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N.C. State chancellor resigns

BY JAY PRICE AND J. ANDREW CURLISS, STAFF WRITERS

N.C. State University Chancellor James L. Oblinger resigned this morning after days of shifting explanations about a deal he cut for former provost Larry Nielsen when Nielsen stepped down last month.

Both men are at the heart of a controversy about how former state first lady Mary Easley gained a job at the university in 2005, then an 88-percent pay hike last year to a $170,000 salary. In his resignation letter Oblinger said the university would be releasing e-mails that showed he was involved in her hiring, something he had denied.

The university had provided those e-mails to a federal grand jury investigating the Easleys after getting subpoenas.

"I understand that the University will be making public today the documents that it is providing to the grand jury in connection with the federal investigation," Oblinger wrote. "A handful of those documents - all emails - indicate that I was made aware of Mrs. Easley's potential availability as a faculty member by [NCSU board of trustees chairman] McQueen Campbell in April 2005. I did not recall those communications until reviewing the emails last week. The emails themselves indicate that I referred the issue to the appropriate university officials and they indicate no impropriety in the process in which Mrs. Easley was hired to come to NC State from her previous position at North Carolina Central University at an increase in pay of $1,072.10."

Oblinger, like Nielsen, said the intense scrutiny was the reason he was quitting.

"I am doing so because that is what leaders do when the institutions they lead come under
"distracting and undue public scrutiny," he wrote in a resignation letter. "This is particularly true for leaders of public institutions like NC State."

Gov. Beverly Perdue released a statement today, calling Oblinger's resignation "appropriate."

"Today's announcements are the appropriate steps to enable the University to keep its eye on the prize – education, collaboration, discovery and leadership," Perdue said in the statement. "Recent events have become a distraction from the core mission of NC State faculty, staff, and students."

Former UNC-Charlotte chancellor Jim Woodward will serve as N.C. State's interim chancellor and must guide the university through one of the most critical moments in its history -- planning for unprecedented budget cuts -- without a chancellor and with a freshly-installed interim provost, the university's top academic officer.

Deans, department heads and other university officials were asked late last month to develop proposals to handle a university-wide budget cut of 18 percent, though NCSU leaders said then they expected that when the legislature completes a state budget the actual figure will be lower.

Last month Campbell, a friend of the Easleys who Gov. Mike Easley had appointed to the board of trustees, admitted to UNC system President Erskine Bowles that he had told Oblinger that Easley was looking for work.

Nielsen, then interim provost, then hired Easley.

After Bowles called for him to resign, Campbell did. Nielsen had preceded him, citing the stress of media scrutiny of the deal.

Then came the changing stories about Nielsen's benefit package. Last week Oblinger said that he had given Nielsen a six-month study leave at the full provost pay and that his pay would fall to $156,000 then return to teaching. The deal, which he described as typical in academia, had been part of Nielsen's contract when he got the job in 2005, Oblinger said.

Then, on Saturday, university officials changed the story, saying that Nielsen's payout at the higher salary would be spread over 18 months. Hours later, they changed the story again, saying it actually would be over three years.

On Sunday, the university released documents that showed Oblinger sweetened the deal on the day before Nielsen quit in apparent violation of university rules.

According to the documents, the deal in Nielsen's original contract was a six-month leave at full pay, but only if he kept the job at least five years. He was in the post about four.

Oblinger's resignation letter indicating that it would be all he would have to say on the situation, at least for a while.

"I am issuing this as a written statement because of the constraints on my ability to speak publicly because of state employee privacy laws and the confidential nature of the federal grand jury investigation," he wrote. "Suffice it to say that I intend - as I have done all along - to cooperate with that investigation with the full confidence that the ultimate result will exonerate N.C. State and its officials. I will not, however, be issuing or making any further statements until I have fully testified before the grand jury."

Oblinger, a food science and nutrition expert, will return to teaching at the university.

Oblinger will get a six-month leave at his current salary of $420,000. He'll then begin teaching again, as a professor of food science at the normal salary for that discipline, wrote Bowles in a letter to the Board of Governors.

Oblinger joined the faculty at NCSU in 1986, and was dean of the College of Agriculture and
Life Sciences and provost and executive vice chancellor before his elevation to chancellor in 2005.

He has been known as a dyed-red supporter of the university, and all four of his children have attended NCSU.

A little of that showed in the resignation letter.

"I have devoted 23 years of my life in service to N.C. State, 'The People's University.' I intend to continue to serve the university as I return to the faculty."

Trustees chairman Bob Jordan -- who was elected by the board to replace Campbell -- echoed that in an e-mail to the campus just before Oblinger resigned.

"One of things I admire most about Jim Oblinger is that he has always put the university's interests ahead of his own," Jordan wrote. "He is resigning because he does not want the ongoing controversy surrounding the university's hiring and employment of Mary Easley to continue detracting from the important work of our faculty and staff. He wants the university to move forward, and that is what we must do."

jay.price@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-4526

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Mary Easley stands quietly while her attorney Marvin Schiller addresses the media during a press conference on Thursday May 21, 2009. Schiller repeated several times that there is quote "undisputable evidence that Mrs. Easley received the position of Executive in residence at N.C. State University on her own merits" end quote and that at this point she will not step down.
Staff photo by Shawn Rocco

Campbell McQueen
Staff Photo by Ethan Hyman

Mike Easley
Staff File Photo by Ethan Hyman

Former Gov. Mike Easley and his wife, Mary, greet the crowd at Dorton Arena during the state Democratic Party's Jefferson-Jackson Dinner in May 2008. Mary Easley's job at N.C. State University has come under scrutiny.
Records: Mike Easley involved in hiring

J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

New documents show that the Mary Easley job at N.C. State was orchestrated at the highest levels of state government, and included the direct involvement of then-Gov. Mike Easley.

Email messages show the creation of the job for Mary Easley was orchestrated in April and May of 2005 by the governor and that her job formation also included his wife, Mary; the chancellor at N.C. State, James Oblinger; a key trustee, McQueen Campbell; a senior adviser to Easley who now heads the Golden Leaf Foundation, Dan Gerlach; and an NCSU lobbyist at the time, Andy Willis.

Until now, officials have all denied any involvement in the hiring other than by former Provost Larry Nielsen, who the records show was also involved in creating the position that gave Mary Easley an $80,000, three-year contract to oversee a speakers series and help teach a class.

The emails indicate that Dan Gerlach, a key aide to the governor, was involved in making the first contacts on behalf of the Easleys and it was done in quiet — "people up the food chain don't know," he wrote.

Campbell and Gerlach then exchange email messages about possibilities.

Campbell forwards the exchange to Willis.

Gerlach writes to Campbell on April 27, 2005: "Did you get what you needed?" under a subject heading of possible classes for Easley to teach.

Campbell replies: "I did. Thanks for your help and I will keep you posted!"

That same day, Oblinger then writes to McQueen Campbell, saying it is obvious that she would be wanted on campus. "My question to her is money related in that they (in poly sci) are very much into the pay-by-the-course mode vs. contract. Any sense as to the importance of a contract to the first lady?"

Campbell, who was close to Gov. Easley, writes to Oblinger: "I think that is more what he had in mind to try and get her at least where she is now. I can speak more in person later."

The next day, Oblinger writes to Campbell: I must speak with Provost as this is an academic matter -- appointment, contract, etc. Am thinking contract mediated by me but discussion of subject matter by the dean with her, ok? Will need to speak with you about a couple of other things related to this."

A day after that, on April 29 2005, Oblinger wrote to Campbell: "MCQ: We're ready to move on this; next step is in the Mansion, I think. Then, I would propose that I make contact and then turn this over to the Provost and the two deans who are interested. They, then can decide upon what courses the First Lady would consider teaching and what, if any, other duties/activities would be involved. Let me know once there is a strategy on that end. Thanks."

Campbell writes back: "Just chatted with the Gov and he plans to talk to her this afternoon and will call me back after he has had this conversation. I will be in touch when he calls."

The next day, Campbell wrote to Oblinger: "The Gov called me back today and Mary is
interested and would like to meet with you as soon as possible... I could introduce her to you then I would leave you two to your business."

Oblinger replied to Campbell that he was booked up with other events, suggesting, "perhaps she'd meet with Provost Nielsen (?)"

On May 19, 2005, Nielsen wrote to Campbell that he had met with Mary Easley and two deans and agreed on a work plan for her.

Campbell replied to Nielsen: "Great! The meeting obviously went well and I chatted with the Gov late last week and he says she's very excited about it..."

The messages were produced as part of an ongoing federal investigation, and provided to The News & Observer today by a lawyer for N.C. State.

Easley was hired on May 26 by Nielsen.

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Tar Heels punch out Pirates at Super Regional

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Sunday, June 07, 2009

CHAPEL HILL — North Carolina played its pair of aces with authority to end East Carolina’s baseball season on the doorstep of a first-ever trip to the College World Series.

The host Tar Heels closed the door on the Pirates in the second game of the Chapel Hill Super Regional Sunday, blowing out ECU, 9-3, on the strength of Adam Warren’s brilliant pitching.

Warren piggy-backed the dominance of Alex White from the day before, keeping the Pirates’ offense stuck in neutral for the second consecutive day. North Carolina (47-16) earned its fourth consecutive trip to the CWS.

The Pirates (46-20) lost in the Super Regional round for the third time in three tries.

“They rolled out two very good arms, and we battled, hit the ball hard at times but we couldn't get runs to fall,” ECU senior Brandon Henderson said of the Tar Heels. “It’s disappointing.”

Joining Henderson in making his final appearance for ECU were left fielder Stephen Batts, third baseman Drew Schieber, second baseman Ryan Wood, outfielder Trent Ashcraft and pitchers Bailey Daniels and Britton Cole.

The Tar Heels outscored the Pirates by a count of 19-4 in the two-game sweep, but it was the mound work by North Carolina that made the difference.

ECU head coach Billy Godwin said the weekend sweep should serve as an important lesson for the future.

“Unfortunately, we have to have experiences such as these,” said Godwin, whose teams have been in the postseason each of the last three seasons. “I think you fail before you succeed sometimes. That first year, we came over (to UNC) and lost in the regional, and we bounced back and played in the championship last year (at the Conway, S.C., Regional), and this year we pushed through to win a regional.”

Warren pitched into the eighth inning, striking out eight and walking one to run his season record to 9-2.

“He hit his spots and didn’t miss,” Wood said of Warren. “If he missed, he was missing just a couple of inches off the plate, especially his fastball, and he could throw his breaking ball for a strike and put it where he wanted to.”

UNC charged out to a 2-0 lead in the top of the third inning. After Garrett Gore bounced a single up the middle to lead off the frame, Ben Bunting and Dustin Ackley each drew two-out walks to load the bags, and Kyle Seager hammered the first pitch he saw into center field to drive in a pair.

The Tar Heels tacked on another five runs in the sixth.

Mike Cavasinni roped a single that scored Mark Fleury, who led off the inning with a double that chased ECU starter Kevin Brandt from the mound in lieu of Brad Minney, to make it 3-0. Designated hitter Seth Baldwin drove in the fourth UNC run when he beat out a fielder’s choice to avoid a double play, allowing Gore to come home for a 4-0 lead.

Seth Simmons then took the mound for ECU, and the game’s big blow followed. Tar Heel slugger Dustin Ackley greeted him with a three-run blast to left field, a staggering blow for ECU that extended the lead to 7-0.
The duo of Ackley and Seager accounted for five RBIs.

Baldwin's sacrifice fly made it 8-0, and Garrett Gore's monster home run to center field rounded out the Carolina scoring.

ECU staged a brief rally attempt in eighth inning, scoring three runs, but went scoreless in the ninth. Austin Homan, Trent Whitehead and Wood all singled to load the bases in the eighth, and a groundout by Kyle Roller and a two-run single by Henderson put ECU on the scoreboard.

Brandt (9-2) pitched five innings and allowed three runs on six hits.

"I felt like my stuff was working good, but even if you have it, good hitting clubs are going to hit you, and that was a good team," Brandt said.

Warren yielded just three hits through the first five innings, none in the same frame, and the Pirates' futility in moving baserunners, which haunted them in Saturday's 10-1 loss, continued to plague them in the early innings Sunday.

As Carolina crafted its early lead, ECU failed to bring any runners home in the opening three innings, despite putting its leadoff hitter on base in all three frames.

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9595.

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UNC pitchers a cut above against East Carolina

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Sunday, June 07, 2009

CHAPEL HILL — Despite watching his club get shut down on consecutive days to be excused from the Chapel Hill Super Regional, East Carolina baseball coach Billy Godwin remains upbeat about his own team's chances of playing in the College World Series.

The Pirates' season ended rather abruptly inside Boshamer Stadium as the bats that powered ECU's offense all season were rendered punchless by North Carolina starters Alex White and Adam Warren. The outcome of their pitching efforts spelled doom for the Pirates, who lost 10-1 and 9-3 in the best-of-three series.

ECU's own ace pitchers — Seth Maness and Kevin Brandt — had mixed results, but certainly might have recorded wins with at least some run support.

Godwin contended that while the difference between the two clubs was obvious this weekend, the experience of three postseason appearances for ECU in three years could prove priceless in the long term.

"That's one of the things that I've tried to emphasize during my tenure at East Carolina, that we have to roll guys out there that will give us a shot," said Godwin, who tweaked his rotation for the Super Regional by moving Maness into the top spot ahead of junior Chris Heston and making Brandt his No. 2 man. "You saw how important those guys are with the guys that went out there for North Carolina.

"I think we're getting there, but we have to keep grinding and keep putting a quality product on the mound, and I think that's the next step."

Final rally

Godwin insisted he didn't believe his team was out of the Super Regional until UNC recorded the final out in the bottom of the ninth inning Sunday.

Last week, the coach watched his team win the Greenville Regional in extra innings against South Carolina after rallying from an early 6-0 hole, then a 9-6 deficit.

So when the Pirates surged for three runs in the eighth Sunday after being in the hole 9-0, Godwin was still managing his team and still scheming for a win.

"That's how much confidence I have in our club," Godwin said. "Even being down 9-3 - I'm being honest - when we scored three, it felt like we're still in this. I preach to these guys to never give up, and I wasn't going to give up until I saw the last out made."

Manteo to Murphy

Both of UNC's polished starters in the Super Regional are former recruits from the eastern part of the state.

White is from Greenville's D.H. Conley, while Warren is a New Bern product.

Despite that fact, UNC skipper Mike Fox said he would rather celebrate the talent from across the state that was on display from both clubs at the Super Regional than concentrate on two of his gems plucked from traditional ECU recruiting grounds.

"I don't want to put too much on where kids are from," Fox said. "There were a lot of North Carolina kids on the field this weekend, and on ESPN, and I think that says a lot about our state in general, and the caliber of the high school programs and coaches there are in the state, and the youth programs. I give kudos to
everybody from Murphy to Manteo."

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9595.
Laurels — To the healthy debate about taxes in North Carolina that unfolded in Raleigh this week, thanks to two rallies focused on the subject. The gatherings offered differing viewpoints, but pressed lawmakers to make difficult decisions that are in the state’s long-term interests. The Legislature is under the gun to produce a budget, and heated debate is expected as the process continues.

Omaha dreams

Laurels — To this weekend’s Super Regional pitting East Carolina University against in-state rival North Carolina. On the line is a trip to Omaha and a chance to compete for the College World Series crown. The Pirates advanced thanks to a remarkable come-from-behind win in Greenville on Monday, and hope to extend that magic streak in Chapel Hill this weekend.

Darts — To the unfortunately few tickets available to Pirate fans for the games this weekend. UNC sold out the Super Regional in advance of the public on-sale date, meaning that many East Carolina supporters have been calling in favors from Chapel Hill friends in the hope of getting a seat. Ever resourceful, the purple-and-gold faithful are sure to make their presence felt this weekend.

Laurels — To the many citizens who attended the town hall meeting for Greenville voting Districts 1 and 2, represented by Mildred Council and Rose Glover respectively. Topics of discussion included access to park land, options for young people and code enforcement. Meetings like this are tremendously valuable to the community.

Laurels — To those who plan to attend Monday’s City Council meeting, which will include a public hearing to discuss the 2009-10 budget. City staff has invested considerable time and energy in drafting this budget, which has been a challenge due to the difficult economic climate. The public should use this opportunity to review the city’s spending priorities and offer thoughts and suggestions.

Darts — To mixed signals about the economy that diminish confidence in the prospects of an impending recovery. Even as job loss slows and gas prices halt their recent steep increase, unemployment remains historically high and banks still have not loosened restrictions on lending to improve the flow of capital in the marketplace. The worst may have passed, but it is hard to know at this point.

Laurels — To the Latino Leadership Summit, held on Friday at East Carolina’s Murphy Center. The meeting, sponsored by the Association of Mexicans of North Carolina, intended to promote awareness and discussion of issues specific to those residents. Organizers hoped the meeting would also help individuals and businesses more effectively integrate the Latino community as well.

Compiled by Brian Colligan, editorial page editor of The Daily Reflector. Contact him at 329-9507 or via e-mail at bcolligan@coxnc.com
Educators gathering support for academies

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Saturday, June 06, 2009

A group of education leaders and advocates from the east and west are trying to gather support for two academies of math and science which they say would benefit some of the brightest students in the state.

Their vision entails opening the 650-student public schools on the East Carolina University and Appalachian State University campuses. The schools would offer advanced science and math courses similar to those at the North Carolina School of Science and Math in Durham.

The challenges of getting legislators and the university system to buy in and overcoming budget constraints likely mean the concept is years away from becoming a reality, but members of a task force examining the issue say it is essential to create a broader range of students proficient in higher-level science and math.

Former Pitt County Schools Superintendent Michael Priddy, who coordinated the planning grant, is among several members of a volunteer task force examining the concept which includes representatives of East Carolina, Appalachian State, The Golden LEAF Foundation, the State Department of Public Instruction, Pitt Community College and other community leaders from Greenville and Boone.

Priddy says the idea was sparked at a lunch in 2005 during which the discussion turned to ways to foster economic development in Greenville and eastern North Carolina.

"Most economic development activities are based on math and science," Priddy said. "For me it is the universal language, but we have not done a good enough job of educating our students in those areas."

The task force says establishing two more science and math schools would provide: access for students who do not qualify for the North Carolina School of Science and Math but are capable of advanced study in the areas; a laboratory environment for pre-service and in-service teachers where the preferred methods and approaches in the two fields can be demonstrated and taught; and an extension of the regional impact that ECU and ASU have had on the school systems in their part of the state.

Priddy said the schools could benefit academically-gifted students living in rural areas who may not have access to advanced courses.

He noted that the Durham school received more than 1,200 applications last year. The school accepted about 325 students, leaving plenty of students in need of higher levels of education.

"Even if the other 900 kids are not the caliber of the ones chosen, they are high-caliber anyway," Priddy said. "That is who we are interested in. We are not trying to compete with the Durham school."

The task force two years ago received an $80,000 grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation to fund research on the project. Since that time, members of the group have visited similar schools on the campuses of Western Kentucky and North Texas University.

The group estimates both schools would cost nearly $30 million annually to operate. The University of North Carolina system likely would fund the schools as it does the school in Durham.

Operations in Durham run about $30,000 per student, about $10,000 more per student than what officials project for the east and west schools.

The focus of the Greenville school would be health sciences; the Boone location would be tilted toward the environment. Priddy says Greenville officials also hope they could incorporate ECU's teacher education program.
ECU Provost Marilyn Sheerer said officials continue to look for ways to address a science and math teacher shortage, and they are hopeful that incorporating teacher education into the school may do that.

“There is a real need for more young people to go into math and science teaching,” said Sheerer, who has been working with the task force. “The hope would be that if we had our own academy that we could link it to teacher training programs and hopefully encourage some of those graduates to go into math and science teaching.”

ECU has included the concept in its response to the UNC Tomorrow Report and, in a letter sent to Priddy in February, ASU Chancellor Kenneth Peacock said he was supportive.

Randy Collier has led the research on the concept. He said task force officials will continue to examine its feasibility, but the next level of involvement would be chancellors from ECU and ASU taking the idea to the state level.

“People have been really supportive and encouraging,” Collier said. “We continue to hear this is a worthwhile concept and so many students can benefit, so we should push forward with it. That is kind of where we are.”

Contact Brock Letchworth at bletchworth@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9574.

Volunteers needed

When Hurricane Floyd caused massive flooding nearly 10 years ago, the Pitt County chapter of the American Red Cross provided 27 shelters for displaced families and supported 25 others in the area, organization officials said last week.

With the beginning of hurricane season this week, the Pitt County chapter of the American Red Cross is looking for volunteers to get involved with the wide array of disaster relief services it provides to individuals and families in need, Executive Director Deborah Horn said.

“We'd like to find about 100 volunteers this season. There are so many jobs that people can perform, including working at a shelter for displaced people, driving a Disaster Action Team (DAT) vehicle or handing out food,” Horn said.

All volunteers are given orientation and training in the various aspects of volunteer work. They can be trained in damage assessment, where they determine the extent of loss people have sustained and how much relief must be given, Horn said.

Some volunteers will receive CPR and first aid training. Others will learn how to facilitate communications between families and relatives serving in the military.

The training is free for the volunteers but costs the chapter about $60 per volunteer, plus additional costs for CPR and first aid training.

“This is another reason funding is so essential,” Horn said.

Those who want to find out more about volunteering with or donating to support training at the Pitt County chapter of the American Red Cross can call 355-3800.

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Provost's deal sweetened

NCSU chancellor upped Nielsen's severance one day before his exit -- a breach of school rules.

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

New records show that N.C. State University Chancellor James Oblinger cut a deal last month to increase the severance package for former Provost Larry Nielsen, and it was done the day before Nielsen resigned.

Moreover, the publicly disclosed terms of Nielsen's payout show he will receive more than what officials had indicated -- with Nielsen now set to receive $310,255 in extra pay above his faculty salary.

The documents directly contradict the public comments that Oblinger offered about Nielsen's exit last month as the chief academic officer of the state's largest university. The university released the revised Nielsen payout information late Sunday after days of requests from The News & Observer.

They also show that Oblinger changed the payout package in apparent violation of university rules.

Oblinger, the chancellor since January 2005, could not be reached for comment.

Other officials declined to comment, including UNC system President Erskine Bowles, who was working in his Chapel Hill office late into the evening. Bowles hires the university chancellors in North Carolina.

Nielsen resigned on May 14, citing "intense public attention and criticism" of his hiring of former first lady Mary Easley. Oblinger said in a news conference at the time that Nielsen resigned on his own. But officials would not release the terms of his separation.

Then, last week, Oblinger and other university officials said that Nielsen would keep his provost's pay for six months while he had a six-month study leave.
Oblinger said the payout to Nielsen was part of his original contract and was "very standard." The documents now show otherwise.

On Saturday, officials disclosed that Nielsen would actually be paid over 18 months -- then later said it would actually be over three years.

A university policy says such deals should be for a maximum of a year.

The records released Sunday show:

- Nielsen originally had a six-month payout package if he left his job before serving five years as provost. He had been in the job since June 2005.

- Oblinger wrote to Nielsen on May 13, saying he would accept his resignation, and then outlined the new terms of the deal.

- Oblinger also confirmed "our discussion" with Nielsen related to a state law that allows state employees to access a defense attorney from the Attorney General's office in a criminal or civil matter. A federal grand jury is probing the hiring of Mary Easley. Officials have said the hiring of Mary Easley was Nielsen's idea.

The documents detailing the deal struck by Nielsen and Oblinger were released late Sunday night after the executive committee of the N.C. State University Board of Trustees held an emergency meeting by phone.

A hastily called meeting of the school's full board of trustees will take place at 2 p.m. today, NCSU officials said.

Burley Mitchell, a trustee and former chief justice of the state Supreme Court, said he was unaware of the subject of today's meeting.

Numerous N.C. State and university system officials declined to react to disclosures in Sunday's N&O that a payout package for Nielsen will give him a larger salary for much longer than previously disclosed.

Staff Writer Jack Hagel contributed to this report.

acurliss@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4840

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NCSU job is hard to pin down

Mary Easley's workload may not match the hype

BY JAY PRICE AND J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writers

Mary Easley’s $170,000-a-year job at NCSU -- which seems to be vanishing one big bite at a time -- is an unusual mix of politics, insider connections and academia, according to a picture of her work that emerges from internal university e-mail, documents and interviews.

Amid calls for her to step down, the state’s former first lady has held on to the job. It bears a single title, executive in residence, given when former NCSU Provost Larry Nielsen retooled her post and gave her an 88 percent raise last summer. The job, though, is actually four part-time roles cobbled together. She was to create and direct a public safety center; run a speakers series, which she started in 2005; coordinate law-related academic programming; and teach half a class each semester.

NCSU Chancellor James Oblinger has said she is unique for the position. And UNC system President Erskine Bowles called it "a big, complex job" at the time of her raise.

But it’s unclear from the records and interviews whether it ever was as big or as difficult as billed. Easley sometimes picked up the phone and ordered a speaker from an agency. She keeps irregular hours. There are serious questions about whether she has performed all the duties required under one part of her job description. And the salary she gets for teaching is far above the amount that another instructor is getting for the same work.

Her job is at the center of a mushrooming series of resignations and other inquiries, including a federal probe. It was strongly backed for years by Oblinger and Nielsen.

The job for Easley, who has four years left on her contract, has come under intense scrutiny...
after recent reports showed that a close friend and NCSU trustee, McQueen Campbell, was involved in her hiring. Campbell stepped down as a trustee and chairman of the board after his role came to light.

Oblinger and Bowles have called on Easley to resign as well. She has refused.

A week and a half ago, the university put a moratorium on new academic centers like the public safety effort Easley was to lead. Then, on Thursday, a House budget committee voted to cut the funding for the speakers series. If that effort is successful, only tasks that had been billed as 35 percent of her workload will be intact -- her teaching and academic programming work.

Easley didn't return calls seeking comment. At a news conference last month, though, her attorney, Marvin Schiller handed out off-the-charts positive reviews from Nielsen and Bowles. Schiller said Friday that he had just reviewed her personnel file.

"If there is a single negative word in there, it's written in invisible ink," he said.

Working connections?

The university justified hiring Easley in 2005 without a job search by saying that she was "unique" for the speakers job and that her connections, many of them developed while her husband, Mike Easley, was the state's attorney general and two-term governor, would help lure top names to campus. She had previously been a lawyer and then taught law courses at N.C. Central University in Durham. Easley, a Democrat, was governor from 2001 until January.

But a review of documents makes it clear that, although Mary Easley worked her friends to get speakers, more often than not it didn't work out. She tried for the king of Jordan, for Supreme Court justices, for former Vice President Al Gore and other big names. The speakers she got are not all as lofty.

In one e-mail message, she wrote to Nielsen that she didn't want to bring in the likes of Ken Thompson, then the CEO of Wachovia Bank in Charlotte, because she was "hoping to come up with someone who would be instantly recognizable to the student population." Thompson was the series' first speaker.

And take David Gergen, a former presidential adviser who regularly appears on CNN. Gergen spoke at NCSU in September 2006. Easley engaged him in the same way scores of other organizations across the nation locate speakers: She contacted the Washington Speakers Bureau.

Other speakers were found the same way, including Robert Reich and Donna Shalala, Cabinet secretaries under President Bill Clinton.

Former Sen. Bill Bradley's visit is an example of how Easley's contacts did help land a speaker. But her efforts, and fundraising surrounding some speakers, have also raised questions from government reformers.

E-mail messages show that Bradley, who is on the board of directors of the lighting technology company Raydiance, had a meeting with Gov. Easley, Mary Easley and others in February 2008.

Ed Turlington, a lobbyist who was once a deputy campaign manager for Bradley and also Gov. Easley's pick for party chairman in 2005, made the contact on behalf of Mary Easley afterward.

He wrote to Bradley a month later:
"As I discussed with you yesterday, our friend Mary Easley is going to invite you to speak ... You remember she mentioned this to you when we were meeting with Governor Easley with the Raydiance people on February 26."

Bradley received $5,000 for his talk, which was about Russia.

Easley also got some speakers at a discount. Clinton waived his typical fee, appearing this year in exchange for travel expenses and other costs that totaled more than $15,000. The Easleys campaigned for Hillary Rodham Clinton in the 2008 election.

Records also show that to pay for speakers, Easley turned to entities with interests before state government, including Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina and Progress Energy. Combined, those two gave $60,000. Other donors included AT&T and Bank of America. Checks also came from state alcohol boards, which sponsored a visit by the surgeon general.

One donor check for $1,000 came from the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association to help sponsor a panel on "green" initiatives. The association has been registered to lobby every year since 2005.

Easley secured the donation through former state Sen. Fountain Odom, who handles legal work for the association and whose wife served as Department of Health and Human Services secretary under Easley.

"Hi Fountain," Mary Easley wrote in October 2007. "Would you call your folks @ the NCSEA and let them know about this opp to help sponsor this event?"

Odom replied, "They are standing by for your requests and orders."

Advocates of government reform say such interactions are too cozy.

"The big deal here is that she raised the money while she was the wife of a sitting governor and while he was in a position to help these people," said Jane Pinsky, who heads a coalition of groups seeking lobbying and ethics reforms. "Once he's no longer governor, it's a wholly different situation."

Tough job to track

It's hard to say how much time the former first lady spends on the job or at any one task. University officials have declined to produce records tracking her work. Easley hasn't responded to a request made more than a week ago for her work calendar, which is a public record.

Even with accurate records, it may be tricky to understand where Easley has been and what she has done on any given day. Schiller, her attorney, said during the news conference last month that Easley's supervisors understood she would work at odd hours and outside the office.

"Historically -- and this is true of academics, whether you're in Mary's position or some other department in the university -- you do a lot of work from home," said Schiller, responding to journalists who had staked out her office for several days without seeing her. "And so Mary does some of her work from home.

"The appropriate supervisors at the university know that. So she comes and goes and does things at night and on the weekends, and she's been around."

But the university's lone pre-law adviser, Mary A. Tetro, has seen little of Easley. The two were to work together to develop new seminars, internships and other law-related programs. For the academic year that ends in three weeks, their collaboration has consisted of a single formal meeting, a handful of e-mail messages and a few casual conversations after chance
encounters, Tetro said in an interview.

Their lone meeting came 11 months into the academic year. It was the same day that Oblinger and Bowles called on Easley to resign.

Tetro also said that she was not aware of Easley attending any of about 20 events that Tetro organized for pre-law students.

Easley also is part of a team working with Campbell University to create a dual graduate degree in law and public administration.

Jerrell D. Coggburn, chairman of the Public and International Affairs Department, said that he and another faculty member did most of the nuts-and-bolts work, but that Easley performed well.

Her work has consisted of a few meetings -- "more than two, less than five," Coggburn said -- but a goodly amount of work took place via e-mail and phone calls.

Easley was a key player in getting the idea started, he said, and since then has acted as a taskmaster and facilitator, making sure officials from both universities worked together smoothly. She also was a troubleshooter when the tricky process was slowed by administrative hurdles, he said.

"I think she did what was expected and did a good job of it," he said.

She also met expectations at the smallest of her four tasks: teaching.

Still, she is paid nearly five times as much for that part of her work as someone with similar qualifications doing the same job -- and nearly five times as much as she herself made teaching the same kind of class before her job was retooled last year.

Easley was tasked with teaching half a class for police supervisors in the fall and half a class in the spring. Teaching the other half was Ike Avery, a former state deputy attorney general. He was paid about $2,700 per semester, or a total of about $5,400, said James R. Horner, director of the popular Administrative Officers Management Program.

Before Easley's job was upgraded last year, she was paid the same as Avery, Horner said.

The deal for Easley struck last summer allocated that work to 15 percent of her job; and 15 percent of her salary is $25,500.

jay.price@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4526

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**SPECIAL MEETINGS**

The executive committee of the N.C. State University Board of Trustees held an emergency teleconference meeting Sunday night, university officials said in a news release.

In addition, a hastily called meeting of the school's full board of trustees will take place at 2 p.m. today, NCSU officials said late Sunday.

Burley Mitchell, a trustee and former chief justice of the state Supreme Court, said he was unaware of the subject of today's meeting.

Numerous NCSU and university system officials declined to react to disclosures in Sunday's News & Observer that a payout package for former NCSU Provost Larry Nielsen will give him a larger salary for much longer than previously disclosed, a deal that will pay him an
additional $267,500 to transition back to a faculty role by 2012. NCSU Chancellor James Oblinger offered a different account of his payment package from what has now been revealed.

Reached at his Chapel Hill office late Sunday evening, UNC system President Erskine Bowles declined to comment.

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- Read the series about perks of Mike Easley’s power.

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