. Department of Sociology
■ 2 p.m. Department of Economics

Willis Building
■ 9 a.m. Planning Program / Department of Geography
■ 11 a.m. The International Studies Program
■ 2 p.m. Honors Program

Mendenhall Great Rooms
■ 3 p.m. Department of History

McGinnis Theatre
■ 12:30 p.m. School of Theatre and Dance

Kowell Science Complex
■ 10 a.m. Department of Mathematics (Room 103)
South Central class revamps table, chairs for Habitat store

By Kathryn KENNEDY
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, April 29, 2009

WINTERVILLE — When South Central High School teacher Vickie Herring brought a low table and three chairs into her Interior Design II class, reactions were immediate and unanimous.

"Ugh," the 16 female students said, with a sprinkling of "ugly" and "gross." The chairs wobbled, paint was faded and chipping.

Ten days later, the furniture had been totally transformed.

The table is now a red and black oriental-themed piece, complete with a cherry blossom and Chinese characters for unity, love, strength and beauty on each corner. A dark stained chair had to be taken apart before it became a cream piece with periwinkle blue accents and a high-backed dinner chair required re-upholstery. The third wooden classroom chair needed extra parts for stabilization before it was painted bold colors with zebra-print accents — the design inspired by a fellow student’s handbag.

"Everybody that goes by is saying, 'Oh my goodness,'" Herring said. "They're just beautiful."

The furniture was given to the class by local Habitat for Humanity ReStore Manager Mark Klaich. They'd been donated and Klaich told them to "do what you can" before he returned them to the store for sale. ReStore helps pay Habitat's bills, and leftovers go into a fund for more houses.

Klaich was wowed by the results, and said he hopes to work with another of Herring's classes in the future.

"Doing stuff like this helps Habitat," he said. "We'll get more money for these pieces than they normally would go for."

Herring said the project also helps teach her students teamwork in addition to the skills of rehabilitation and design.

"It's really taught us to be flexible and adapt," said Katie Wynn.

Wynn and fellow senior Amber Blankenship are both headed to East Carolina University, where they plan to continue their interior design studies.

"This is our first major hands-on project," Blankenship said. "Everyone had a vision in their mind."

"The hardest part is making that come through," Wynn said.

Herring said all of her students showed dedication as they sanded for days on end, brainstormed, made repairs and painted.

"Some people came after school, some came during lunch, before school," Herring said. "There were a lot of sacrifices made. I'm just really proud of them."

Contact Kathryn Kennedy at kkennedy@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9566.
Editorial: The long view - Lasting solutions needed for fiscal crisis

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Gov. Beverly Perdue can be forgiven for reversing her position on cutting state workers' pay, a budget-balancing option she rejected for months prior to embracing it on Tuesday. With the state facing a budget shortfall far larger than expected, even distasteful choices now seem palatable.

However, though the governor's plan to close a massive revenue gap may work this year, it does not promise the type of long-term, sustainable solution needed to achieve fiscal solvency. This is a short-term fix and, if judged as such, could do more harm than good.

North Carolina's revenue fell far short of expectations this month, with all areas seeing sharp declines amid the economic recession. That led to revised projections for the current fiscal year, causing a forecasted $2 billion shortfall to balloon into a $3.3 billion shortfall.

Under the state constitution, Perdue is required to balance the budget, and responsibility for closing that revenue gap is hers. The governor intends to use $400 million from the state's rainy day fund, $300 million from federal recovery funding appropriated for the next fiscal year and about $200 million from other state funds.

However, Perdue's most significant announcement was that $65 million would come from a 0.5 percent pay cut for state workers, to be offset with 10 hours that can be used in the next fiscal year. Though she described the action as a furlough, it is little more than a pay reduction, to be applied before the end of the fiscal year on June 30.

Organizations representing state workers — the North Carolina Association of Educators and the State Employees Association of North Carolina, in particular — responded with understandable anger. Low income workers will face the greatest hardship since any pay cut is magnified as a percentage of their income. And teachers who collect 10-month paychecks will also feel the pain since it is a significant imposition in the next two months.

All understand that North Carolina's economic crisis can only be overcome if all shoulder the burden of these difficult times. And surely state workers will play a key role.

But North Carolina must embrace long-term strategies for a crisis that will not disappear on June 30. It must reform the tax code to provide a reliable revenue stream that reflects the modern state economy. It must address the state health plan with an eye toward the future and not the immediate bottom line. And it should look to reduce positions and streamline government, not merely impose a small across-the-board salary cut.

Perdue made an unpopular choice that should allow the state to break even this year. But short-term thinking assures the state of considerable hardship in the future.

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Letter: ECU Chamber Singers stir Pirate pride

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Is there anything like the thrill of an amazing touchdown scamper by a Pirate running back? Is there anything to compare with the sight and sound of a double play turned by the Diamond Pirates? When Coach Skip Holtz speaks, people listen. Can anything compare to ECU sports?

Yes it can, and does. One hundred and fifty enthralled fans were at St. Paul's on April 27 to witness possibly the best combination of student talent and coaching that ECU has to offer. To what am I referring? It is the ECU Chamber Singers. Mere adjectives cannot describe the sound that this team of 44 singers, artists and vocal athletes provided the audience.

Under the direction/coaching of Dr. Daniel Bara, the acoustic properties of the St. Paul sanctuary were challenged as never before. No, there were not 43,000 screaming fans to cheer on the Singing Pirates. No, the fans in St. Paul's jungle didn't harass the tenors.

For those ECU officials and administrators not in attendance at this concert, you need to know that arguably the best team that ECU fields is not on the gridiron or the diamond, but on the risers, in concert formation.

GREG BALDWIN
Greenville_SPgB

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Myrtle Leggett Roberson

Myrtle Leggett Roberson WILLIAMSTON - Martin County native, Myrtle Leggett Roberson, 92, resident of the Williamston House in Williamston and formerly of Greenville and Atlantic Beach, died peacefully Friday evening in Williamston. Myrtle attended Business College in Baltimore Maryland then married her high school sweetheart, Irving Roberson. She was Miss Secretary of North Carolina prior to managing the Chemistry Department at East Carolina University. Their daughters, Donna Roberson La Treill of Wilmington and California, and Christie Suzanne Roberson, of Hatteras Island and Virginia Beach, remained close to her throughout her life. She is also immediately survived by two brothers, Col. L. Nelson Leggett of Rocky Mount and Hilton Leggett of Ocean Isle Beach; one sister, Katie Clyde Critcher (Mrs. T. Stuart) of Raleigh; and several nieces and nephews of those siblings and of her deceased brother, William "Bud" Leggett and sister Delia Frances Rawls. Myrtle and Irving’s parents were founders of Christian Chapel Church of Christ, to whose membership they returned after a period of founding membership of Hooker Memorial Christian Church in Greenville. Funeral service to be held at Christian Chapel Church Disciples of Christ Friday, May 1, 2009 at 11:00 a.m. Interment at Martin Memorial Gardens with reception following. Arrangements by Biggs Funeral Home in Williamston.
UNC gets center for solar study

Affordable solar paint among goals

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - Here's Tom Meyer's idea for changing the world: a solar paint that, when applied to your roof, acts as a conductor and powers your home.

Science has created a first-generation version, still unrefined and far too expensive. Meyer thinks he and a team of local scientists can do it better.

Meyer, a UNC-Chapel Hill chemist, is the lead investigator on a team of Triangle scientists that just snared $17.5 million in federal economic stimulus funds. The grant, through the U.S. Department of Energy and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, will fund one of 46 new solar energy research centers across the country, mostly based at universities. The research center will be based at UNC-CH and will largely tap the brain power of the university's well-regarded hard sciences departments -- chemistry, physics and astronomy. Researchers from N.C. State, Duke, N.C. Central and the University of Florida will collaborate as well.

In all, about 20 faculty members will be involved in the work. The grant will fund the work of about 30 graduate and post-doctoral scientists who will contribute over a five-year span.

"There are a lot of problems to solve," said Meyer, a longtime UNC-CH chemist and member of the National Academy of the Sciences. "You need a lot of different approaches to attack them."

The team's work will concentrate on two areas. One is making new technology such as the solar paint possible and affordable on a large scale. The other is to figure out a way to store solar energy for later use.

In solar energy research, the race is on. President Barack Obama has pegged it as a priority. Meyer thinks the UNC-CH project can establish North Carolina as a player in energy research and in the manufacturing of solar technology. The UNC-CH center will likely collaborate with the Research Triangle Energy Consortium, a research group of scientists from area universities and the Research Triangle Institute.

This all sounds fantastic to Brad Broadwell, director of economic development for Orange County. Broadwell is trying to drum up support for a cluster of solar energy businesses in Orange County, off Interstate 85 near Buckhorn Road. He envisions a solar energy-specific industrial park where companies that manufacture solar technologies -- a solar paint store, perhaps - can set up shop.

The commercial potential of solar energy technology is catching the eye of bankers and venture capitalists, Broadwell said.
"It's wide open now. An awful lot of sectors are looking to plug into renewable energies," he said. "There's a lot of money to be made."

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State to dump several 529 plan choices

BY ALAN M. WOLF, Staff Writer

State officials who oversee college-savings plans for parents are dumping several funds with higher expenses that have performed poorly during the stock market swoon.

The move will reduce expenses for parents who participate in North Carolina's National College Savings Program, but also limit their choices.

As of March, more than 41,000 participants had $368 million invested in so-called 529 college-savings plans run by the state. The plans offer tax breaks to encourage parents to save for college.

The Balanced Fund and CollegeHorizonFunds will be discontinued July 1, the College Foundation of North Carolina announced this morning. The foundation administers the 529 plans on behalf of the N.C. State Education Assistance Authority.

Participants will be able to switch to other so-called 529 plans, or their money will automatically be moved into lower-cost funds run by Vanguard.

"We regularly monitor what's going with the market" said Ben Kittner, a spokesman for CFNC. "The idea of making it simpler makes a lot of sense, especially if you go into a better-performing fund."

In addition to the Vanguard funds, the N.C. 529 plan will still offer an Aggressive Fund managed by NCM Capital Management Group of Durham and the Dependable Income Fund managed by the N.C. State Treasurer.

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SPECIAL REPORT

Discomfort at U.S. Medical Schools

By PAUL SULLIVAN

NEW YORK — The United States' standing in the world ebbs and flows, but one thing remains strong: the reputation of its medical schools and the physicians they produce. Whatever the international criticisms of its financial regulatory system or past foreign policy, the United States has long been perceived as the go-to place for state-of-the-art medical care.

President Barack Obama wants to fundamentally change the system in which these doctors work. Supporters say this will improve access for poorer Americans: to which critics reply with a cry of “Canada,” a code word that, justly or unjustly, is held to encapsulate all the perceived ills of socialized medicine.

With health care on the minds of many Americans and with the world watching, how are the country's medical colleges, and their students, preparing for the challenges?

The number of graduates from U.S. medical schools has remained roughly constant at about 16,000 a year since the 1980's. But the number of new doctors has fallen as a percentage of the population. The population rose by 50 million from 1980 to 2000, according to the census.

Responding to this, medical schools have stepped up annual admissions to 18,036 last year from 16,170 in 1998, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Gail Morrison, vice dean for medical education at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, predicts that admissions will rise again this year. She notes that in recessions, interest in medical school jumps. “We’re anticipating a bump up,” she said. “Smart people can no longer go to Wall Street.”

This would be welcome news to the Association of American Medical Colleges, which is calling for a 30 percent rise in admissions. According to a 2008 report co-written by Edward Salsberg, director of the Center for Workforce Studies with the medical association, the gap between supply and demand for doctors could be 125,000 to 159,000 by 2025, if the training of doctors fails to keep pace with population growth and a rising need for specialists catering to the aging demographic.

There are two problems with seeking a rapid expansion of medical school enrollment. The first is that the recruitment pool is limited by a requirement for specialist knowledge of physical and biological sciences, measured in the Medical College Admissions Test. Mr. Salsberg, however, says that admission test scores are not absolute predictors of performance in medical school and that more students could be admitted without hurting the quality of graduates.

The other problem is a financing constraint on the number of spots in hospital residency programs. Medical
training in the United States has two components: medical school and residency, also known as graduate medical education. There are 130 accredited medical schools in the United States and 1,000 teaching hospitals to train residents. But the teaching hospitals are limited in the number of doctors they can train because the large majority of residencies are paid for by Medicare, the federally funded health insurance for people over the age of 65, and these slots have been frozen since 1997.

Still, at this year’s “match day,” the annual event when graduating medical school students find out where they will go for their residencies, there were promising signs of rising capacity, augmented by non-Medicare sources: 29,890 American and foreign-trained medical school graduates were placed, which the National Resident Matching Program said was an increase of 1,153 from last year and 4,500 more than five years ago.

“This is likely the result of medical school expansion across the nation in anticipation of a future physician shortage,” Mona Signer, executive director of the National Resident Matching Program, said. “Existing medical schools have increased their class sizes and new medical schools are in development.”

Yet high-paying specialties like dermatology, neurological surgery and orthopaedic surgery were the main beneficiaries, while the number of positions for family medicine fell by 101.

“You can’t force people into a specialty they don’t want,” Dr. Morrison said. “Let’s face it: As long as primary care doctors in this country make a much lower salary than a specialty doctor, it’s hard.”

The Association of American Medical Colleges’ push for expansion may not help the situation. “If we had more graduates I don’t think it would be any different,” Dr. Morrison added. “It’s the environment in which we live.”

Against this background, “the success of health care reform really depends on how they design it,” Mr. Salsberg of the Center for Workplace Studies said. “Giving someone an insurance card doesn’t guarantee coverage, and just covering 45 million Americans will not add capacity.”

Is there a way, then, to ensure better general medical provision for all?

Incentives, Dr. Morrison said.

In one way at least, medical graduates are similar to their peers graduating from business and law schools: “These kids have debt to pay off,” she said.

Alice Pfeiffer contributed reporting from Paris
Rejection: Some Colleges Do It Better Than Others

By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Members of this year's record-size high-school graduating class applied to more colleges than ever -- and now, that's resulting in a heavier than usual flurry of rejection letters.

Hundreds of students at high schools from Newton, Mass., to Palo Alto, Calif., have created cathartic "Wall of Shame" or "Rejection Wall" displays of college denial letters. On message boards at CollegeConfidential.com, students critique, attack and praise missives from various schools, elevating rejection-letter reviews to a sideline sport.

Even with impressive test scores and grades, abundant extracurricular activities, good recommendations and an admission essay into which "I poured myself heart and soul," Daniel Beresford, 18, of Fair Oaks, Calif., netted 14 rejection letters from 17 applications, he says. Among the denials: Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago. (He's bound for one of his top choices, Pepperdine University.) When he "realized it was going to be so much harder this year," he started calling in reinforcements, asking teachers and friends to open the rejections for him.

Here, based on my own highly unscientific survey of actual letters, student interviews and message boards, are my picks for this year's most noteworthy college rejection letters -- and the liveliest response by a student.

**Toughest:** Bates College, Lewiston, Maine. Most rejection letters, in an effort to soften the blow, follow a pattern: We're sorry, we had a huge applicant pool, all our applicants were terrific, we wish we could admit everyone. Bates, a competitive, 1,700-student college, expresses its regrets to rejected applicants and praises its applicant pool. But it delivers a more direct, and perhaps more honest message: "The deans were obliged to select from among candidates who clearly could do sound work at Bates," the letter says.

The letter touched off a chorus of moans online. One recipient, a 17-year-old high-school student from California, says it "implied that you had been rejected because you are." Bates Dean of Admissions Wylie Mitchell acknowledges that he had one applicant "take me to task for such an abrupt letter." But he says he carefully considered how to convey respect for applicants and decided that brevity is the best route. The letter aims to clarify that Bates is "denying the student's application, and not rejecting the student," Mr. Mitchell says. He doesn't see counseling recipients as the role of college deans.

Stanford University sends a steely "don't call us" message embedded in its otherwise gentle rejection letter. In addition to asserting that "we are humbled by your talents and achievements" and assuring the applicant that he or she is "a fine student," the letter says, "we are not able to consider appeals." It links to a Q&A that reiterates: "Admission decisions are final and there is absolutely no appeal process." It also discourages attempts to transfer later, an even more competitive process. One recipient, whose heart had long been set on Stanford, cried for hours, her mother says, after interpreting the letter as, "we never want to hear from you again so don't bother."

Stanford admissions dean Richard Shaw says the ban on appeals is necessary because other California universities allow appeals and families assume Stanford does too. Even after sending that firm message, Stanford, which has an admission rate of 7.6%, still gets about 200 attempted appeals. "We care deeply about the repercussions" of the letter, Mr. Shaw says, but "there's no easy
way to tell someone they didn't make it.

**Kindest:** Harvard College. Despite an estimated admission rate of about 7% this year, this hotly sought-after school sends a humble rejection letter.

"Past experience suggests that the particular college a student attends is far less important than what the student does to develop his or her strengths and talents over the next four years."

"I didn't feel a teensy bit bitter about" it, says recipient Evelyn Anne Crunden, 18. Instead, the letter's "warm and apologetic tone ... made me feel proud for having even applied."

Duke University, Durham N.C., also drew raves for a gracious missive emphasizing that it's not passing judgment on individuals, but trying to put together a well-rounded class. Undergraduate admissions dean Christoph Guttentag won particularly praise from students and parents for the line, "I know you will find an institution at which you will be happy; I know, too, that the school you choose will benefit from your presence." Says Mr. Beresford, who was one of the 18,000 recipients: "It made me feel like I was a good applicant, not just another rejection."

Mr. Guttentag says he's had particular empathy for rejected applicants since his own daughter was rejected by several kindergartens four years ago. "We know we're imparting bad news, and we just want to make it as human as we can," he says.

**Most Confusing:** University of California, San Diego. Officials there rejected 29,000 candidates not once, but twice. After sending a first round of rejections, they accidentally sent all 47,000 applicants, including those who had been denied, an email invitation to an open house for admitted students: "We're thrilled that you've been admitted ... join us this Saturday ... and get a glimpse of the powerful combination that can be you plus UC San Diego." The errant message raised some false hopes. "It would be cool if this means they changed their decision," one rejected applicant says he thought.

Less than two hours later came 29,000 re-rejections. "We deeply regret this mistake, because we understand the level of distress it has caused" for many, university officials wrote. "We continue to wish you success." The admissions staff worked all night and through the next two days, making and taking calls, to straighten things out, a spokesperson says. "We would never intentionally confuse students."

Another surprise package came from Penn State, which sent the hoped-for "fat envelope" with a rejection letter inside. Applicants who receive a fat envelope assume they've been admitted. But Penn State sends a fat envelope to students who have been denied admission to its biggest campus, at University Park, Pa. One mother says her daughter was "so excited then ... No!" She adds, "I had to pick her up off the floor."

The envelope contains information on others among Penn State's 20 campuses where the student is invited to enroll, with the right to transfer later to University Park, says admissions executive Anne Rohrbach. "We've had some people not laugh about that," she concedes. "We don't see them as denials," she says, but as invitations to qualified students the university would like to enroll elsewhere.

**Most Discouraging:** Boston University. To students who have family ties to the university, its letter begins: "We give special attention to applicants whose families have a tradition of study at Boston University. We have extended this consideration in the evaluation of your application, but I regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you admission." Consideration of family legacies is common practice at many universities. But Rob Flaherty, 17, a North Reading, Mass., recipient, said he felt the wording in BU's letter translated to "we made it even easier for you and you STILL couldn't get in." Admissions head Kelly Walter says BU tries to deliver such bad news "with as much sensitivity as possible." Most applicants appreciate an acknowledgement of their family ties, she says, and she regrets that "our efforts fall short with some."

**Biggest Spin:** Numerous colleges spin the data in their rejection letters as a well-intentioned way of comforting denied students. University of California, Davis, says it had "42,000 applicants from which UC Davis could enroll a freshman class of 4,600." This implies an 11% acceptance rate. Its actual admission rate is closer to 50%, because many accepted candidates ultimately enroll elsewhere.

UC Davis undergraduate admissions director Pamela Burnett says most applicants understand that actual enrollment rates vary and she hasn't received any complaints that the language is misleading.
**Best Coaching:** Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick. This 2,200-student institution added handwritten notes to almost all the 600 denial letters it sent this year, explaining areas of weakness, such as math grades or English skills. The personal detail, says Ron Byrne, a vice president who oversees admissions, helps students understand "it's not a rejection of them, and they know very concretely some of the things they can do" to improve their chances if they apply again.

**Best Student Response:** Living well. As the rejections sunk in, many students rebounded to console each other. After getting rejections from Harvard and Yale, Isaac Chambers, 17, Champaign, Ill., a top student, track athlete, student-government leader and an editor of his school's online newspaper, posted these words of advice for other rejected candidates on CollegeConfidential.com: "When you're in the dough," he wrote, "Fax the colleges that denied you a copy of your rejection letter every day -- letting them know just how badly they screwed up."

* For commentary on college rejection and other work-family issues, see our blog, TheJuggle.com. Email sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.

Printed in The Wall Street Journal page B9
USA TODAY's college all-stars gifted in class and beyond

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

The nation's most gifted college students rightly take pride in their academic achievements, be they in the area of environmental policy, medical research or the classics.

But give them the chance to talk about their proudest accomplishments, and a refreshingly eclectic set of extracurricular interests and talents slips into view.

Matthew Baum, a soon-to-be Yale University graduate whose research on Fragile X Syndrome may someday lead to better treatments for mental retardation, is a wrestler on the side and started a club for beer aficionados. Harvard chemistry major Allen Cheng, 20, who envisions a career as a physician-scientist, finds pleasure in kendo, a form of fencing based on the art of Japanese samurai swordsmanship. And when Aaron Krolikowski is not advocating for environmental justice, he just might be on stage with the Buffalo Chips, a collegiate male a cappella group.

"Music has always been an important part of who I am," says Krolikowski, 22, who will graduate next month from the University at Buffalo and hopes to serve someday in state public office. Writing and arranging music is an escape, he says, and performing is "exhilarating."

FIRST TEAM: Gallery of their self-portraits and accomplishments
OUTSTANDING STUDENTS: Meet 2nd, 3rd and honorable mention teams
COMMUNITY COLLEGES: Winners found 'something magical''

Those are just three of the students named to USA TODAY's 2009 All-USA College Academic First Team. The 20 winners, selected by a panel of judges from among hundreds of college juniors and seniors, each will receive a $2,500 cash award. Second- and third-team members also were selected, along with honorable mentions. "We're delighted to honor such a multi-talented group of achievers," says Susan Weiss, managing editor of USA TODAY's Life section.

They're selected based on their intellectual endeavors, community service and campus leadership; they all boast high grade-point averages, campus honors and prestigious prizes. Collectively, they have amassed more than a dozen national awards, four are Rhodes Scholars, and eight are members of Phi Beta Kappa national honor society.

Their scientific interests range from the tiniest cell in a research laboratory to outer space in all its wonder. They help teach classes and work with faculty on their research. And they are global citizens. Their studies and service work have taken them to a shantytown in sub-Saharan Africa, an international conference in Bali and orphanages in Nepal.

But they find value, too, in other creative outlets, whether it's running a marathon, sky diving or learning to cook a raccoon.

Such diversions are important — necessary, even, says Baum, 22, who co-founded the Berkeley Beer Club, an unofficial beer-appreciation club that he says emphasizes quality, not quantity. Unlike the English with their afternoon tea, "we do not have an activity ... to give us a few moments to take a break from our busy lives and discuss ideas, problems, or just talk," he says. "It makes me happy to see my friends smiling and talking with one another, even if they have a paper due the next day."

Rooted in family

When asked what has motivated them to achieve their accomplishments, many of them quickly credit their families.
"More than anything else, my parents taught me that no one is inferior or superior to me," says Meredith DeBoom, 22, the daughter of corn and soybean farmers. Her first job was pulling milkweeds for a penny an piece; after graduating from the University of Iowa in May, she's headed to Washington, D.C., where she'll analyze environmental policy in the office of the U.S. secretary of transportation.

Her parents, she says, gave her the confidence to "march up to the corner office to express my views" and the humility to "roll up my sleeves and wash dishes."

Anh Tran, who graduates next month from the University of Minnesota, similarly acknowledges the gift her parents gave her and her sisters.

"My parents fled from Vietnam 18 years ago. They left everything they had," says Tran, 22. Their only goal: "a better future." Her undergraduate studies and advocacy work on diabetes have taken her to Tanzania; now, she's getting ready to study diabetes risk for Asian immigrants on a Fulbright grant to the United Kingdom.

As you would expect, life experience has helped determine the direction that a number of First Team members have taken:

• Carrie Bryant, 23, a Middlebury College graduate who is heading to the University of Oxford to continue her study of the classics, has balanced her academic pursuits with community service work aimed primarily at helping children with pediatric multiple sclerosis. She was diagnosed with the illness after graduating high school and says she is motivated to help others "because there is a lack of resources devoted to this population."

• Jarrod Aguirre, 22, who graduates next month from Yale, plans a career in medicine and global health policy, with a particular interest in disadvantaged and underserved communities. "A family friend's death due to AIDS, a brother's fight with addiction ... my family's reliance on food banks, and many other experiences have convinced me that our society fails to treat all its members with equal respect and consideration," he says. "There are so many resources and so much goodwill in the world, and it is my hope to tap into these to remedy our failings as a society."

• Carrie Johnson, 21, who graduates in May from American University, has spent college pursuing two passions: studying alternative energy and eliminating rural poverty. Her goal is to help her home state, South Dakota, become a leader in wind energy, and she believes Indian reservations hold special promise. "Wind is going to be instrumental in ... combating global climate change," she says. "Throughout South Dakota and on its reservations, which are some of the most impoverished places in the United States, it sure is windy."

'Greater than yourself'

If there's another hallmark of this year's First Team members, it's that they recognize their good fortune, are grateful for their talents and have made sure not to squander opportunities to help others similarly aim high.

West Virginia University engineering major Emily Calandrelli, 21, encourages young women to get involved in the sciences when she makes presentations about her adventures with NASA. And when Charlene Bashore, 22, who graduates in May from Arizona State University, helps put on leadership retreats for high school students, she cites "the importance of being part of something greater than yourself."

"The mere fact I'm at an American university with the chance to learn whatever I want puts me in such a privileged group," says Bashore, a biochemistry major who also plays the violin, is learning Polish and helps raise start-up funds for a school for girls and women in Malawi, Africa. "I try to experience as much of life as I can and try to help others access those same opportunities."

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