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UNC system may face 8 percent tuition hike

By Josh Humphries  
The Daily Reflector  

Wednesday, May 27, 2009  

A state policy may increase tuition at East Carolina University by 8 percent.  

State lawmakers are considering an 8 percent tuition hike for all 16 campuses in the University of North Carolina system.  

The hike would be 8 percent or $200, whichever is lower for students at East Carolina University, N.C. State, UNC-Chapel Hill and the other schools in the system.  

The ECU Board of Trustees approved a $71 tuition increase for next year that would be overridden by the state proposal.  

In-state tuition at ECU for the 2008-09 year was $2,445; if the proposal is approved, tuition at ECU would increase to $2,640, an increase of $195.  

ECU also approved a fee increase of $25, bringing the total to $1,799 for in-state undergraduate students for the 2009-10 year.  

The price hike would surpass a 6.5 percent cap instituted by UNC system President Erskine Bowles. Since 2006, universities have not been able to increase tuition by more than 6.5 percent in one year.  

The news comes in a time when ECU and the other universities are preparing for major budget cuts that likely will result in job losses across the state.  

ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard advised deans and vice chancellors to prepare for a spending reduction of 15 percent for the next fiscal year, a base budget cut about $43 million.  

Due to a $4.6 billion gap in state revenues and expenditures for the next fiscal year, cuts to education across the board are expected.  

The House is working with about $1 billion less than the Senate when it prepared its budget last month.  

ECU has been preparing for budget cuts of about 7 percent for the coming year, but that number is likely to increase.  

“Today, a 7 percent base budget reduction would be welcome,” Ballard wrote in a message on the ECU Web site.  

“If we are given a 10 percent reduction for the new fiscal year, that would be a loss of $28.5 million, and some people are predicting it could be twice that much.”  

The university is planning to cut administrative expenses by $9 million during a three-year period.  

Nine areas of campus, including parking and transportation, information technology, and research administration, have been targeted to reduce expenditures by 20-30 percent.  

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Editorial: ECU, PCC pain - Minimize higher education cuts

Thursday, May 28, 2009

East Carolina University Chancellor Steve Ballard warns that the school might face a 15 percent decrease in funding due to the state's dire budget situation. At the same time, Pitt Community College is preparing for a revenue drop of more than 10 percent.

North Carolina should recognize that investing in education, from kindergarten through university, represents the most sound use of public resources, particularly in times of economic strife. Cuts so large to Pitt County's institutions of higher learning would be devastating and must be strongly resisted by the local legislative delegation.

Even as Gov. Beverly Perdue and the General Assembly struggle to close a budget hole in the 2008-09 fiscal year estimated at $3.3 billion, concern has started to focus on the budget year that begins July 1. Early projections show a gap between revenue and spending that could be $4.7 billion, and could grow larger depending on how the economy progresses. That would represent an unparalleled crisis for North Carolina, forcing decisions that are yet unfathomable.

At East Carolina, the chancellor hopes to position the school for funding cuts that appear inevitable. All state entities will be expected to trim fat and do without in the interest of fairness and mutual hardship in difficult times. But Ballard predicts the university may see a 15 percent reduction in funding, cuts so deep that they promise to have a profoundly adverse effect on the delivery of higher education to students and the valuable research being done at the campus.

Pitt Community College expects to see similar turbulence, with revenue cuts claiming about 10 percent of the budget for this fiscal year. Plans that once seemed settled are in doubt as the school confronts the likelihood of depleted resources.

Since North Carolina remains an economy in transition, these cuts threaten to inflict more harm at a delicate time. The work conducted at state universities, the education delivered and the research being done, provide valuable returns in a strengthened and attractive work force. So too at the state's community colleges, where worker retraining, trade education and associate degree programs provide a stable foundation for workers in a changing economic landscape.

It would be impossible for East Carolina or PCC to escape funding cuts, nor should they amid this crisis. It may aid the efficiency and effectiveness of both institutions. But lawmakers should resist inflicting excessive harm on higher education when the consequences of doing so are clear.

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Hot ticket: Regional spots selling fast

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

The bell hanging from the entrance of East Carolina University's athletic ticket office has been ringing as steadily as the phones today as college baseball fans try to ensure themselves a place at this weekend's NCAA baseball regional.

Ticket seekers have visited and called the office steadily today, said Scott Wetherbee, ECU assistant director of athletics for marketing and ticket operations. As of noon, fewer than 1,000 all-session, general admission tickets remained from the 4,500 the university was permitted to sell for spots at Clark-LeClair Stadium.

ECU was chosen earlier this week as one of 16 hosts for a regional, the four-team tournaments which start the college baseball playoffs. The Greenville Regional begins Friday at 3 p.m. with a matchup between George Mason and South Carolina. The Pirates and Binghamton play at 7. Regional competition concludes Sunday with the winner advancing to a Super Regional.

The $60 all-session tickets went on sale to the general public this morning, and they will be sold through Thursday at 5 p.m. Single session tickets, if available, will only be sold prior to each game at the Clark-LeClair Stadium Ticket Office.

Wetherbee said he expects tickets to sell out before tomorrow's deadline, but he did not rule out the university selling additional tickets at the gate Saturday.

"I think that 4,500 is a good number for a stadium of this size, but this is our first time hosting this event here, so we will feel it out and see what it can handle," Wetherbee said. "After Friday's games, we will see how packed in everyone was and how concessions did and things like that, and if we feel like we can sell more, we might."

Those purchasing tickets now will be in the standing-room only area behind the outfield fence, commonly referred to as "The Jungle," after Pirate Club and ECU baseball season ticket holders scooped up all of the reserved section tickets prior to the general public sale, Wetherbee said.

The reserved area seats 3,000 people and the general admission outfield area holds about 1,500, he said.

Each of the participating schools is provided 200 tickets for their games. They have already been deducted from ticket sales.

Wetherbee said more than half of the calls the ticket office has been fielding today have been from South Carolina fans.

**Stadium rules may differ for regional**

East Carolina University officials would like fans planning to attend this weekend's NCAA baseball regional to be aware of several guidelines and policies that might differ from regular season games at Clark-LeClair Stadium. Following are some of the policies university officials consider most significant:

- There will be no "pass outs." Once a ticket-holder enters the stadium for a session, that individual will not be allowed to re-enter with the same game ticket.
- The stadium will be cleared after each game. Those attending will need the appropriate session ticket for each game they plan to attend.
- Reserved seat ticket-holders can go back and forth to "The Jungle," but they can't go to the parking
lot for that area once they have entered the stadium.

- General admission (Jungle) ticket-holders can go back and forth to the concession stands and rest rooms in the stadium, but they can’t go into the reserved seating area during ECU games. Jungle ticket-holders may sit in unoccupied seats in the 200 level only during non-ECU games.
- All lots around Clark-LeClair Stadium will require a parking pass.
- General public parking lots will be available for $10 a day. Those lots include the Belk building parking, VIP lot and Minges Coliseum parking areas.
- Artificial noisemakers, air horns, megaphones and electronic amplifiers are not allowed in the stadium.
- Signs, flags and banners on poles are not permitted inside the stadium.
- Uniformed security will be stationed throughout the stadium to ensure the safety of fans, athletes and coaches. Potential violations of the NCAA Code of Conduct include throwing objects in the grandstands or on playing field, using language deemed abusive by security agents, university officials or game management personnel and entering the field of play or practice areas. Violators will be removed from the stadium.

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BU's Sinicki close friend, former teammate of ECU's LeClair

By Nathan Summers  
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

Tim Sinicki admits there was a small measure of relief when he heard of the death of former East Carolina baseball coach Keith LeClair back in 2006, but it was based solely on Sinicki's location.

The head baseball coach at Binghamton University, Sinicki was a former college teammate of LeClair's, and the two had remained friends even through LeClair's diagnosis with ALS. As it happened, Sinicki was on vacation with his family in Myrtle Beach, S.C., when he learned of LeClair's passing, and his satisfaction came from knowing he was close enough to say a proper goodbye to a true friend.

He carted up to Greenville to attend LeClair's wake and pay his respects to the grieving family.

Today, Sinicki and his Binghamton Bearcats will arrive at East Carolina's Clark-LeClair Stadium to begin practice for their first-ever NCAA regional. Their first opponent is host ECU, the program LeClair guided from 1997 to 2002, before his disease forced him out of the dugout for good.

For the longtime Binghamton coach, it will mean saying hello and goodbye all over again.

"I feel to this day there is a part of me at East Carolina and in Greenville," said Sinicki, in his 17th year with the Bearcats. "It's kind of ironic that our first regional appearance is going to be where Keith spent his last days."

The two men became friends at Western Carolina in the mid 1980s. Sinicki, a pitcher, was finishing his college playing career in Cullowhee after transferring from New York's Broome Community College.

LeClair was a former walk-on turned star with the Catamounts, batting .375 for his career. Together, the duo won two of what proved to be four straight Southern Conference titles for Western, but their friendship off the field was every bit as important as the wins on it.

"Keith and I had a very special relationship," Sinicki said. "Not only were we teammates, but we were both born and raised in the northeast and we had a lot in common. We always stayed in touch."

Sinicki said he remained in contact with LeClair throughout his illness, mostly by phone and e-mail.

It didn't make it any easier to hear the news that his friend had died, and Sinicki admits today won't be easy either, when his 29-20 Bearcats enter the stadium for practice in preparation for Friday's 7 p.m. game against the 42-17 Pirates.

"I'll have a hard time focusing on the game probably until pitch one," Sinicki said. "It'll be difficult going into the stadium and seeing his name throughout that stadium. There will be some reminders, I'm sure, that will take me back to our days together. But it's an honor and a privilege to bring my team down there to compete in a facility that's named after one of the people I hold in the highest regard."

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Budget worries school officials

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

High school students across the state will lose their chance to earn free college credit if the state’s budget for next year looks anything like the one proposed last week by a House subcommittee.

In its first budget draft, the N.C. House Appropriations Subcommittee recommended the elimination of Learn and Earn Online, an initiative which offers college-level courses to all high school students at no cost.

Students can currently earn college and high school credit by completing the courses online during regular school hours.

The proposal is among four primary concerns Pitt County school officials say they have about the early House budget proposals.

Others include the potential reduction of the school year by five days next year and 10 the following year, increasing class sizes by two students and the expansion of some programs despite the tough economic times.

The school system received some encouraging news Tuesday about one of its concerns when House officials dropped their proposal to cut school days.

However, the potential remains for teacher furloughs of up to 10 days and the closing of school at each district’s discretion.

School leaders say they want the public to be aware of how deep the budget cuts would go so they can voice their opinion during the next couple of weeks.

"Between now and when there is a final budget, every taxpayer and voter has a chance to speak with their elected officials," Pitt County Schools Superintendent Beverly Reep said. "We're not trying to tell them what to say because we don't know how the community feels about this. But we want the community to know that these are things under consideration."

In addition to eliminating Learn and Earn Online, the subcommittee also proposed charging students concurrently enrolled in college classes on campus. Currently, high school students are allowed to take some courses on site at no cost.

Eliminating the Learn and Earn program would save the state about $17.6 million, according to the subcommittee's proposal.

But Reep says the move would be a crucial blow to school systems throughout eastern North Carolina which previously could not afford to offer college-level courses.

"A lot of people probably don't realize this, but from the 2006-07 school year to next school year, we will have reduced high school teaching positions by 25," Reep said. "But most every student is going to be able to take what they want to take even with the reduction because of this (Learn and Earn) program. We have been able to improve equitable course offerings at the same time that we have decreased positions."

Nearly 350 Pitt County students were concurrently enrolled during the fall, school spokeswoman Heather Mayo said. That is up from nine students in 2005.

"This is truly an example of how it is much more than a budget issue," said Michal Cowin, Pitt County Schools associate superintendent of finance.
“We are talking about a significant reduction in class offerings and opportunities.”

Concurrent enrollment numbers at Pitt Community College have also soared, tripling the number of students from the spring to the current summer session.

“I think Learn and Earn has helped students because it really leveled the playing field,” said Pamela Hilbert, vice president for academic affairs.

“Regardless of socio-economic status or location, high school students now have the opportunity to take college-level courses because of the program.”

Class-size increases have been a constant concern among school officials, but they also noted earlier this week their opposition to the $22 million proposed for the expansion of some areas such as early college high school, dropout prevention, leadership academy and comprehensive school reform.

“If you are discussing all of these cuts, then why would you have a nickel of money to expand or increase the budget,” Reep said. “If the situation is that bad, then ought not everything be stopped and put on hold.”

The House’s budget draft includes more than $55 million in spending expansions for the public schools, community colleges and university system.

Teacher organizations and parent groups are already starting to rally against the House’s budget draft.

The N.C. Association of Educators has asked its local chapters to call emergency meetings with legislators, develop editorials and take any other measures possible to generate public support.

Pam Garris, president of the Pitt County Association of Educators, said the local NCAE affiliate has a meeting planned with N.C. Sen. Don Davis. They hope to schedule similar meetings with other representatives during the coming weeks.

The early version of the House budget would eliminate: 6,005 classroom teaching positions; 4,663 teacher assistants; 354 instructional support positions; 187 assistant principals; a 5 percent cut in the central office and a 5 percent reduction of non-instructional support.

Other proposals include: a 10 percent reduction to More at Four; the elimination of literacy coaches; and the redirection of corporate capital funds previously earmarked for school systems.

“Public education is under attack and our members need NCAE now more than ever,” said NCAE Executive Director Scott Anderson. “We will come to work every day battle-ready.

“Everyone has something to contribute and when this budget process is through, we will have saved jobs, protected families and preserved a learning atmosphere for North Carolina students.”

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Stimulus scramble is on

Universities get inventive to reel in federal grants

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - Until just a few years ago, the fine-tuning of a research grant proposal at UNC-Chapel Hill was a laborious, low-tech operation involving reams of documents and plenty of cheap labor.

"We'd hire student workers to do nothing but march paper across campus for signatures," recalled Andy Johns, UNC-CH's associate vice chancellor for research. "If you can order a book from Amazon in three clicks, you should be able to do this online."

Subsequently, the university's research arm developed software that dramatically reduces the time spent shuffling these requests for federal money to all the folks whose reviews are required before applications go to federal agencies.

That's the sort of edge most research universities are trying to employ these days, as scientists at UNC-CH, Duke and N.C. State prepare hundreds of requests they hope will snare some of the coming federal stimulus money aimed at kick-starting academic research.

The National Institutes of Health, which UNC-CH and Duke rely on for funding, will dole out $7.8 billion in research grants through the stimulus plan. In recent years, UNC-CH has used its software to help put together about 4,200 grant proposals annually. But the prospect of stimulus funding raises the stakes: The university expects to submit about 4,700 by the end of this fiscal year.

NCSU doesn't compete for much NIH money because it doesn't have a medical school, but the university competes vigorously for funding from other federal agencies, primarily the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Still, the university submitted 60 proposals last month hoping for a piece of a $200 million pot of stimulus money to fund NIH "challenge" grants. That is the first wave of stimulus funding for research, and it caught the attention of American academe.

NCSU's rapid response

"It's a little bit of a mad scramble," said Matt Ronning, NCSU's associate vice chancellor for research administration. "Every time there's a [grant proposal request], we go after it with full force. It's an opportunity. We think we'll get a good chunk of change out of it."

To that end, NCSU created a "Stimulus Rapid Response Team," a collection of faculty and other research experts who meet each week to discuss funding opportunities and determine where to focus their energy.

The stimulus legislation came down quickly, and universities have thrown grant requests together while trying to understand the new federal guidelines.

"We're treating it as a short-term opportunity," Ronning said. "You have to move quickly."
Data-streaming at Duke

At Duke, researchers now use a data-streaming system that sends properly-formatted proposals directly to federal agencies. The Duke system essentially speaks the same language as the NIH grants system, which means Duke researchers can submit information directly, as complete proposals or in pieces as they go. The better the proposal, the less likely it is to be kicked back for revisions or clarifications.

Judith Dillon, who heads Duke’s research support office, has a three-person staff that reviews grant proposals. Because scientists can submit much of the information themselves, Dillon’s staff is freed to review the financial details of each without having to wade through the science.

Generally, her office deals with 60 to 70 proposals attempting to meet an NIH deadline. By the late-April deadline for the first round of NIH stimulus challenge grants, Duke had submitted more than 300.

"Missed deadlines is just something we can't allow," Dillon said. "And this [data streaming system] is good insurance that it doesn't happen."

Universities have not yet heard whether their requests for the NIH challenge grants were accepted. But the odds aren't good.

The $200 million or so designated for those grants that sent scientists into such a frenzy is just a tiny piece of the $7.8 billion that will be doled out through the stimulus package. Just by the numbers, Triangle researchers shouldn't hold their breath.

Long odds for hard cash

Nationwide, universities submitted 20,000 requests for about 250 available grants. UNC-CH alone submitted 200 proposals, said Johns, the UNC-CH research official.

"If you look at the amount of time put into submitting and reviewing challenge grant proposals for the amount of money made available, the odds are pretty rough," he said.

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Device has pig hearts pulsing

Gross, sure, but it's for science

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - The sight of a dripping-fresh, human-sized heart, it turns out, is both repulsive and attractive. Especially when it's suspended in the open among an elaborate array of tubes, pumps and valves. And when it's pulsing as though alive.

"There are basically two reactions," Andrew Richards, an N.C. State University graduate student, said of the macabre wheeled contraption he calls the Heart Cart.

"'Ewww, gross' or 'Ewww, cool.'"

The pulsating hearts come from pigs. And the new machine, despite its startling appearance, has serious practical applications for researchers such as Richards who are developing new medical equipment and techniques for use on humans.

Pig hearts are so similar to humans' that the valves are often used to replace defective human hearts. The Dynamic Heart System -- its real name -- pushes saltwater through recently removed pig hearts to make the valves move in a natural way. It can be programmed to simulate a range of heart rates and blood pressures to mimic specific defects or healthy hearts. The idea is to use $5 pig hearts from a slaughterhouse to speed research, trim costs and reduce the number of live animals used in the tests.

It's a new intermediary step between concept and live animal testing that can save thousands of dollars, many animals and the months of red tape that it can take to get approvals for testing live pigs, said Gregory D. Buckner, an associate professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering who oversaw the project.

"It's very likely that in some cases we'll eliminate an entire cycle of animal testing and shorten the research and development," Buckner said.

Richards, a Ph.D. student in mechanical engineering, developed it under Buckner's
supervision. The idea, he said, grew out of frustration with not being able to test a device as quickly as the researchers wanted.

Typically, it costs researchers about $2,500 for each live animal tested, Buckner said. They have to buy pigs at a premium from companies that raise them especially for testing, then pay for their housing, food and any medical procedures done at the veterinary school, a major cost even at the special rates for university projects.

Some experimental pieces of equipment require two or three rounds of animal testing, and each round may use half a dozen to a dozen animals. The new machine could cut a cycle out of that process.

The new machine also may provide budding surgeons with vital practice before they actually operate on humans, he said. A surgeon at UNC-Chapel Hill who heard about the device contacted him to talk about using it for training in hospitals.

The device was used recently for the first time on an experimental band used to make heart valves stop leaking. The band will be the subject of a paper published in the next few weeks in The Journal of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery.

Hustling up hearts

The type of experiment dictates how fresh the hearts must be, Buckner said. In some cases, graduate students have to drive to a processing plant in Eastern North Carolina and hustle back with a heart in a cooler. In other cases, the heart doesn't have to be quite as fresh, and they get one from a pork outlet at the State Farmers Market.

Researchers can actually test a heart with the machine, damage it surgically to mimic a natural problem, then repair it and test again to see how well the repair worked.

The lab where the machine was developed works with surgeons at ECU, Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill, as well as at hospitals elsewhere. Its work has led to about half a dozen patents, Buckner said.

The new machine consists mainly of a computer, high-grade pump and elaborate plumbing. It doesn't have the gee-whiz factor of many of the things done in the lab, but the sight of a heart beating on its own stops people walking past the door and draws them inside, Buckner said.

Passersby may have something bigger to gawk at soon: A major medical device company recently called with a question about some experiments it needs to perform that would require a slightly different approach.

"We've never actually acquired a cow heart and hooked one up," Buckner said, "but there is no reason it wouldn't work."

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- Video: Watch a disembodied pig heart

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New hope for cancer of gullet

Radio waves halt pre-cancer cells

BY SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer

Heat generated by radio waves erases most pre-cancerous cells associated with chronic acid reflux, providing an alternative to surgery or the current wait-and-see approach.

The ablation technology works on the same principle as freezing warts off skin but uses high-frequency radio waves shot through a catheter to target abnormal cells in the esophagus, or gullet.

In a study published today in The New England Journal of Medicine, lead authors at UNC-Chapel Hill report that the technology completely wiped out pre-cancerous cells in 90.5 percent of patients with Barrett's esophagus who underwent the procedure. Only 1.2 percent of patients went on to develop cancer a year later.

Among patients who got a sham procedure, 9.3 percent developed cancer.

"It's a promising therapy and provides a new option for patients who faced treatments that weren't that attractive," said Dr. Nicholas Shaheen, lead author and director of UNC-CH's Center for Esophageal Diseases and Swallowing.

An accompanying editorial in the journal says the study, which involved 127 patients at 19 medical centers, "challenges the current paradigm for the management of Barrett's esophagus."

The condition is diagnosed when the normal lining of the swallowing tube becomes inflamed after prolonged assaults from leaked stomach acid, and the tube develops characteristics of stomach and intestinal linings.

Over time, these abnormal cells can bloom into cancer. People with Barrett's esophagus have a 30 percent to 60 percent increased risk of developing esophageal cancer. And that's an increasingly common diagnosis.

In the past 40 years, esophageal cancer has jumped 500 percent.

Acid-reducing drugs work to curb the source of inflammation, but once Barrett's esophagus develops, doctors have had few therapies that target the pre-cancerous cells. Instead, most patients are monitored with regular scopes. If cancer develops, patients often must have their esophagus removed in a drastic surgery that can cost $50,000.

"You tie the stump of the esophagus to the stomach, which is pulled up in chest," Shaheen said. "It can be a hard way for someone to live."

By contrast, blasting away the offending cells using ablation technology costs less than $5,000, although the procedure may need to be repeated. And while the idea is not new -- other technologies, including freezing, are being tried -- the radio-frequency technology is
furthest along in studies, Shaheen said.

Paul Bailey, 61, of Cary said he had the procedure in 2007 after his Barrett's esophagus progressed and his local doctor referred him to UNC Hospitals. Bailey said he had suffered from acid reflux for years and was worried about the abnormal cells growing unchallenged.

He said the procedure caused uncomfortable burning in his chest. The pain subsided after a couple of days. Most of the pre-cancerous cells were wiped out in the first blast, but he had two more procedures to eliminate 98 percent of the abnormal growth. He has had no recurrence.

"Such a relatively simple procedure to eliminate a potentially catastrophic problem ... was like a weight getting lifted off your shoulders," Bailey said.

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Students studying abroad face dangers with little oversight
By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

A Jamaican police report sums up what happened on the last night of Jenee Klotz's semester abroad her junior year of college: She was robbed, sexually assaulted and stabbed while walking back to her host family's home. She says she spent nine hours in a Kingston hospital, and the next morning, the program's academic director dropped her at the airport — still wearing pajama bottoms and with dried blood on her neck and chest.

Klotz, 23, knows that no program can guarantee 100% safety. But two years later, she and her family remain bitter about the way they say the incident was handled.

MORE: Problems could get worse as more go abroad
LEGAL ANGLE: Rulings may hold some lessons

"These people were supposed to care for my daughter," says Klotz's mother, Kathy Lunardini. "We were shocked and dumbfounded to find out that study-abroad programs are unregulated."

Officials at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, VT, which ran the program in which Klotz participated, say they followed proper protocols. But in the rapidly expanding world of study abroad, the case highlights a long-standing gap between families' perceptions and what colleges and providers see as their responsibility for ensuring student safety.

Compounding that gap is a lack of transparency. Though most college students who go abroad — nearly 250,000 in the 2006-07 academic year — return home without serious incident, nobody knows exactly how many students end up hurt because nobody is required to keep track on a national level. Nor are most programs required to disclose incidents to the public.

The concern is not new. In 1996, families of four students who died in a bus crash in India were taken aback to learn that international education programs lacked any kind of central oversight. Neither the Education nor State departments, for example, have authority over them.

"We were naive," John Amato, the father of one of the students who died, told Congress in 2000. "We fully expected (university officials connected to the program) to be as concerned as we were that the facts be brought to light so that whatever went wrong could be corrected before further tragedies occurred."

Others express similar frustration today:

•University of Minnesota student Rachel Jamison, now 25, cut short her studies early 2007 in Tanzania after she says she was threatened and assaulted; in several media interviews, she raised concerns about the way the university handled her case. The university said in a statement at the time that officials could not discuss Jamison's case because of privacy laws but said its staff takes prompt and appropriate action to address student concerns.

•Rachel O'Sullivan, 23, one of eight University of Washington students who fell ill with malaria and dengue fever and had to be medevaced out of Ghana in 2007, says it felt like "a slap in the face" when no one was disciplined after an investigator for the university concluded the program "was not appropriately handled" by the professor in charge. University spokesman Norm Arkans said the school has beefed up its faculty training and that the students received medical care, got a partial refund and could get credit for the program.

•The parents of Tyler Hill, who died at age 16 of complications related to type 1 diabetes on a high school exchange to
Japan in 2007, have sued the companies involved, saying a group leader denied their son's request for medical help. "We wanted to work with the organization to reform some obvious problems they had," says Tyler's father, Allen Hill, of Mound, Minn. A Minnesota judge is reviewing their first attempt at mediation.

**No federal standard**

Legal observers thought at the time that a resolution to the lawsuit involving the bus crash in India would help clarify the murky legal questions surrounding study abroad. The families sued and called for legislation that would create "a federal standard of liability, enforceable in federal court" that would hold colleges accountable when the unthinkable occurs. But three of the families settled for undisclosed amounts in 2004; the lawsuit by a fourth family continues. And Amato's recommendation to Congress went nowhere.

The problem? Such a law would effectively "kill overseas programs" because no school or provider would be able to guarantee student safety, says Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., who chaired the 2000 hearing at which Amato testified.

Higher-education officials don't question the importance of safety abroad but argue that it must be a shared responsibility.

"This is one of those situations that is an impossibly difficult tradeoff," says Terry Hartle, a senior vice president at the non-profit American Council on Education, which represents higher education in Washington. "We want students to study abroad ... and we want them to be safe. But if we wanted to send students to places where we were sure nothing bad could ever possibly happen to them, we probably wouldn't send them anywhere."

The India bus crash, along with a rash of other incidents in the late 1990s, did have an effect, though. Over the past decade, study-abroad providers have developed an array of voluntary guidelines aimed at preventing and responding to a crisis, be it injury, accident, crime, illness, natural disaster or civil unrest. Those early cases also paved the way for a handful of court decisions that have offered insights into how providers can protect students — and themselves.

Most of the best programs today, for example, require students to have health insurance and attend an orientation to prepare them for challenges. Many cancel or relocate programs if State Department travel advisories warn of danger. And students typically must sign disclaimers saying they're aware of the risks.

"If you compare where the field was 10 years ago with where it is now, it's come a long way," says Gary Rhodes, director of the Center for Global Education at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, which operates a safety clearinghouse for international educators. But "more needs to be done."

**More students, programs**

Growth alone has raised the stakes. The number of students going abroad jumped nearly 150%, to 241,791, between 1996-97 and 2006-07, the latest year for which data is available, says the Institute of International Education, a New York non-profit that tracks the data.

Proposals introduced in the House and Senate this year seek to boost the number of students going abroad to a million a year within a decade. And rising demand has led to growing supply. The institute's 2009 program directories together list 9,000 programs, up 80% from 1999. While the federal proposal would require programs that receive federal funding to "have established health and safety guidelines and procedures," the task of vetting falls primarily to families. The institute neither evaluates nor recommends programs it lists.

One of the things that baffles Lunardini, of Richland, Mich., is that the 45-year-old School for International Training (SIT) has a solid reputation for its programs that immerse students in local culture; she had no reason to doubt the non-profit's website, which says it "places the highest priority on the health, safety and security of all students." And the program was listed as being approved by Butler University in Indianapolis, where Klotz was enrolled.

Butler spokeswoman Courtney Tuell said in an e-mail that when selecting programs, "we look for those that have health and safety protocols as well as in-country offices whose staff members are trained to respond to various kinds of emergencies."

But soon after their arrival in Kingston, Klotz and other students had doubts. For starters, the SIT website had said its Jamaica program included "16 resource persons who deliver the program content." That reassured Lunardini. But Klotz says they had regular contact with only an academic director and a newly hired part-time assistant. SIT Abroad dean
Maureen Powers says people who deliver program content typically include academic experts who lead a workshop or field trip, say, or give a lecture on a particular topic.

Students said they read the pre-departure materials and were prepared for catcalls and whistles. But one student was dragged down the street by a man wielding a machete. A bus driver groped another student’s breasts. Klotz says those and other concerns were barely acknowledged by the director.

They later learned the Peace Corps had stopped assigning volunteers to Kingston a few months before they arrived.

In a 38-page letter to SIT, a lawyer representing Klotz and five other women says the organization “knowingly subjected (the students) to an unreasonable risk of serious harm.” They have asked for $1.75 million.

SIT stopped offering its then-13-year-old Jamaica program the following semester, and the academic director’s contract ended in December. But Maureen Powers, vice president and dean of SIT Abroad, says the Jamaica staff did all they could after Klotz was attacked. She says Klotz’s homestay mother stayed at the hospital for several hours but was shielded from Klotz’s view during medical exams, according to hospital policy. And she says the director parked her car after dropping Klotz at the airport curb, but that she and the other students were past security by the time she arrived inside.

What happened to Klotz, Powers says, was a tragic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. “It’s not something any of us can be immune to.”

SIT has offered to reimburse the students for half of what they paid; each paid about $15,000.

To Lunardini, that’s not good enough. “Whenever your child travels, you’re concerned,” she says. “I don’t want anyone else to go through what (Jenee) went through or my entire family has gone through.”

Disclosure sought

The international education field has, in recent years, faced some scrutiny. New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo in 2007 began investigating financial deals between colleges and third-party providers, such as SIT, to see “whether any corners are being cut in the quality” of programs, says Cuomo spokesman John Milgrim. But no action has been taken since.

Federal lawmakers from Minnesota, in response to queries from bereaved parents Sheryl and Allen Hill, are exploring legislation to protect U.S. students overseas. One idea: require providers to disclose their safety and security records.

A few colleges already do that, but a national effort could help determine, over time, whether prevention efforts have made a difference, says Robert Aalberts, a legal studies professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, who has written about study-abroad safety.

It also could shed light on just how pervasive problems are. By most available measures, serious incidents are relatively rare. But after Rachel Jamison’s story of sexual harassment in Tanzania was picked up by a local paper and an online trade publication, she says more than 200 students contacted her to say they had a similar experience.

No one wants to discourage students from going abroad. But Klotz, who has since moved to Tampa Bay, where she is part of a rape-support group, says disclosure requirements could save other students from going through what she did.

“I still believe study abroad is a great thing, if it’s done right,” Klotz says. But “I don’t think I’m a rare case.”

Contributing: Nicholas Persac

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