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The beaches of Corolla, N.C., belong to wild horses when it is not summer. The herd is becoming so inbred that some fear a genetic collapse.

May 7, 2012

Herd’s Fate Lies in Preservation Clash

By LAURA BEIL

COROLLA, N.C. — Come summer, the beaches of this barrier island will be choked with cars and sunbathers, but in the off-season the land is left to wild horses. Smallish, tending toward chestnut and black, they wander past deserted vacation rentals in harems of five or six.

Thousands of them once roamed the length of the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the likely descendants from mounts that belonged to Spanish explorers five centuries ago. Now their numbers have dwindled to a few hundred, the best known living on federal parkland at Shackleford Banks.
But the largest herd, which has recently grown to almost 140 strong, occupies more than 7,500 acres of narrow land that stretches from the end of Highway 12 in Corolla (pronounced cor-AH-la) to the Virginia border, 11 miles north. Lacking natural predators, and trapped by fences that jut into the choppy Atlantic, the herd is becoming so inbred that its advocates fear a genetic collapse in mere generations.

These supporters are leading a campaign to save the Corolla herd, and they have powerful allies in Congress. In February, the House passed a bill that would sustain the herd at about 120 and allow the importing of new mares from Shackleford for an introduction of fresh genes.

Wildlife conservationists say the issue is not so simple. The beaches, marshes, grasslands and forests near Corolla are a stopover for flocks of endangered migratory birds, and nesting ground for sea turtles. Much of the horses’ range belongs to the Currituck National Wildlife Refuge, and defenders of the native habitat fear the herd’s current size strains the ecosystem.

The future of the horses raises larger questions about whether one animal should be preserved at the expense of others — and who gets to decide.

“This is about values,” said Michael Hutchins, executive director of the Wildlife Society, representing wildlife biologists and managers, which opposes the House measure. “I like horses; I think they are fascinating animals. I also deeply value what little we have left of our native species and their habitats.”

Both sides invoke science to their cause. But data are sparse and a comprehensive study of the horses’ impact is not expected before next year.

In the arena of political and public sentiment, the horses win hands down. Bonds between horse and human have existed for centuries; it is the animal that has pulled plows, and carried armies and settlers forward in the name of civilization.

“God has put such a beautiful thing here — how can you not want to protect them?” said Betty Lane, 70, who has lived here for more than 40 years, driving her S.U.V. as part of a citizen patrol to protect the horses. (She stopped after mistaking a reporter for a tourist trying to get too close to the horses, in defiance of local law.) She wore a necklace bearing the name Spec, for a stallion killed by a hit-and-run driver on the beach.

Dedication to wild horses runs so deep here and elsewhere that many supporters even chafe at the notion of calling the animals “non-native,”
citing fossil records that horses lived in North America more than 11,000 years ago before going extinct along other Pleistocene creatures like mastodons.

The wild horses of Corolla did not arise here, but they are domestic animals that have lost their domesticity. Though skeptics question whether the horses are indeed Spanish, an inspection from the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy and other groups has noted the horses’ short backs, low-set tails and other traits that make them distinct from other North American stock. A DNA analysis published February in Animal Genetics also points to a common origin for the horses, suggesting they may be a living relic of an Iberian breed that exists nowhere else.

The study also confirms fears that the horses are growing perilously inbred. “There are wild herds with lower diversity, but not many,” said Gus Cothran, an expert in equine genetics at Texas A&M University who is lead author of the report. He says a herd of 60 could survive, provided a new mare entered the group every generation (about eight years). The federal bill sets a herd size at 110 to 130, the minimum number Dr. Cothran says could slow genetic erosion if the horses remain isolated.

“We are not asking for hundreds of horses,” said Karen McCalpin, director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, which protects and cares for the horses, and leads public education about them. The heart of the disagreement with wildlife conservationists is over how many horses the habitat can bear. “If they were that detrimental for the environment,” she asked, “wouldn’t that be evident by now?”

This question would be easier to answer if not for the matter of people. Other herds of Outer Banks horses live in expanses largely free of human intrusion. But the Corolla horses mostly live off people’s land and landscaping. Tourism promoters like to show horses frolicking in sand and surf, their manes blowing majestically, but these animals are just as likely to be spotted grazing alongside driveways.

Genetics aside, tourists pose the biggest threat to the herd, whether from collisions with distracted drivers, or from photo-seeking vacationers who flout local code that makes it a crime to feed or get within 50 feet of a horse. Last summer a 2-week-old colt died of an intestinal blockage after eating watermelon rinds fed to it by visitors.

As Corolla becomes more densely developed, the horses could be pushed more and more onto land set aside for wildlife sanctuaries. Last summer, out of concern for a species of bird called black rail, Mike Hoff, the refuge
manager, fenced off a 135-acre swath of marshland after noting too many seasons of depleted grass. “It wasn’t that we wanted to exclude the horses because we don’t like them,” he said.

One of the few studies to examine the horses’ direct impact was published in 2004 in The Journal of Range Management. Researchers from East Carolina University reported that in general, plants on Corolla recovered from one season of grazing by early the following summer. But the data were gathered in 1997, when the horse population was estimated at 43, spread across 11,400 acres. Today, the range is almost 4,000 acres smaller and the herd size has more than tripled.

The continuing study of feral animals, financed jointly by the federal Fish and Wildlife Service and North Carolina State University, is intended to measure the effect of hogs and deer in addition to horses. Teasing out the horses’ impact “is a difficult question,” said Chris DePerno, who is leading the research, but he added, “We think we’ve designed a very, very good study.”

In this case, politics and science may be operating on separate timetables. The Senate could take up the bill before Dr. DePerno’s study is complete. Ms. McCalpin lamented that the horses were already bearing hallmarks of genetic failure, with an occasional foal born astoundingly small, or with back knees that lock instead of hinge.

“What is running out,” she said, adding: “They’ve been here for five centuries. It makes me sad to think they might not be here for more.”
Psychiatrists and other mental health providers are under increasing pressure to stay current. With the fast growth of knowledge, the challenge to keep up with the ever-growing body of information is greater than ever.

There is an emerging realization that as clinical providers, we need systems or methods to help sort and evaluate the utility of information before we apply it in clinical care. Without such systems, when we are facing an overload of information, most of us tend to take the first or the most easily accessed information—our clinical experience or the drug detailer’s latest data. Perhaps we overestimate the quality and utility of that information while we remain unaware of potentially more useful and relevant information. As a result, the quality of care we provide tends to become suboptimal and the cost of care increases.

Clinical practice is based on knowledge, skills, beliefs, and research. Knowledge can become outdated quickly and skills can get rusty. The traditional methods of improving skills and keeping current with new diagnostic and treatment approaches include reading professional materials, accumulating clinical experience, attending CME conferences, learning from colleagues, and conducting research. There are significant problems,
however, with each of these strategies.

The inferences we draw from our individual successes and failures in clinical encounters, with or without evidence, shape our beliefs, which, in turn, influence our clinical practice. These inferences can be distorted by overvaluing treatment successes and undervaluing treatment failures. Evidence-based medicine does not consider one’s clinical experience to be listed among the levels of evidence, and expert opinion is either viewed as the lowest level of evidence1 or has fallen off the list completely.2

Attending CME events has been shown to have little or no effect on clinical practices.3,4 Learning from colleagues’ clinical experience can have similar recall problems. Conducting one’s own research is seldom done because it is too time-consuming. The challenge is that the knowledge base continues to grow at a rate that is impossible to keep up with unless we devise effective and efficient methods to identify, evaluate, consolidate, and distribute new knowledge and provide tools for real-time analysis and decision support.

Rate of growth in knowledge base

It is estimated that if we took all the knowledge that humankind had accumulated by the year 1 AD as equal to 1 unit of information, it probably took about 1500 years, or until the 16th century, for that amount of knowledge to double. The next doubling of knowledge (from 2 to 4 “knowledge units”) took only 250 years, until about 1750 AD. By 1900, 150 years later, knowledge had doubled again to 8 units.5

The rate at which information has been doubling continues to pick up speed. It is now estimated that the collective sum of all printed knowledge is doubling every 4 years.6 Between 1999 and 2002, the amount of new information stored on paper, film, magnetic tape, and optical media was estimated to have about doubled, with a growth rate of about 30% a year.7 President Clinton8 had the following to say about this subject in his 1998 remarksto the National Association of Attorneys General:

The sheer volume of knowledge is doubling every 5 years now. . . . because of human genome research, we are literally solving problems in a matter of days that took years to solve not long before I took office. The World Wide Web is growing by something like 65,000 websites an hour now. When I took office, there were 50—(laughter)—50.

Medical knowledge is now reported to be doubling every 8 years,9 and medical professionals are struggling more than they ever have to keep up. Of
course, this is not something that is entirely new. Stewart\textsuperscript{10} wrote the following almost 50 years ago:

A brilliant student who might successfully master all the present facts and theories by graduation would be seriously out of date 10 years later, and hopelessly so by retirement age unless he continued his education while in practice.

Lifelong learning

Medical education is a lifelong learning process.\textsuperscript{11,12} From a consumers’ perspective, our patients expect, and often believe, that their physicians are keeping their knowledge and skills current.

Most medical boards now require that physicians accumulate a significant number of CME hours to re-new their licenses. Medical specialty boards are now also emphasizing maintenance of certification as a way to establish physicians’ lifelong learning. While often we may not think of professional competency as an ethical requirement, ethical background is founded on being primarily responsible for the welfare of the patient through professional competency, striving to continue to learn, being honest with colleagues and patients, and demonstrating responsibility to society.\textsuperscript{13} This concept of professional competency as an ethical responsibility was probably best described by Clifford\textsuperscript{14} in The Ethics of Belief: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Of course, the challenge we face is that knowledge continues to grow, our understanding of illnesses we treat continues to evolve, and our hold on “truth” is never complete.

We know that all scientific truths are provisional! What is concerning to both consumers and professionals is that as research and technology rapidly advance, the gap between what should be done in clinical settings and what is actually practiced appears to be widening. This has led to a paradox: we live in times when the treatment of mental disorders has never been more effective, yet many of our patients do not benefit from these hard-achieved scientific advances.

It is well established that there is a gulf between what we know and what we practice. Large gaps exist between best evidence and practice in the implementation of guidelines.\textsuperscript{15} Failure to follow best evidence highlights issues of underuse, overuse, and misuse of drugs\textsuperscript{16} and has led to widespread interest in the safety of patients.\textsuperscript{17} These serious and widespread quality problems have occurred “in small and large communities alike, in all
parts of the country, and with approximately equal frequency in managed care and fee-for-service systems of care.”16

Literature reviews conducted by RAND had previously identified studies that document quality shortcomings. Large gaps between the care patients should have received and the care they did receive were identified. This was true for preventive, acute, and long-term care across all health care settings and for all age-groups and geographic areas.18 The Institute of Medicine’s major and widely cited reports described this problem as follows: “Between the health care we have and the care we could have lies not just a gap, but a chasm.”17 Understandably, there is an increasing public concern about the lack of access to appropriate treatment, pervasiveness of unsafe practices, wasteful uses of precious competence, and unsatisfactory patient outcomes.

Now, more than ever, we need novel methods to help us rapidly identify, evaluate, consolidate, and distribute new knowledge. This requires tools for real-time analysis and decision support.

We live in an age of information. But how much of this information is useful, and how much of it gets in the way of learning and keeping up? The answer depends on our ability to find a signal in the noise of this information explosion.19

The signal to noise ratio [SNR] is a useful concept in determining what information is relevant. The SNR is a qualitative measure of value received relative to the irrelevant data one must sift through to get to that value. In other words, the task at hand is to find the information and knowledge bases that improve medical decision making and can be effectively applied in current clinical practice. Many efforts continue to be made to narrow the gap between evidence and clinical practice. These efforts have included educational strategies to alter practice behavior and interventions at the organizational and administrative levels.20,21

The Medical Informatics Panel of the Medical School Objectives Project of the Association of American Medical Colleges identified the following 5 major roles played by physicians in the area of medical informatics: lifelong learner, clinician, educator-communicator, researcher, and manager.11

This report further states that to successfully perform as a lifelong learner, a physician must be able to demonstrate competence in many areas, including knowledge of the information resources and tools available to support lifelong learning; ability to retrieve, filter, evaluate, and reconcile information; and attitudes that support the effective use of information
technology. While there are many ways to acquire and practice these skills, it is the position of this report that evidence-based medicine provides a coherent approach to do exactly that for patient care.

A “top 25 list” that can help

In future columns, I will illustrate one approach to keeping current with critical findings that are relevant to clinical practice. In an effort to sort and evaluate published research that is ready for clinical use (ie, finding a signal in the noise), I used the following 3-step method to find new information in the previous year that had applicability to clinical decision making and to make a personal judgment as to which information was the most useful:


2. Survey the American Association of Chairs of Departments of Psychiatry, the American Association of Directors of Psychiatric Residency Training, the American Association of Community Psychiatrists, the American Association of Psychiatric Administrators, the North Carolina Psychiatric Association, the Group for Advancement of Psychiatry, and other colleagues with the following question: Among the papers published from June 1, 2010, to May 31, 2011, which ones in your opinion have affected or changed the clinical practice of psychiatry?

3. Look for appraisals in online post-publication reviews, including Faculty of 1000,22 NTK Institute,23 MDLinx Psychiatry,24 and Evidence Updates From the BMJ Evidence Centre,25 and in secondary sources, such as Evidence-Based Mental Health.26

The papers were chosen on the basis of their clinical relevance/applicability—ie, their “clinic readiness.” The order in which the papers appear in the list is arbitrary.

We need to come up with systems with an acceptable SNR to efficiently identify, evaluate, and apply new information. A method that has been used to develop an annual “top 10” list of important, clinically relevant findings that have been presented at regional psychiatric association meetings and that have been well received has been described. While the method relies on evidence-based thinking, there is subjective judgment involved in selecting the “top” of any list, and this is not an argument that the method or the selection is “best.” The list is useful, nonetheless, and it is hoped that it will be improved by sharing.

In my next column, I will present an expanded, “top 25” list.
New cancer study seeks participants
By K.J. Williams
Thursday, May 10, 2012

The third generation of cancer studies by the American Cancer Society called CPS-3 is targeting a younger generation that is more diverse with no history of the disease.

At a kickoff meeting Wednesday held at the Greenville Country Club, speakers addressed an audience of health care providers, representatives of companies and organizations to ask them to become “champions” by getting the word out about the need for men and women to take part in the 20- to 30-year study. Primary target groups include ages 30-40 and minorities.

After the initial appointment, participation will be limited to periodic surveys.

Dr. Suzanne Lea, an associate professor of epidemiology at East Carolina University’s Brody School of Medicine, said the CPS-3 study will look at interactions, including how genetics and the environment combined affect cancer risk.

To prevent cancer, its causes need to be identified, Lea said.

The study will follow participants as they age. The age range starts at 30 and ends at 65. Having younger participants makes it possible to study the long-term effect of behavior and lifestyle on cancer risk, she said.
A requirement is that participants have never been diagnosed with cancer other than basal- or squamous-cell skin cancer.

Minorities are needed to provide a good cross-section of eastern North Carolina’s population and genetic information for specific groups.

Cancer survivor and oncologist Dr. Mary Raab, a clinical professor at Brody, said the cancer society’s second study has helped identify links between exposure to various factors and cancer. That study is scheduled to conclude soon.

The first study linked tobacco use to cancer.

“As a result of these studies, we know well over 50 percent of all cancers are related to our diet, our lifestyle and our environment,” she said. “We need more answers. We need to continue our quest for a cure.”

The goal is to sign up 360 participants in the Greenville area, although more may follow before the December 2013 deadline.

Participants sign up online at www.cps3GreenvilleNC.org or by calling 888-604-5888 to schedule a half-hour enrollment appointment from June 14-16 at The American Cancer Society’s McConnell-Raab Hope Lodge, so named because of the efforts of Raab and her husband, retired Dr. Bill McConnell, in its establishment. The lodge, which offers free lodging to people undergoing cancer treatment and their caregivers, is located at 930-A Wellness Drive.

Organizers are aiming to enroll 7,500 participants statewide and 300,000 nationally. Once enrolled, study subjects can participate online from anywhere as long as they keep the cancer society apprised of their current address.

Lea said it is important for participants to continue with the study long term to ensure the study’s quality.

Nadine Malpass, the cancer society’s vice president for North Carolina, urged attendees to help locate participants.

It’s an easy sell, she said.

“All we’re asking is for people to come and be part of this ground-breaking research,” Malpass said. “It’s a great way to say you are making a difference.”

Contact K.J. Williams at kwilliams@reflector.com or 252-329-9588.
Theresa Brown and her husband, Steve Filarsky, are the featured artists at Wake Forest Art and Frame Shop for Art After Hours on Friday.

On the road: Franklinton painting duo make art pay
By Chelsea Kellner - ckellner@newsobserver.com

WAKE FOREST - Theresa Brown’s first career was as a dog trainer running a 100-pen kennel in Raleigh. Steve Filarsky was a sign painter from Philadelphia, specializing in gold-leaf hand-lettering on fire trucks and antique boats.

Now, the couple is married, earning a living as traveling portrait artists for the past 15 years, crisscrossing the country to sell their work at art shows and returning to home base in Franklinton in between. Making it work as a self-employed household has taken flexibility and business savvy, but both say it’s worth it.

“As times change, you have to adapt what you do,” Brown said. “The biggest thing is, yeah, you can do it, but it’s hard work.”
Filarsky and Brown are the featured artists at Wake Forest Art and Frame Shop for downtown Wake Forest’s Art After Hours event Friday. Shop owner Beth Massey recently commissioned a portrait from Brown of her own children, marveling over Brown’s ability to capture the essence of each child’s personality.

“You can make something look like a picture, but to capture how people in that family see that person is amazing,” Massey said.

The idea that you can’t make a living as an artist is relatively new – artists have been tradesmen working on commission for millennia, Brown said.

“Even the greatest of artists had to go, gee, I’ve got to finish this – I have bills due,” Brown said.

A life in art

Art show season is cyclical, so Brown and Filarsky have developed a lifestyle that follows the weather like migrating birds: drive the camper down to Florida for a month at a time for winter art shows starting in November, then head to the northern shows in spring and summer. It helps that they work well together; last Wednesday, Brown was scheduling art classes in Wake Forest while Filarsky set up their booth at the state fairgrounds in Raleigh.

The road to self-employed success was a winding one for both artists.

For Brown, the catalyst was a divorce that left her a single mom of four kids between the ages of 3 and 13. She needed money, fast.

Her three years of art school at East Carolina University had left her with the mindset that painting portraits on commission was somehow lesser, not truly “art.” She shoved those feelings aside and set up a booth at the N.C. Flea Market, “where most artists wouldn’t be caught dead.” The first weekend, she came up empty. Her second weekend, she netted $90. The two following weekends brought in $250 apiece, and she knew she’d found a viable career.

In the two decades since, she has illustrated books for New York publishing houses and other projects, but her focus is portrait-painting with a special niche capturing people and their horses or dogs. She first holds a photo session with a client to get natural, relaxed photos in the setting of their choice. She then creates a pastel portrait, with special care to capturing the spirit of her subjects.

Filarsky started out with an architecture degree from Penn State University, then moved to North Carolina to start a sign business in Wake Forest, where he met Brown while investigating the local art scene. He specializes in watercolor portraits, in addition to hand-lettering gigs from across the country.
Having a business-owner’s mindset is crucial to succeeding in a notoriously difficult field, Brown said. There’s no waiting for inspiration to strike – the work has to be done according to client specifications on deadline.

The couple is able to live comfortably; their house and cars loans are mostly paid off, and they used to maintain a beach getaway spot. Brown’s kids are grown, but the couple has two ponies, five dogs and a goat.

“When it comes to ‘making a living,’ you determine what you want,” Brown said. “Aim for what you want, and you can do it by hitting the right market. Luck doesn’t enter into it.”
Gov. Bev Perdue to seek more school funding, sale tax hike in budget

By Lynn Bonner - lbonner@newsobserver.com

Gov. Bev Perdue will ask legislators to spend an additional $562 million on K-12 schools and increase the state sales tax in the $20.9 billion budget she plans to release Thursday.

Gov. Bev Perdue will ask legislators to spend an additional $562 million on K-12 schools and increase the state sales tax in the $20.9 billion budget she plans to release Thursday.

But Republican lawmakers on Wednesday made it clear they weren’t interested, setting up a rematch of last year’s budget battles between the Democratic governor and the GOP-led legislature.

This time, however, Perdue is a lame duck and education cuts are expected to be a key part of the Democrats’ battle to retain control over the governor’s office.

Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton, who won the Democrat primary on Tuesday, has sought to tie his opponent, former Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, to the legislative budget cuts.

Meanwhile, a McCrory spokesman on Wednesday called Perdue’s handling of the budget process “another example of why state government is broken” and said she was “attempting to pick another food fight between Republicans and Democrats.”

Perdue’s proposal calls for a three-quarter-cent sales tax increase that her advisers say is expected to raise $760 million over 11 months, or $850 million a year.

The plan includes spending about $8 billion on K-12 schools, up from $7.46 billion this year. The increase would go toward hiring or retaining 11,000 school jobs, reducing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, and continuing and expanding use of a software program that helps teachers diagnose reading problems in young students.

The $562 million is intended to replace the $258 million in federal “Edu-jobs” money that runs out early next school year, and to reverse some of the recent “discretionary cuts” to schools. Since the 2009-2010 school year, districts have had
to return nearly $1 billion to the state. This year, schools had to return about $428 million, and that is scheduled to go up $74 million next year.

“We have to reduce the deep and unnecessary cuts that the Republican-controlled legislature forced on us in all 100 counties last year,” Perdue said in a YouTube video describing parts of her budget. “The budget I submit will restore the cuts they made and prevent even deeper cuts that were scheduled for next year.”

Also included:

• $25 million more for N.C. Pre-K, which would add up to 4,579 slots
• An additional $53 million for community colleges
• $145 million more for public universities, including $35 million for financial aid
• A 1.8 percent raise for teachers

Perdue had her last budget and its extension of a sales tax increase rejected last year.

**Veto and override**

While she pushed to extend part of a sales tax increase that was set to expire, the legislature wrote its own budget without it. Perdue didn’t want the legislature’s plan and vetoed it. The legislature canceled her veto.

Her new plan is likely to meet the same fate. Perdue, who is not seeking re-election, said about three months ago she would put a sales tax increase in next year’s budget.

In the last few months, Perdue has toured the state promoting the idea, and school superintendents invited to a State Board of Education meeting and to a legislative committee meeting talked of their districts straining under repeated budget cuts.

When Perdue first presented the tax increase proposal, Republican legislators said that it wasn’t going anywhere. They said it again Wednesday.

Rep. Nelson Dollar, a Cary Republican and budget writer, called the proposed tax increase “an anti-jobs measure.”

“The economic recovery is far too fragile, unemployment is way too high in North Carolina for us to consider adding $1 billion in new tax burdens for working families in North Carolina,” he said. “Family budgets are strained.”

Senate leader Phil Berger, an Eden Republican, said replacing federal stimulus money with state money was “the wrong approach.” Instead, the state should determine “the appropriate level of funding” and figure out how to get there.

‘We’ll take a look’
The legislative session starts Wednesday, and legislative leaders say they don’t want to stay long. Berger said he’d like the session to be over by the end of June. Budget writers are already busy putting their spending plan together and plan to introduce it next week. Budget chairmen were at work Thursday afternoon.

Dollar said he expects the House to pass a budget “in a matter of days.” That doesn’t leave much time for the legislature to consider Perdue’s budget proposal.

“Whatever she sends us, we’ll take a look at,” Berger said.
tlong@newsobserver.com - Inductees to the 2012 North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame from left, Jerry McGee, M.L. Carr, Kristi Overton-Johnson, Wray Carlton, Lennie Rosenbluth, Wilt Browning, Henry Trevathan and Elliott Avent (in place of Sam Esposito who could not be present), pose for a photograph Wednesday, May 9, 2012, at the North Carolina Museum of History.

**Water skiing champ Kristi Overton Johnson joins N.C. Hall of Fame**

By Chip Alexander - calexander@newsobserver.com

RALEIGH - The North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame has any number of former football and basketball stars among its members. Stock-car drivers, swimmers, coaches, administrators, a billiards player.

Even sportswriters.
But never a water skier. Not until this year, when Kristi Overton Johnson was recognized.

David Thompson did marvelous things with a basketball. Jim “Catfish” Hunter was a pitching craftsman in pinstripes for the New York Yankees. It’s an impressive group in the hall.

But few, if any, was more dominant in their chosen sport than Overton, the Greenville native who jumped in the Pamlico River at age 4 and didn’t let go of the rope, or stop competing and winning in women’s slalom, until she was almost 40.

“I’ve talked a lot about how two little words changed my life – ‘Hit it,’ ” Overton Johnson said Wednesday. “That’s what we say for the boat to take off. I often think how different my life might have been if I hadn’t said those two words in 1974 and then continued to say them over and over and over again for the next 30 years.

“There were a lot of falls between 1974 and being a world champion. The water’s not very soft. There are a lot of life lessons. It has been an amazing journey.”

Overton Johnson, 42, said she had a hip deformity that prevented her from running or playing other sports. But it wasn’t a problem on the water, in the slalom.

Turning professional at 13, she would notch 80 victories and earn more No. 1 national rankings than any female skier in the history of the sport. She was a four-time U.S. Open champion, an eight-time U.S. Masters champion, Pan American Games champion. She set a world record in 1992 in the slalom that was not broken until 2010.

“The difference between water skiing and the traditional sports is you get one shot,” she said. “You’re out there, you’re by yourself, you don’t get a warmup. You’ve flown all the way to Australia or wherever and you get one shot.”

Overton Johnson, a graduate of Rose High, said she always had the strong support of her family. And it would be her father, Parker, who gave her just the lift she needed in the 1999 World Championships in Milan, Italy.

“It’s the one tournament for some reason I had not won,” she said. “I was the last one on the dock and had skied just well enough to tie for first place. As I sunk in the water, I was so defeated mentally.
“All of a sudden I heard a Southern accent on the shore line. I looked over and my father was knocking people over and screaming out, ‘You can do it, baby!’ It was life-changing for me.”

Overton Johnson, after 10 major surgeries to reconstruct her pelvis, retired from pro competition in 2003. She would briefly return in 2007, but with another goal in sight – to help gain attention for her non-profit ministry, Champion’s Heart.

The ministry, based in Keystone Heights, Fla., has a water-sports outreach program, In His Wakes, that helps at-risk children. Or, as Overton Johnson said, let them know they can “Do it, baby!”

“We teach kids that champions aren’t people who never fall, but people who get up and say ‘Hit it,’” said Overton Johnson, married and the mother of three. “Victory only comes when you get off the dock.”

The induction banquet is Thursday night at the Hilton North Raleigh. As part of the ceremony, a pair of memorable sports moments – the Carolina Hurricanes winning the 2006 Stanley Cup, and Jim Beatty running the first sub-four-minute mile indoors in 1962 – will be recognized.

Joining Overton Johnson as inductees are basketball star Lennie Rosenbluth and M.L. Carr, football star Wray Carlton, baseball coach Sam Esposito, football coach Henry Trevathan, NCAA football referee Jerry McGee and sportswriter Wilt Browning.

And a water skier.

“I’m really thankful,” Overton Johnson said. “And I’m thankful our sport has gotten the recognition.”

2012 Inductees into the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame

Wilt Browning

Browning has been honored as sportswriter of the year in North Carolina five times and is the former sports editor and sports columnist for the Greensboro News & Record and the Asheville Citizen. A member of the South Atlantic League Hall of Fame, he has authored seven books.
Wray Carlton

The former Duke running back shattered the legendary Ace Parker’s rushing and scoring records and set the ACC single-game scoring record of 26 points against Virginia – playing one half. As a pro, the two-time All-ACC performer was a two-time All-AFL selection with the Buffalo Bills.

M.L. Carr

The former Wallace-Rose Hill High and Guilford College star played a dozen years in the NBA and the ABA, and is best-known for his years with the Boston Celtics. He was a key element in the Celtics’ 1980-81 and 1983-84 NBA championship teams and later was the Celtics’ general manager.

Sam Esposito

Esposito played 10 years with the Chicago White Sox, participating in the 1959 World Series. Named N.C. State’s baseball coach in 1967, his teams won a program-record 513 games in 21 years and “Espo” coached 69 All-ACC players and seven All-Americans. His 1968 Wolfpack team won the ACC title and finished third in the College World Series.

Jerry McGee

A college football official for more than 40 years, McGee worked 405 games. He was the referee for 2009 BCS championship game between Oklahoma State and Florida and worked 20 bowl games. A former four-sport letterman at Rockingham High, he played baseball at East Carolina. Since 1992 he has been president of Wingate University.

Kristi Overton Johnson

The Greenville native was a competitive water skier for more than 30 years, setting several records in women’s slalom. She had 80 professional victories and held the No. 1 world ranking in the event. She won the U.S. Masters eight times and the U.S. Open four times. Away from competitive skiing for five years while she underwent 10 surgeries, she returned in 2008 to win the U.S. Masters.

Lennie Rosenbluth
The New York native, who now lives in Chapel Hill, led the 1957 North Carolina Tar Heels to a 32-0 record and NCAA championship, beating Wilt Chamberlain and Kansas in the title game. He still holds the school record for scoring average in a season (28.0), was named to the ACC’s 50th anniversary men’s team and is a member of the Helms College Basketball Hall of Fame.

Henry Trevathan

Trevathan coached Wilson Fike High to three consecutive 4A football championships in 1967-69. He also was head coach at Rocky Mount High and an assistant coach at N.C. State. He coached at every level of competition, including midget, high school junior high, junior varsity, varsity, college freshmen, college varsity and professional. He was named N.C. coach of the year three times at the high school 4A level.

Source: N.C. Sports Hall of Fame
When N.C. State student Jessica Ekstrom interned with the Make a Wish Foundation, she never dreamed it would lead her to become an entrepreneur.

Touched by the young cancer patients she met during her time with the nonprofit – which grants wishes to the terminally ill – Ekstrom was inspired to start a business to help young women and girls who’ve lost their hair because of chemotherapy treatments. Headbands for Hope is a line of headwear that benefits the St. Baldrick’s Foundation for childhood cancer research.

“For girls and women everywhere, their hair is a part of their feminine identity, says Ekstrom. “Wigs can be uncomfortable and unappealing, especially to younger girls. I realized that headbands are the perfect way for these girls to keep their feminine identity and have a constant reminder that they’re not alone.”
The headbands, which come in a rainbow of bright colors, aren’t just for cancer patients. Ekstrom works with a company in North Dakota to create the headbands and chooses styles she thinks will work for both those who’ve lost their hair and those who haven’t.

“I get to choose what styles I like and what I think girls and women want,” she says. “I get feedback from women and girls of all ages to make sure the headbands are appealing for everyone.”

Ekstrom, a junior at N.C. State University, has found it both a challenge and a help to start this company while she’s a student.

“Being at N.C. State has been the perfect launching pad for Headbands of Hope,” she says. “The students and faculty have been more than supportive every step of the way. It’s been absolutely amazing to be able to reach out into all the different departments of the university, such as business, textiles, and graphic design, to help me in areas I’m not familiar with.”

The company is just now getting off its feet, but Ekstrom hopes to continue to grow her business long after graduation.

“I want to inspire people to not just wear Headbands of Hope, but to start a fashion trend that makes a difference,” she says. “I would eventually like to make a line for boys as well, maybe wrist bands or baseball caps, but that will be later down the road!”

The headbands are available at www.headbandsofhope.org. One dollar from each purchase benefits the St. Baldrick’s Foundation.
UNC Charlotte: 350,000 social security numbers exposed during Internet breach

By Chris Dyches - email

CHARLOTTE - University officials at UNC Charlotte say they now know exactly what was exposed during an Internet breach earlier this year.

School officials alerted students and staff in mid-February that online security breach hit the Charlotte-based college campus. They discovered the breach in January but told WBTV they waited to inform students until they knew more.

An investigation into the incident shows that financial account numbers and approximately 350,000 social security numbers were included among the exposed data.

The exposure has been remediated, officials say, and the University is acting to alert people who may have been affected by this exposure. University staff discovered the exposure.

"I think that's really scary. It makes me feel unsafe to think my information could be out there and that somebody could take my credit and do what they want to with my social security," said student Jennifer Affinito.

Due to a system misconfiguration and incorrect access settings, a large amount of electronic data hosted by the University was accessible from the Internet.

There were two exposure issues, one affecting general university systems over a period of approximately three months, and another affecting the University's College of Engineering systems over a period exceeding a decade.

The University has no reason to believe that any information from either of these incidents was inappropriately accessed or that information was used for identity theft or other crime.

The exposed data involved people connected to the University, and included names, addresses, social security numbers, and/or financial account information provided in association with transactions with the University.
"We're still investigating as to how it came to be," said Stephen Ward, a spokesman with UNCC.

The University involved state and federal regulatory and law enforcement agencies to assist in determining how to proceed, and acted upon their advice. The University continues to monitor the situation carefully and has increased its internal review procedures to watch for any unusual activity.

The university created a website where it will post information and have setup a phone hotline at 855-205-6937 (toll-free).

The University consistently utilizes industry standard information protections, uses leading data management vendors, and has dramatically increased its information protection capacity since the discovery of the exposures. Nonetheless, the University continues to review all aspects of its information security.

Any person currently connected with the University, or who has been associated with the College of Engineering, who notices either suspicious activity with regards to accounts associated with the University or improper use of his or her social security number, should report such activity or use immediately to the University at 1-855-205-6937, and to any financial institution involved.

Additionally, the affected person should contact the Federal Trade Commission at www.ftc.gov/idtheft at 1-877-ID-THEFT (438-4338) or at 600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20580. Affected persons may also call the local sheriff's office and file a police report of identity theft, keeping a copy of the police report.

In addition, you may contact the Consumer Protection Division of the North Carolina Attorney General's Office at 9001 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699, by phone at 1-919-716-6000 or toll free in North Carolina at 1-877-566-7226.

If you reside outside of North Carolina, the contact information for the Attorney General of your state can be found on the website for the National Association of Attorneys General available at http://www.naag.org/current-attorneys-general.php

If affected persons wish to protect themselves from the possibility of identity theft, they may also place a free fraud alert on their credit files. A fraud alert notifies creditors to contact individuals before opening new accounts in their name.

Contact any one of the three major credit reporting agencies at the numbers/addresses below to place a fraud alert with all three agencies, and receive
letters from all of these agencies, with instructions on how to receive a free copy of a credit report from each agency.

Experian - 1-888-397-3742

Equifax - 1-800-766-0008

TransUnion - 1-800-680-7289
Changes coming to UNCW creative writing department

By Pressley Baird

The creative writing department at the University of North Carolina Wilmington is undergoing changes due to both the program's popularity and tight resources, according to the school.

The department won't accept any new undergraduates into the creative writing minor and is changing the requirements for the creative writing major to make it more selective, said David Cordle, dean of UNCW's college of arts and sciences, in a release.

Cordle attributed the changes to the popularity of the program, saying that the university hasn't been able to allocate more resources to hire faculty to keep up with the influx of students.

"The faculty made the decision to discontinue acceptance of new students into the minor in order to ensure that they can continue to offer the classes required for creative writing majors to complete the program and graduate on time," Cordle stated in the release.
Thorpe honored with room naming

CHAPEL HILL - Friends, family members, alumni, and colleagues came together to celebrate the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Division of Radiologic Science’s founding faculty members, including Wilmington's own Robert L. Thorpe, by naming its School of Medicine Bondurant Hall classroom in their honor on March 4.

"I am very humbled at even the thought of receiving such an honor, let alone actually having a teaching classroom named and dedicated in my honor, and that of my two colleagues. …," said Dr. Thorpe in a press release. "Furthermore, I am indebted to my family, my teachers at my beloved Williston Senior High School, and to the Wilmington community at large for my success to date. …"

Dr. Robert L. Thorpe received national certifications in Radiologic Sciences, specifically in Diagnostic Medical Imaging and Magnetic Resonance Imaging. He also received his bachelor's degree in Business Administration from the University of North Carolina Charlotte, a master's degree in Health Sciences Education and Evaluation from State University of New York at Buffalo, and a doctorate in Adult and Community College Education from North Carolina State University. He has served as an Associate Professor in the Division of Radiologic Sciences and Associate Chair of the Department of Allied Health Sciences over his 34 years in the School of Medicine, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. He has served on numerous national bodies involved in educational policy and workforce issues in the allied health professions.
Dr. Thorpe is the recipient of the 1992 Distinguished Tanner Teaching Award, presented by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, in recognition of inspirational teaching to undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. The North Carolina Health Careers Program presented its 1997 Award of Leadership to Thorpe in recognition of dedication and leadership toward improving the access of minority students into the health professions.

Thorpe also is the co-founding donor, along with Brenda Mitchell, of the Thorpe/Mitchell Diversity Leadership Development Fund which seeks to increase the diversity of underrepresented minority students into the diagnostic and therapeutic disciplines at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's Department of Allied Health Sciences. The Thorpe/Mitchell Fund has provided 13 students with scholarships since 2007 and has helped to create a flexible, coordinated, and collaborative pathway for recruiting, retaining, and graduating underrepresented minority students from the Allied Health Sciences.
**Rocky Mount Telegram**

**Local student receives ECU Alumni Association scholarship**

From Contributed Reports  Wednesday, May 9, 2012

GREENVILLE – An East Carolina University student from Rocky Mount has been chosen to receive a $2,500 scholarship from the East Carolina Alumni Association.

Twenty-two scholarships were awarded recently to full-time students who excelled in the classroom and distinguished themselves as leaders.

Rocky Mount’s recipient is Jacqueline Tarek Traish.

Traish is a sophomore double major in music performance (flute) and science education (biology). She is recipient of a School of Music scholarship, Honors College scholarship, and Pirate Tutoring scholarship.

Traish has been recognized on the Chancellor’s List for academic achievement.

She is a member of Honors Ambassadors, Rising Leadership Circle, Omicron Delta Kappa, is 1st chair for the ECU Wind Ensemble, and plays with ECU’s Symphonic Orchestra, Woodwind Quintet, and Flute Choir.

Traish has been a Pirate Tutor and volunteers for ECU Open Houses, Pitt County Animal Shelter and Habitat for Humanity.

Her hobbies include watching movies, Zumba, reading and attending musicals.

Jacqueline’s mother Cheryle Ann is a 2000 and 2004 ECU graduate.

“At ECU many students excel in the classroom, many lead organizations, and many serve their communities,” said Paul J. Clifford, East Carolina Alumni Association president and CEO. “This group of scholars excels at all three! They learn, they lead, and they serve, and that is why they have been awarded this prestigious scholarship. We are proud to include Jacqueline in this group.”

The East Carolina Alumni Association provides programs, services, and communications to 138,000 alumni worldwide.

Its purpose is to inform, involve, and serve members of the ECU family throughout their lifelong relationship with the University.

For more information, visit the East Carolina Alumni Association’s website PirateAlumni.com or call 800-ECU-GRAD.
May 9, 2012

**Much Ado About Double or Nothing**

By MARK KANTROWITZ and LYNN O’SHAUGHNESSY

**THE interest rate on the popular Stafford federal student loan program is set to double in July, after the Senate could not reach agreement on Tuesday on a way to keep the rate at 3.4 percent. President Obama has blamed Republican obstruction for the looming rate increase; Mitt Romney says the lower rate should be extended but hasn’t specified how to pay for it.**

But the partisan posturing is a distraction from far more pressing issues that face students and parents who must borrow to cover their college costs. What’s lost is how Congress, in numerous ways, has been hurting the most vulnerable college students and dithering on the crisis of college affordability.

The Stafford debate is more rhetoric than substance. If the rate on the subsidized Stafford loan program does double, as scheduled, to 6.8 percent this summer, very little will happen.

In fact, students who borrow through this program will ultimately end up paying only about $6 a month extra for one year of loans. And the rate increase won’t affect previous loans, only new loans borrowed for the 2012-13 school year.

Let’s look more closely at what’s on the table. The proposals that Congress has been debating would extend the 3.4 percent interest rate for only one year. If a student borrowed the average subsidized Stafford loan ($3,357) at 6.8 percent for the next school year, the higher interest rate would boost the borrower’s debt burden by $761 over a 10-year repayment period. Even if the interest rate doubles, the monthly payment on the subsidized Stafford loan would increase by only about one-sixth.

What few observers seem to appreciate is that the low rate of 3.4 percent took effect only last July. As recently as 2007, the rate was 6.8 percent. The Democrats made reducing the interest rate on student loans into a winning campaign issue in 2006 and they fulfilled their campaign promise by ushering through the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, which gradually reduced the subsidized Stafford rate over a four-year period.
Congress often passes this sort of legislation with a 5- or 10-year window, so it’s reasonable to ask whether this political battle was anticipated by Congressional Democrats, who knew they would gain political Brownie points if the Republicans, in the months preceding a presidential election, balked at extending the low rate. (Each party has added conditions to the rate extension that are unacceptable to the other side. Republicans want to pay for a one-year extension on the lower Stafford rate by taking $6 billion out of the preventive health care fund established by the 2010 health care legislation; Democrats want to cover the tab by cutting oil subsidies and closing a corporate-tax loophole.)

It’s true that a very high percentage of students who graduate with debt hold a subsidized Stafford loan: 70 percent come from families who make less than $50,000; 24 percent from families with incomes between $50,000 and $100,000; and 6 percent from six-figure-income families. However, there are far more urgent priorities for families with college students.

Congress has starved the Pell grant program, an educational lifeline for low-income families. This year Congress made it even tougher for poor students to qualify for the full Pell grant ($5,550, hardly a princely sum). This past academic year, families that made $32,000 or less automatically qualified for the maximum Pell grant, but for the coming year a household can make no more than $23,000 to qualify.

The Pell grant program helps currently enrolled low-income students pay college bills, reduces debt and increases graduation rates. The interest rates on the subsidized Stafford loan, on the other hand, don’t kick in until after the student has already graduated.

Here’s another issue that Congress has punted on: why the interest rates on other federal college loans remain so high even though interest rates are at historic lows. The interest rate for the Direct PLUS Loan for Parents is 7.9 percent — not counting a 4 percent fee on the amount of the loan — making it a profit center for the government.

Congress has also taken a pass on addressing the student loan debt that hundreds of thousands of borrowers are struggling to repay. Neither private nor federal college loans can be discharged in bankruptcy, unlike nearly every other type of debt. A growing number of borrowers have been defaulting as the collective outstanding balance on college loans has reached $1 trillion.

Finally, the Stafford proposals that Congress is debating would merely maintain the status quo. We aren’t seeing proposals for bold new
investments in postsecondary education, nor ways to reduce the rising cost of college and the suffocating indebtedness of graduates.

These issues are a much bigger deal than a $6-a-month increase in loan payments. It’s a shame so few people are talking about them.

Mark Kantrowitz is the publisher of Fastweb.com and FinAid.org, Web sites about planning and paying for college. Lynn O’Shaughnessy is the author of “The College Solution.”
Republicans in Senate Block Bill on Student Loan Rates

By JONATHAN WEISMAN

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans on Tuesday blocked consideration of a Democratic bill to prevent the doubling of some student loan interest rates, leaving the legislation in limbo less than two months before rates on subsidized federal loans are set to shoot upward.

Along party lines, the Senate voted 52 to 45 on a key procedural motion, failing to reach the 60 votes needed to begin debating the measure. Senator Olympia J. Snowe, the moderate Republican from Maine who is retiring, voted present.

Senators said quiet negotiations had begun to resolve the impasse, but Democrats sought to raise the political pressure, vowing to take to the Senate floor to show the cost of inaction for students in their states.

“Mitt Romney says he supports what we’re trying to do. I’d suggest he pick up the phone and call Senator McConnell,” said Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Senate majority leader, referring to the Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

Republicans blamed Democrats for the impasse and suggested that they were manufacturing a political controversy instead of working out differences in private.

“We all agree we’re not going to let the rate go up,” Mr. McConnell said.

The vote was the Senate Republicans’ 21st successful filibuster of a Democratic bill this Congress, which started in January 2011. Republicans have blocked consideration of President Obama’s full jobs proposal, as well as legislation repealing tax breaks for oil companies, helping local governments pay teachers and first responders, and setting a minimum tax rate for households earning more than $1 million a year. Republicans say the measures were flawed and potentially harmful to the economic recovery.

But the student loan filibuster may be the highest-profile stalemate yet, because unlike those earlier bills, this one is not likely to be abandoned. Mr. Obama has elevated the issue by hammering Republicans on it for weeks. American students took out twice the value of student loans in 2011, about $112 billion, as they did a decade before, after adjusting for inflation. Over
all, Americans now owe about $1 trillion in student loans. In 2010, such debt surpassed credit card debt for the first time.

The bill in limbo addresses only part of that burden. Graduate students with Stafford loans pay a higher rate, as do students with unsubsidized Stafford loans. Most undergraduates take out both unsubsidized and subsidized loans. Republicans say they want to extend Democratic legislation passed in 2007 that temporarily reduced interest rates for low- and middle-income undergraduates who receive subsidized Stafford loans to 3.4 percent from 6.8 percent. But the Republicans would not accept the Senate Democrats’ proposal to pay for a one-year extension by changing a law that allows some wealthy taxpayers to avoid paying Social Security and Medicare taxes by classifying their pay as dividends, not cash income.

“They want to raise taxes on people who are creating jobs when we are still recovering from the greatest recession since the Great Depression,” said Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, who instead wanted to pay for the rate decrease by eliminating a fund for preventive health care in Mr. Obama’s health care law.

Before the vote, Senate Democrats arrayed college students to plead for a yes vote, including Clarise McCants, 21, a junior at Howard University in Washington who said she pulled herself out of a troubled neighborhood in North Philadelphia and relies on $13,500 in Stafford loans for her tuition.

“I know I’m not the only one with dreams,” she said. “I’m here to ask Congress, ‘Don’t double my rate.’ ”

Republicans have not always been so averse to closing the loophole that the Senate bill addresses. In 2004, when it emerged that John Edwards, then a vice-presidential hopeful, had classified himself as a “subchapter S corporation” to pay himself dividends rather than income, conservatives criticized him for avoiding payroll taxes.

But the Democratic line of attack has been complicated by the House’s actions. Shrugging off a veto threat, the House passed an extension of the subsidized rate last month, paid for with the preventive health care fund. Thirteen Democrats voted for the bill, making up for the 30 Republicans who voted no because they opposed federal subsidies for an interest rate that they believed should be set by market forces. Those Democratic defections put the House bill over the top and fortified Republican arguments that the Senate Democrats were now to blame for the stalemate.
Representative Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the House minority whip, said Tuesday that those Democratic votes were driven by politics, not substance. “They didn’t want that 30-second ad” attacking them for opposing a rate-subsidy extension, he said. “That was not a demonstration at all for the funding source.”

Republicans made clear they would go on offense, blaming Democrats if interest rates doubled July 1.

“Instead of compounding the problem with more bad policies that raise taxes on small businesses and raid Social Security and Medicare, we must work together to prevent a rate increase on students and make it easier for job creators to hire them when they graduate,” Senator Roy Blunt, Republican of Missouri, said after the vote.
Learning a New Language on Location

By TANYA MOHN

AMERICANS are not known for their facility with foreign languages, and learning gets more difficult as people age. But that has not stopped 60-, 70- and 80-somethings from heading to senior-friendly language immersion classes to tackle verb conjugations and the nuances of idioms — in places like the Tuscan hills and beach towns of Costa Rica.

“It can open up your world, and it’s a great way to meet people,” said Randy Balla, 63, of Evanston, Ill., who was a middle-school special education teacher for 31 years before retiring. He took up French recently. “The language is beautiful,” he said. He hopes to learn enough to discuss French literature and poetry and enhance his travel experiences.

“Learning now is more focused, more pleasant and less pressured than college,” said Mr. Balla. He took a three-week French immersion program last summer at the University of Quebec in Trois-Rivières and plans to attend this summer. “The tests are easier now, because there aren’t any,” he said jokingly.
The program is offered by Road Scholar, a nonprofit group formerly known as Elderhostel that created some language programs more than 10 years ago.

Daniel Lavoie, director of the École Internationale de Français at the University of Quebec, where the French Quebec Road Scholar program is held, said the average participant was 70, but some as old as 85 had attended. One woman has taken the program 15 times.

“We have to be patient, so going at a slower pace may be in order,” Mr. Lavoie said, but there were few other special challenges in teaching older adults. “They really like to learn,” he said. “If they are motivated, for sure they will learn it. That’s the key.”

However, fine-tuning pronunciation can be tricky. “The accent? Who cares?” he said with a laugh.

The number of older adults enrolled in immersion programs abroad is not tracked, experts said. Beth Lieberman, vice president of AmeriSpan Study Abroad, a company that offers language travel programs through partner schools in 15 languages in 40 countries, said older adult participation “has remained consistent since the early 1990s and is a good portion of our repeat business.”

In the last five to 10 years, there has been a trend to tailor programs to the needs and interests of travelers 50 and older, Ms. Lieberman said. AmeriSpan offers eight such programs, called Golden Age programs, in Italy, Spain and France. They are part of its Language and Fun series, which combine language immersion with excursions and cultural activities.

But Ms. Lieberman said that while some older adults preferred same-age groups, many others favored general classes that offered a greater variety of dates and locations and a mix of international students of all ages.

Il Sasso, an Italian language school in Montepulciano, Italy, tried special classes for older adults several years ago.

Not all of the older people were happy with it, said Heike K. Wilms, Il Sasso’s office manager. Most students preferred a mixed environment, she said. In addition, she said, because most students at Il Sasso were age 40 or older, nobody had the feeling of being too old. So the special classes were discontinued.

One of the most common concerns many older learners have is fear of failure and the worry that they will be the worst in the class. “Most students
have not been to school for 20, 30 or 40 years. If they are bombarded with grammar, they go home and are not happy. It has to be fun,” Ms. Wilms said.

“As an older learner, maybe one approaches it with high expectations to learn quickly,” said Irmgard Booth, 72, from Lewisburg, W.Va., a retired nurse. She studied at Il Sasso this month, her third time since April 2011. But “some days you absorb it very well, and other days it’s like, ‘What’s going on?’ Sometimes it’s discouraging,” she said.

But “proper grammar is not a priority for me,” said Ms. Booth. She is learning the language so she can speak with her son’s future mother-in-law, who is Italian. “She’s taking English and I’m taking Italian,” she said.

The teachers are patient and reassuring, Ms. Wilms said. And the school weaves Italian culture through its programs, with a variety of activities like cooking, wine tasting and hiking through the Tuscan countryside, she said.

Immersion programs tend to progress at a rapid pace and can be tiring, so the Intercultura Language School and Cultural Center, a Spanish language school in Costa Rica, does several things to help some older learners at its campuses in the colonial city of Heredia and the beachfront community of Sámara. They are offered an extra hour of private tutoring each day, as well as conversation classes outside the regular class, two extra hours a week.

“The percentage of people who take it increases proportionately with age,” said Laura Ellington, the school’s founding director. Extra practice “gives them more confidence” and helps them overcome the fear of making mistakes, she said.

And then, of course, there are the superstars, like Jane Gantz, a former senior associate director of admissions at Indiana University in Bloomington, who retired four and a half years ago. She has studied at Intercultura a number of times, staying four to six weeks each time.

“It was hard. It’s still hard,” Ms. Gantz said in a phone conversation from Valencia, Spain, where she is taking immersion Spanish and living with a local family. “I really work hard at it.”

When not traveling, she regularly listens to Latin American music, takes language classes and attends conversation classes near her home.

She is now nearly fluent, according to Lucie Angers, group coordinator at Intercultura’s Sámara campus. “Her Spanish is beautiful,” she said.

Ms. Gantz’s interest began 20 years ago when a young woman from Spain lived with her family as an exchange student. “I was very frustrated because
I wasn’t able to communicate with her,” she said, but she was not able to find the time to study Spanish while working.

She said she planned to return to Costa Rica to study every February, when the weather was ideal. “I’ll do this for as long as I am able to do it,” she said. “I have discovered my passion. It really changed my life. It is the best thing I’ve done.”

Language immersion programs are particularly good for people who are traveling alone, visiting a country for the first time and planning extended stays but are not interested in traditional tour groups.

“They feel like they have a support base and are not totally on their own, like backpackers,” Ms. Ellington said. She strongly recommends staying with a local family and sharing meals, an excellent way to learn about a culture and gain an instant connection to the community. “And for language acquisition, it is unbeatable,” she said.

George Hughes, 83, a retired university professor who lives on a small ranch near Sweet Home, Ore., took classes at Intercultura last year and lived with a host family. He said he had been comforted by the built-in social network of language schools. “At my age, I don’t want to go to a hotel,” he said.

Mr. Hughes had trouble adjusting since his wife died six and a half years ago, so he took up Spanish.

“To get back into the swing of things, I started going south of the border,” he said. He plans to head to Oaxaca, Mexico, this week for his 19th Spanish language program abroad. He will be joined by his grandson, a 20-year-old college student.

“I always enroll in a school for three weeks at a time,” Mr. Hughes said. “I love it. I have a good time.”

Does all this language learning help keep the mind sharp?

Scientific evidence shows that being bilingual is a particularly good exercise for the brain and an excellent way to build cognitive reserves, said Ellen Bialystok, a psychology professor at York University in Toronto who has studied the benefits to the brain of bilingualism. She said it would not prevent diseases like Alzheimer’s and dementia; it simply helped coping with them by delaying symptoms. “Everything you do that is stimulating and hard is good for your brain,” she said.
University of Michigan creates model for instant research funding

By Daniel de Vise

A team of University of Michigan professors have created a new model for funding academic research that potentially eliminates months of delay from when an idea is born till the money arrives to put it in play.

They hope the rapid-funding approach will help their peers at Michigan compete in an increasingly fast-paced research community. (U-Mich, with $1.24 billion in annual research funding, is the second-most-productive research university in the nation, behind Johns Hopkins.) Ideas that used to languish for months or years in poorly circulated academic journals now see instantaneous release online and can be shared by all. Michigan administrators believe the concept, an apparent first among the nation’s research universities, represents the future of scholarship on university campuses.

“If I publish a paper in science, there are thousands of people who will read it even before it comes out,” said Mark Burns, professor and chair of chemical engineering at Michigan. In the digital age, “it’s really the scholars who are able to respond very quickly who will succeed.”

Burns created the new funding model, called MCubed, with professors Alec Gallimore and Thomas Zurbuchen, both associate deans in the College of Engineering.

In the traditional model, a researcher has an idea and then launches a torturous quest for funding to realize it. Along the way, the professor must write various grant proposals, submit them and wait for approval and funding.

That leisurely tempo “was OK in the past,” Burns said, “because the pace of research and the pace of publishing were kind of disjointed. The speed of communication now is essentially instantaneous.”

The new concept puts start-up funding in the researcher’s hands immediately. To access the cash, all the scholar must do is enlist at least two colleagues who agree that the idea has promise and are willing to commit time to it.
The general concept is that any idea good enough that three or more researchers will line up behind it is worth further exploration. Once three researchers decide to “cube” their talents on the project, each will receive $20,000 from a $15 million pool of Michigan funding. It’s enough money to hire one or two grad-student helpers and fully develop the idea.

This initial exploratory phase is key to determining whether an idea has merit. If so, then the team can seek larger, more ambitious funding sources to bring the project to scale. If not, it can be abandoned, with minimal waste in time or money.

“Cubes” needn’t be limited to three: Twenty or 30 faculty can pool their talents, tap much more start-up money and open a full-scale research center in a matter of days or weeks. Research at that pace simply is not possible under the traditional model, the scholars say.

MCubed is set up to encourage big, bold, risky ideas. Researchers might not ordinarily pursue a risky idea, because of the time involved in securing even the meager funds to explore whether it has promise.

“In the traditional system, faculty are often forced to do research based on what will get funded, as opposed to what’s the best idea or what is most important for society,” Burns said, in a prepared statement. “Today those decisions are being made by external parties, and not by the best scientists in the world. MCubed will change that.”

In the new Michigan model, faculty essentially vote with their feet. If colleagues coalesce around an idea, that sends a signal to the university that it is probably a good one; no professor may pursue more than one idea at a time, so choices must be made. One member of each research “cube” must be from a different academic department, a provision that ensures projects will reach across disciplines.

As many as 250 projects will be funded in the pilot program, which starts in the fall.

By Daniel de Vise | 09:55 AM ET, 05/09/2012
The Number of Ph.D.s on Public Aid Triples in U.S.

By SUSANNA KIM

May 9, 2012 —

Most Recent Data Shows 33,655 Ph.D.s received Food Aid in 2010

The life of an academic who pays hundreds of thousands of dollars in tuition and lives off stipends and scholarships is becoming more financially treacherous. A skyrocketing number of Americans with Ph.D.s say they are facing a reality in which they are turning to food stamps to survive.

One in six Americans received food stamps or other public assistance last year, but the number of people with a Ph.D. or Masters degree who receive that aid has tripled in the past two years, according to government data.

In a story published by The Chronicle of Higher Education this week Ph.D. holders and students who are teaching on the non-tenure track in community colleges and universities bemoaned their prospects.

Elliott Stegall, 51, is pursuing a Ph.D. in film studies at Florida State University while he teaches two English courses at Northwest Florida State College in Niceville, Fla.

To help support their two young children, he and his wife rely, in part, on food stamps, Medicaid and aid from the USDA program, Women, and Infants and Children (WIC).

"I tend to look at my experience as a humanist, as someone who is fascinated by human culture," he told the Chronicle. "Maybe it was a way of hiding from the reality in which I found myself. I never thought I'd be among the poor."

He and his wife also have worked part-time jobs as house painters and cleaners and food caterers.

"As a man, I felt like I was a failure. I had devoted myself to the world of cerebral activity. I had learned a practical skill that was elitist," he said. "Perhaps I should have been learning a skill that the economy supports."
Various factors, mostly related to the down economy and state and local educational budget cuts, have helped drive educational institutions to rely more on part-time or adjunct professors. They are paid much less than regular professors and get few or no benefits.

Overall, 44 million people were on food stamps on a monthly basis in 2011, compared with 17 million in 2000, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The number of people with Ph.D.s who received some kind of public assistance more than tripled to 33,655 in 2010 from 9,776 in 2007, according to Austin Nichols, a senior researcher from the Urban Institute, who used data from the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor.

"While on average higher learning still results in higher salaries, the promise of that financial payoff isn't materializing for some," Sara Hebel, senior editor with The Chronicle of Higher Education, said. "And for growing numbers of people with advanced degrees, they have not been insulated from financial hardship for a number of reasons."

Of the 22 million Americans with master's degrees or higher in 2010, about 360,000 were receiving some kind of public assistance, according to the latest Current Population Survey released by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 2011.

The number of people with master's degrees who received some kind of aid grew to 293,029 from 101,682 over the same three-year period.

The average salary for U.S. professors is $82,556, according to an annual report from the American Association of University Professors, released in April. "People off the tenure track now make up 70 percent of faculties. People in those positions often have working conditions that can be tough, including not knowing from semester to semester how many courses they might teach," Hebel said.

That leads to an inconsistent income for adjunct professors, which is often much lower than a tenured faculty member.

"On average, higher educational attainment does translate into higher salaries. That's the promise of education," Hebel said. "It's just that for a growing numbers of people, advanced degrees haven't insulated them from financial hardship."