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Our Views

Funding cuts, tuition hike could harm ECU’s future

Like those at other state universities, administrators at East Carolina University fear the deep spending cuts they face in the budget proposals circulating in Raleigh. They recognize the harm such cuts would inflict, and the detriment of offsetting them with tuition increases, as is included in the Senate budget plan.

While schools in the University of North Carolina system remain an excellent value for students, who receive an excellent education at fairly reasonable expense, lawmakers cannot continue to pass the funding burden onto them. Higher education remains the state's best investment and the Legislature should look to avoid raising tuition if at all possible.

East Carolina’s Board of Trustees held a special meeting on Tuesday to discuss its options in regard to the state budget, which is being crafted against the gloomy backdrop of a dour economic landscape. A massive budget shortfall must be filled, and lawmakers propose to do so with deep cuts, with the UNC system sharing the hardship felt across the state.

An 8 percent spending cut could be coming in the House budget, which could affect East Carolina's core academic mission. Chancellor Steve Ballard fears there is little more the school can do, short of cutting faculty positions, to make ends meet. The university could hardly have picked a worse time to explore using private funds to purchase a new house for Ballard, since debate on that issue distracts from this other, more pressing matter.

Another unwelcome option exists, that of a tuition increase to offset the budget cuts. The Senate budget includes a provision that would allow schools to ask more of students for their education, passing the burden of funding from the state to those who attend classes. The increase would...
raise in-state tuition at East Carolina from $4,477 in 2009-10 to $4,947 in 2010-11. That seems like a small jump, but it means a lot to students in this region, the poorest in the state.

The state Constitution includes clear language about the public university system, saying, “The General Assembly shall provide that the benefits (of) public institutions of higher education, as far as practicable, be extended to the people of the State free of expense.”

Repeated tuition increases over the past decade do not meet the parameter set by the constitution, nor do deep spending cuts serve the state’s best interest. Lawmakers do face difficult choices this year, but they should not dig a deeper hole by causing long term harm to the UNC system.
Budget's fine-tuning begins after House approval

RALEIGH -- The House approved an $18.9 billion budget Thursday after more than six hours of debate in which Republicans slipped through small, but meaningful, changes.

Democrats, who control the chamber and write the budget, pitched their proposal as one that protects K-12 education and offers help for small businesses. Not one Republican voted for the budget, and none were expected to vote for it on its final vote, shortly after midnight.

House Speaker Joe Hackney said he was disappointed in Republicans, who he said didn't offer meaningful solutions to the state's $800 million revenue shortfall.

"They just won't do the hard work of governing," Hackney said.

Republicans said that Democrats didn't cut deep enough and didn't include real help for small businesses.

"Who in his or her right mind is going to hire somebody for a year because of the prospect of getting $250?" state Rep. Paul Stam, an Apex Republican and the chamber's minority leader, asked about the bill's tax credit for businesses. "Most of the provisions of this bill about jobs are a fig leaf. They're not real."

The tally was 62-55, with four Democrats voting against it. The budget is headed next for a conference with the Senate. The two chambers will work out a final compromise in which many of the hard-fought details can be changed. A key issue for negotiators is the House's proposal to spare K-12 education at the expense of the UNC system.

The House budget would move money from the state lottery to preserve K-12 teacher jobs and would include millions to cover a 16 percent increase in community-college enrollment driven by the recession. It includes deep cuts to the UNC system and banks on a half billion dollars in federal money that is anything but certain.

"There had to be a haircut somewhere in the budget," Rep. Ray Rapp, a Mars Hill Democrat, said in explaining the university cuts.

Republican triumphs

House members debated nearly three dozen amendments over six hours and 10 minutes Thursday. As usually happens in the Democrat-controlled chamber, Republicans threw up a lot of amendments that failed.

But two notable Republican-backed amendments were successful. Both had failed in Democrat-dominated committee meetings this week.

One amendment, by Rep. Bryan Holloway, a Republican and former teacher from King, would eliminate
end-of-course tests for students in U.S. history, physical science and civics.

EOC tests take beating

Holloway said the tests are meaningless and wildly unpopular with students, parents and teachers. The tests don't show whether a student actually learned anything in a course and are not required by the federal No Child Left Behind program, he said.

"This body is smart enough and intelligent enough to listen to the people you represent," Holloway told House members.

Rep. Bill Faison, an Orange County Democrat, said the tests mean that teachers stop teaching the course material as the year ends and start teaching the tests.

"This stuff is an absolute complete waste," Faison said.

The amendment would divert $2 million from the tests to pay for classroom supplies.

Another change by Onslow County Republican Rep. George Cleveland diverts $6 million to technical education at the expense of a tuition break for out-of-state university students on academic scholarships.

"I do not think our constituents should be supplying millions of dollars to support students from out of state and out of country," Cleveland said.

The House budget had already denied in-state rates to out-of-state students on athletic scholarship. Opponents of Cleveland's amendment said the out-of-state students who are qualified enough to earn full academic scholarships are just the kind of students the state wants to attract. Many of them stay in North Carolina.

Headed to the exits

The fact that the budget has cleared two chambers in early June may not be a record for the legislature, but it certainly shows an unusual eagerness to finish the session quickly.

Rep. Hugh Holliman, the House's Democratic majority leader, said lawmakers don't want to hang around much longer than a couple of weeks.

"Let's finish this up and go home," he said.

Staff writer Michael Biesecker contributed to this report.

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The future site of the ECU School of Dentistry, which changed its name to the School of Dental Medicine, near Pitt County Memorial Hospital. The school opened its official application process Thursday.
Rhett Butler/The Daily Reflector

**Dental school applicants chomping at the bit**
By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector
Thursday, June 3, 2010
After more than four years of planning, the East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine has opened wide — statewide — for its first applicants.
The American Dental Education Association opened the official application process Thursday to prospective members of the inaugural class of the state’s second dental school.
“I’m not sure how many of them are going to be logging onto the application service website at one minute after midnight,” said Margaret Wilson, associate dean for student affairs at ECU’s School of Dental Medicine. “But there are a lot of students who are just really excited.”
While some students across the state have been counting the days until they can get out of school, Spencer Dail has been counting the days until he can get in.
“As soon as it opens up, I’m going to go ahead and get started on it, so I can get it in as quickly as possible,” Dail, a Farmville native and Greene Central High School graduate, said.
Dail, who has wanted to be a dentist since getting his second set of braces at age 12, has spent time following eastern North Carolina dentists and orthodontists to observe their work. The junior biology major at North Carolina State University already has his dental school references lined up.

"Some of the students who are very interested in dentistry are pretty gung-ho," Wilson said. "I've told them, 'It's OK if you're not applicant (number) 0001.'"

ECU's dental school, which is scheduled to enroll its first class of 50 North Carolina students in the fall of 2011, has had more than 10,000 hits on its admissions page.

Wilson, who came to ECU from the dental school at the University of Maryland in November, said she and admissions director Lamont Lowery have met with more than 50 dental school hopefuls months before the application process opened.

Among them is Will Griffin, a Greenville native and graduate of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Griffin has applied twice for one of the 81 seats at the UNC School of Dentistry. "It's a very competitive field," Griffin, 23, said. "It's something that I know that I'm going to be involved in, but I've been waiting for a couple of extra seats in the state to open up."

In the meantime, Griffin has worked to polish his résumé. He is working in Wilmington as a sales representative for Practicon, a Greenville-based dental products and services company founded by his grandmother. In addition, Griffin volunteers at St. Mary's Dental Clinic, where he has assisted once a week for four years.

While Griffin spent summers in high school working in a dental practice, he never seriously considered becoming a dentist until he volunteered at the Wilmington clinic.

"That completely opened my eyes to the need and the effect a dentist can have on someone else's life," he said.

"To see patients who are just in a really bad place (financially), who can't afford to have dental care ... and to be a part of healing them, to me it was just a humbling experience."

Such experiences are expected of ECU dental students, who are required to complete a supplemental application in addition to the standard ADEA form. Students will be asked about contributions they have made to their communities.

"We want to know very specifically about their track record of service and their level of commitment to serving other people," Wilson said. "The other thing is we will ask the students to give us additional background of their experiences that they believe would allow them to make unique contributions to the school."

The questions are in keeping with the mission of the dental school, which is to prepare dental care practitioners to work in underserved regions of the state.

North Carolina ranks 47th nationally in the number of dentists per capita. Several of the state's rural counties have no dentists.

ECU's School of Dental Medicine plans to operate 10 service learning centers in rural and underserved areas of the state. Faculty members and senior students will be based in the centers, which, so far, include Sylva, Ahoskie and Elizabeth City.

Students who hope to someday work at those centers have until Jan. 15 to apply, though Wilson expects most applications to be submitted well ahead of that deadline.

The first of the pool of prospective students can expect interviews as early as this fall, even before the dental school receives its accreditation. The first offers of admission will come no sooner than Dec. 1.

Dail and Griffin, who both plan to apply to several dental schools, hope to be invited to join ECU's inaugural class.

"They should have the latest technology," Dail said. "They've already got a great medical school, so the dental school should be just as good."

Griffin followed the progress of ECU's dental school throughout all four years of college. His grandmother sent him copies of every newspaper article relating to the new school.

"We've been keeping our fingers crossed and hoping and praying ... and here it is," he said. "I'm really just ready and eager to get the ball rolling."
ECU dental school changes its name
The Daily Reflector
Thursday, June 3, 2010

A little more than a year before it enrolls its first students, East Carolina University’s dental school is changing its name.
The school, which has just begun accepting applications for its inaugural class, has changed its name from the School of Dentistry to the School of Dental Medicine. The name change was approved May 12 by the UNC General Administration.
Graduates will be awarded a doctor of dental medicine (DMD). The University of North Carolina School of Dentistry in Chapel Hill, which has the only other dental school in the state, awards the doctor of dental surgery degree (DDS).
Margaret Wilson, associate dean for student affairs at ECU’s dental school, said the two degrees are equivalent. The different name, she said, is more representative of a change in thinking than a change in training.
“[I]f you look at the history of our profession, it used to be the focus of dentistry was more really about surgical intervention, taking out teeth, scooping out decay and putting fillings in or restoring missing tooth structure,” Wilson said.
“I think that nowadays our profession is more integrated with total health care. It used to be that people thought that oral health was separate from general health. I think more and more over time we’re going to see probably a little bit less emphasis on the surgical intervention and a little bit more on the medical management of the patient.”
Two dozen dental schools across the country, including Harvard, award the DMD degree, as does the country’s newest dental school, Midwestern University College of Dental Medicine in Arizona, which opened in 2008.
ECU plans to admit 50 students per year. Admission is limited to North Carolina residents.
ECU students asked to pay more

Chris Lavender
2010-06-03 18:31:05

GREENVILLE — East Carolina University students could end up paying higher tuition costs next school year as public universities across the state work to find ways to offset projected cuts from the state.

The ECU Board of Trustees met this week to discuss whether to increase tuition and decided to recommend a $300 increase for in-state undergraduates and a $750 increase for out-of-state undergraduates for the 2010-2011 school year.

John Durham, ECU executive director of university communications, said Thursday the ECU Board of Trustees had already approved a tuition increase of about $170 for next year prior to this week’s meeting.

The University of North Carolina Board of Governors is required by law to approve tuition hikes proposed by public universities. If ECU’s proposed tuition hike is approved for the 2010-2011 school year, in-state undergraduate students would pay $4,947.

According to ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard, the funds generated through the tuition hike would help pay for providing students with more financial aid and employee retention.

Durham said the General Assembly will have the final say on how much tuition rates will increase for ECU students next year. The state Senate’s budget allows college campuses to increase tuition up to $750 per student above what hikes have already been approved for next year while the state House’s budget doesn’t include any provision that allows colleges to raise tuition prices.

"The issue is going to be settled with a conference committee at the state level," Durham said.

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Mac Attack invades Brook Valley

By Tony Castleberry
The Daily Reflector
Thursday, June 3, 2010

East Carolina football coach Ruffin McNeill is lending more than just his name, OK nickname, to today’s inaugural Mac Attack Golf Tournament at Brook Valley Country Club. McNeill, in his first year in charge of the Pirates after serving as an assistant at Texas Tech, came up with the name of the tourney, will play at least one hole of golf with all 24 teams competing in the event and will make himself available for photos and autographs for any fans who want them. The coach’s hands-on approach stems from his longtime involvement with the Ronald McDonald House, an organization that provides temporary housing for families of seriously ill or injured children while the children receive medical care. Proceeds from today’s tournament will benefit the Ronald McDonald House of Eastern N.C.

For McNeill, taking time out to help the Ronald McDonald House isn’t surprising, considering the organization is something that’s been close to his heart the last 16 years.

“My niece, Hope, was born prematurely, so our family stayed at the Ronald McDonald House,” McNeill said. “So I’ve been blessed to be in a position to help raise funds for the Ronald McDonald House wherever I was coaching.

“It really took off during my 10 years at Texas Tech.”

Emily Carter, an area manager for the Greenville Area Property Management Association — the tourney’s sponsor — wanted this year’s event to expand beyond last year’s 11-team tournament, both in terms of community impact and the benefits for the Ronald McDonald House. Carter said she was hopeful the number of teams would double, which it did, and McNeill’s participation was a big reason why.

“Once coach got involved, things really started to take a turn,” Carter said. “He really helped us get the word out and, even after we got our 24 teams signed up, we still had some more people calling this week wanting to play. But we’re full and it’s definitely something we want to do every year.”

Phyllis Flye, executive director of the Eastern N.C. Ronald McDonald House, said she was thankful that McNeill and Carter helped make the preparation and organization of the tournament as easy as it could be for her and her staff. She’s also thankful that McNeill’s motives for attaching his name and face to the event are sincere.

“His willingness to get involved revolved around benefitting the Ronald McDonald House and supporting these families,” Flye said. “Ruffin and his staff support our efforts and I’ve been so impressed with him. We’re thrilled to be a part of it.”

Sports editor Jim Gentry contributed to this report. Contact Tony Castleberry at tcastleberry@reflector.com or (252) 329-9591.
N.C. shipwreck speculated to be ghost of 1609

COROLLA, N.C.

A shipwreck exposed on the beach by winter storms could date to a time of commerce between England and Jamestown in the early 1600s.

Possibly the oldest known wreck on the North Carolina coast, the timbers and construction of the ship are very similar to the Sea Venture, the 1609 flagship of seven vessels that carried people and supplies to Jamestown, said Bradley A. Rodgers, a professor of archaeology and conservation in the maritime studies program at East Carolina University.

Remains of the Sea Venture rest off the Bermuda coast after it ran aground there in 1609 during a storm.

The wreck at Corolla grabbed attention after it was exposed following November nor'easters. On April 6, crews from the Wildlife Resources Commission, the Corolla fire department and residents hoisted it from the sand and dragged it on a sled to the lot near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse.

North Carolina underwater archaeologists and maritime history experts as well as students from ECU have since documented, sampled and measured the 12-ton wreck.

Plans are to transport it 90 miles down N.C. 12 to the Graveyard of the Atlantic Maritime Museum in Hatteras for display.

"It has a very unusual design," Rodgers said. "We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw that thing."

Now, an ECU graduate student will take on the historical research as part of his thesis, Rodgers said. Details might be found in the United Kingdom's Public Record Office, Rodgers said.

"It's going to be a detective story now," Rodgers said. "He's going to have to follow every lead he can."

The ship is relatively large and probably carried valuable cargo.

"It may not be that hard to find something on this," Rodgers said. "It would have been a tough loss for whatever company sponsored it."

If found, records would show the name of the sponsoring company, names of officers, cargo, destination and possibly where and how it wrecked, Rodgers said.

Two months ago, researchers believed this wreck could be the HMS Swift, a British ship about 70 feet long and 16 feet wide that ran aground off Point Comfort in the Chesapeake Bay in 1698. Currents might have carried the ship southward.

A closer look showed this ship was much larger, possibly 80 to 110 feet long and 30 to 35 feet wide,
Rodgers said. Timbers were made from trees cultivated to bend for use in a shipbuilding style known as compass framing. The timbers, curved upward to form the ship's sides.

After 1650, builders used compound framing, connecting shorter sections of straight beams to form the curve of the ship.

The shipwreck is made entirely of wood without iron fasteners, another indicator of earlier origins. Tests on the timbers show the outer frame is made from oak. Other timbers appear to be made of an older wood such as chestnut, Rodgers said.

Residents Roger Harris and Ray Midgett found coins from the early 1600s encrusted on the timbers. Three fleur-de-lis symbols are visible on one side, but the bust of King Louis XIII on the other side is worn away. Midgett found a coin stamped 1603.

In his Manteo office Wednesday, Harris placed a ruler next to the penny-size, copper-colored coin for a measurement. "If you put it on a metric scale, it's right at 19-1/2 millimeters," he said.

According to his research, that is exactly the size this coin is supposed to be. Harris and Midgett found the coins stuck to the exterior of a concretion, a mass of encrusted materials about the size of a basketball.

Harris also found other items near the wreck, including a small metal wax seal stamp with the initials "T.M.," a skeleton key and a star-shaped rowel of a horseback rider's spur.

X-rays showed the concretion also held small cannon grape shot and straight pins, said Nathan Henry, a state underwater archaeologist. The rest of the ship's story will have to come from research by the ECU team, he said.

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N.C. A&T joins medical student entry program

Friday, June 4, 2010
(Updated 3:00 am)

By JONNELLE DAVIS
Staff Writer

GREENSBORO — Gaining admission to medical school without taking the entrance exam is unimaginable for most college students who want to become a doctor.

But thanks to a new partnership between N.C. A&T and East Carolina University in Greenville, that dream could become a reality for some A&T students.

East Carolina this week announced that it will guarantee admission into its Brody School of Medicine to two A&T students annually. The medical school also will admit two students each year from UNC-Pembroke.

Through its Early Assurance program, ECU offers its top undergraduates admission into the medical school without having to compete with other students or take the Medical College Admission Test, known as the MCAT. The program is being expanded to include the two universities.

Students at A&T and UNCP will have to maintain a minimum 3.5 grade point average and be North Carolina residents to qualify for Early Assurance.

A&T will begin accepting students into the program this fall, said Perry Mack, an adjunct biology professor and health professions adviser at A&T. Mack said entering freshman must have at least a 1200 on the SAT to be considered.

A selection committee will review the records of incoming freshman and choose six each year who meet the program's specifications. During their four years at A&T, they will undergo a rigorous program that will include service learning, volunteer work and research in the medical field.

"They are really enrichment activities that will facilitate their matriculation ... into med school," Mack said.

Only two students can be selected for medical school admission upon graduation and completion of all the Early Assurance requirements. Mack said four students will go through the program as alternates.

ECU has offered its Early Assurance program for 10 years, and during that time, 15 participants have graduated from its medical school.

"It's been an unqualified success," James Peden, associate dean of admissions at the Brody School of Medicine, said in a news release. "Generally speaking, the Early Assurance scholars have been among the best students in the school."

The medical school wanted to expand its program to A&T and UNCP to address a key component of its mission: training doctors to practice in underserved areas.

Another part of the school's mission is to provide access to a medical education to minority and disadvantaged students, according to its website.

Mack said there is an acute shortage of minority health professionals, especially doctors.
“This is an excellent program to help to increase the number of minority health professionals,” he said.

He said many A&T graduates who choose to go to medical school enroll in the Brody School of Medicine.

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Mary Easley’s grievance over firing is dismissed

BY JAY PRICE
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH - N.C. State University officials have dismissed a grievance filed last summer by former first lady Mary Easley over her firing, the university announced Thursday.

In a statement, the university said Easley failed to respond to a request to schedule a pre-hearing meeting and the grievance hearing itself.

University officials refused to say more about the grievance, saying it was a personnel matter. Easley was told of the dismissal last Friday, they said.

Easley’s attorney, Wade Byrd, also refused to comment.

Easley had a five-year, $850,000 contract to run a speakers

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series and create a public safety leadership center in 2008. But controversy erupt- ed after The News & Observ- er reported that her job had been pushed by her husband, former Gov. Mike Easley, and orchestrated at the highest levels of state government.

The university’s board of trustees recommended that Interim Chancellor James Woodward end Easley’s contract last summer.

Woodward said Easley was no longer needed because substantial portions of her job were eliminated as a result of budget cuts required of the university by the short-fall in the state’s budget.

It’s unclear on what grounds Easley contested her firing.

A university spokesman said at the time that he couldn’t release her grievance petition because it was a personnel record and that the grievance proceedings would remain closed to the public.

It’s also not clear whether Easley can continue to dispute her firing within the university system.

Under some circumstanc- es, university employees can appeal to the UNC system’s Board of Governors, and some have pursued their grievances in court.

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Fetzer's endorsement puts tea party on boil

About a dozen supporters of GOP congressional candidate Tim D'Annunzio picketed state GOP headquarters in Raleigh on Thursday to protest state Chairman Tom Fetzer's endorsement of his primary opponent.

“He broke the rules that the chairman cannot be involved until after the primary,” said Randy Dye of Chatham County, who is active in the tea party movement.

The protest comes after Fetzer endorsed retired Charlotte broadcaster Harold Johnson in the June 22 GOP runoff for the 8th District congressional seat now held by Democrat Larry Kissell.

Citing D'Annunzio's past arrests and drug abuse, Fetzer said D'Annunzio was “unfit for public office at any level.”

D'Annunzio has threatened a defamation suit. At noon, some of his supporters stood outside GOP headquarters with D'Annunzio signs or in one case a “Fetzer Step Down” sign.

“He shouldn't be supporting a candidate until after the primary,” said Donna Litteral of Hope Mills, a D'Annunzio backer.

Senate backs college bonds

The state Senate gave its approval Thursday to a $450 million bond package for new engineering buildings at N.C. State and N.C. A&T State universities.

The borrowing will not require voter approval in a referendum.

Supporters said the bond package would help make the state competitive in high-tech fields. It also would take advantage of low construction costs and spur job growth, they said. Opponents, mostly Republicans, objected to borrowing money in a recession.

“There are a lot of good things in this bill, but now is not the time for North Carolina to take on more debt,” said Sen. Phil Berger, an Eden Republican.

Repaying the borrowed money is expected to cost about $18.2 million next year and as much as $39 million in following years.

The bill cleared the Senate 27-17. The measure moves to the House, where it could face an uphill fight.

By staff writers Rob Christensen and Michael Biesecker

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Wal-Mart to Offer Its Workers a College Program

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD and STEPHANIE ROSEN BLOOM

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Now on sale at Wal-Mart: college degrees for its employees.

The purveyor of inexpensive jeans and lawn mowers is dipping its toe into the online-education waters, working with a Web-based university to offer its employees in the United States affordable college degrees.

The partnership with American Public University, a for-profit school with about 70,000 online students, will allow some Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club employees to earn credits in areas like retail management and logistics for performing their regular jobs.

The university will offer eligible employees 15 percent price reductions on tuition, and Wal-Mart will invest $50 million over three years in other tuition assistance for the employees who participate.

Executives at Wal-Mart, the nation’s largest retailer, said the company was not interested in entering the online-education field in a broader way. The point of the program, they said, was to help employees get more education and to build a better workforce.

Even so, because of its size, Wal-Mart’s internal changes often turn into industry standards, as with its efforts involving environmental sustainability. And with 1.4 million employees in the United States, even an employees-only program could have widespread implications.

“If 10 to 15 percent of employees take advantage of this, that’s like graduating three Ohio State Universities,” said Sara Martinez Tucker, a former under secretary of education who is now on Wal-Mart’s external advisory council. “It’s a lot of Americans getting a college degree at a time when it’s becoming less affordable.”

Wal-Mart estimates that about 50 percent of its employees in the United States have a high
school diploma or the equivalent but have not earned a college degree. With the average full-time employee being paid $11.75 an hour, it was unclear how many of them will be able to take advantage of the new program. With the work credits and tuition discount, an associate’s degree for a Wal-Mart or Sam’s Club cashier would cost about $11,700 and a bachelor’s degree about $24,000.

Wal-Mart made the announcement at an early morning meeting at the Bud Walton arena here, where about 4,000 employees were invited to attend events scheduled around the chain’s shareholders’ meeting on Friday.

“It’s important because it reflects the kind of company we are,” Eduardo Castro-Wright, who heads Wal-Mart’s operations in the United States, told the employees. “A company that says, ‘Anyone who wants to learn, who wants to grow with us, who is willing to work hard to get a college degree, can do that.’ ”

The employees clapped and nodded as Mr. Castro-Wright explained the program (though cheers seemed to be louder earlier, when Mr. Castro-Wright said that gas prices finally seemed to be dropping).

Jaymes Murphy, 24, a wireless salesman in a Wal-Mart based in Victoria, Tex., said he had been trying to take college classes while working, but found the scheduling difficult. But he said the program “gives me the confidence that I can go and not have to worry about sacrificing one thing or another.”

“I can get my education,” he said, adding that he would pursue his bachelor’s degree online. “The way the economy’s working, the way all the companies are working, you’ve got to go bachelor’s.”

The program will initially allow about 200,000 employees in positions like cashier, department manager and distribution center unloader to accrue credits for training they already receive in their jobs.

For instance, a department-level manager, who receives training from Wal-Mart in areas like pricing, inventory management and ethics, would be eligible for 24 on-the-job credits, at no charge, toward a 61-credit associates’ degree. A cashier would be eligible for six credits toward a 61-credit associate’s degree or a 120-credit bachelor’s degree.

“It came out of an awareness that the jobs in our stores are really good jobs,” Tom Mars, executive vice president and chief administrative officer of Wal-Mart U.S. said in an interview, “but if we want to make them great jobs, we really have to do something different to distinguish those jobs and our company from everyone else in retail.”
When asked if Wal-Mart wanted to enter the online-education industry Mr. Mars said “no, no.”

Even so, Wal-Mart appeared to acknowledge its wide influence in a letter about the program to the secretary of education, Arne Duncan.

“While there is broad agreement about the need for more Americans to attain college degrees, we recognize that there is a healthy discussion under way about the best way to get there,” wrote Leslie Dach, Wal-Mart’s executive vice president for corporate affairs and government relations. “One of our aims with this program is to try some innovative approaches that seem promising, grounded in what is already known in the field.”

He added: “We hope in this way to expand the education and employer communities’ knowledge of what works most effectively, so that policy makers, other companies and other stakeholders can continuously improve such offerings.”

Wal-Mart executives said it decided to work with an online university instead of a brick-and-mortar school after surveying more than 32,000 of its employees and learning that most of them wanted the scheduling flexibility afforded by online classes.

American Public University, which is based in Charles Town, W.Va., is reviewing all jobs at Wal-Mart to determine which ones will qualify under the agreement. By January 2012, some 70 percent of United States employees will be in jobs that have been reviewed by the university, Wal-Mart said.

To be eligible for the program, employees must have been in the job at least one year full time, or three years part time, and must also score “on target” or “above target” on their most recent evaluation.