THE DAILY CLIPS

June 9, 2009

News, commentary, and opinion
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Senior sendoff emotional for ECU's baseball team

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Monday, June 08, 2009

East Carolina baseball coach Billy Godwin wouldn't comment Sunday evening about the seven senior players who'd just ended their ECU careers.

It's not that Godwin had nothing to say about them. The players in question had largely been the backbone of the Pirates' three trips to the NCAA postseason in the last three seasons.

Instead of offering comment about his departing seniors after North Carolina completed a two-game sweep of the Pirates in the NCAA Super Regional in Chapel Hill, Godwin invoked a well-traveled baseball adage from the movie "A League of Their Own": There's no crying in baseball.

Before he began fielding questions from the media, he asked not be asked about his seniors for that reason.

Godwin wasn't the only one fighting his emotions in the wake of the Pirates' pair of losses Saturday and Sunday. Brandon Henderson and Ryan Wood — who along with Stephen Batts, Drew Schieber, Trent Ashcraft, Bailey Daniels and Britton Cole played their final games for ECU Sunday — arrived at the postgame with understandably red eyes.

"Just what they've meant to me is unbelievable," Wood said of his senior teammates. "I've grown up with them — Brandon, Schieber, Batts and Bailey — I've been playing with them the last four years. As far as what they've meant to East Carolina — I think a ton, at least I hope so, and I know the coaches do. But we've got a good ball club behind us too."

Next generation

ECU freshman pitcher Kevin Brandt got to ride many highs this season, most notably being the man on the mound for the Pirates' memorable regular season victories over UNC and N.C. State.

In Sunday's 9-3 setback to the Tar Heels, the freshman All-America selection also got a taste of the lows which are inevitably a part of baseball, suffering just his second loss of the season but doing so with his team facing elimination.

Perhaps now the southpaw will have multiple perspectives on which to draw inspiration. Riding an 8-1 record into the Super Regional, Brandt admitted that UNC's hitters were much tougher this time around.

"They came out ready to hit (Sunday)," Brandt said. "I just tried to pitch the same. I don't know if they changed their game plan, but they came out hitting."

Brandt said the Tar Heels' bats seemed to find his pitches even though he felt his stuff was as good Sunday as it had been most of the season.

"I'm always trying to get a first-pitch strike," Brandt said. "They were seeing the ball and hitting the ball on a first-pitch strike like they knew it was coming."

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@coxnc.com or (252)329-9595.
Editorial: Another step - Pirates mark progress in journey

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

The dream of making the College World Series may be dashed, but this weekend’s losses should not overshadow a remarkable season by the East Carolina University baseball team. With a regular season conference title and a remarkable regional performance to their credit, the Pirates enjoyed a season to remember.

It would be easy to allow a disappointing finish to overwhelm those accomplishments. But the destination should not be allowed to obscure the journey, and fans enjoyed quite a ride with this Pirate team.

Watching their instate rivals celebrate in the middle of the diamond on Sunday, it would be easy to feel bad for the East Carolina baseball team and their fans. Each year, the ambitious goal remains to win a bid to the College World Series in Omaha. It has yet to be fulfilled, and it hurts to fall short.

But to focus on that goal at the exclusion of all else would be a mistake.

Led by Head Coach Billy Godwin’s steady hand, the Pirates played excellent baseball this year. They earned a regular-season title in Conference USA, one of the toughest conferences in the nation, and earned the right to host an NCAA regional, the first since building Clark-LeClair Stadium in Greenville.

A magical run in that tournament — including three straight victories in elimination games — landed East Carolina the school’s third super regional birth. Unfortunately, North Carolina proved too strong an opponent this year.

It is discouraging the Pirates came up short, but the measure of success remains the sport’s highest mountain. The journey to Omaha will take at least another year, but East Carolina should proudly mark each step in that journey.

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Letter: Cheering loudly for player's gifts, life skills

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

In a world where so much of the news is filled with negative stories, reading the June 3 article about ECU basketball standout, Brock Young, was very refreshing.

My son’s love of the game came from watching the No. 10 jersey last season. It may have been his “Jack Sparrow” braided hair that first caught Britton’s eye, but he quickly became a fan of his skills on the court. Everyone knows Young is a great basketball player; after reading this article, however, I am now an even bigger fan of his compassion, kindness and character.

As I read the article out loud to my 7-year-old son, the words were difficult to see through my tears. Oh, how seeing Young must have brightened 6-year-old Aaron Thomas’s endless days in the hospital. I can only imagine the appreciation and love Thomas’s mom must feel for this basketball star’s commitment to her dying son ... a truly priceless gift.

Sure, we all dream of raising a child with incredible athletic abilities, but what a different world we’d all live in if we raised them with Young’s level of empathy and consideration for others. So this fall, as my family cheers loudly for Brock Young, No. 10, his skills on the basketball court will be the least of what we are celebrating.

PAIGE

LAUGHINGHOUSE

Greenville_SPG8

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ECU medical student takes program for youth to hometown of Pembroke

An East Carolina University medical student will spend a few weeks this summer in his hometown hoping to make a lasting impact on the health of local youth.

Bryan Howington, who just completed his first year at the Brody School of Medicine at ECU, has organized a healthy lifestyle program in his hometown of Pembroke aimed at helping young people learn to eat better, exercise and make healthful lifestyle choices.

Howington, a recipient of a Brody Medical Scholarship, organized the program through his scholarship, which allows students to design a summer enrichment experience. Howington's project will be funded by a $2,500 grant from the Brody Foundation. The funds will be used to purchase exercise equipment and supplies, and cover other expenses.

Working with Howington are Tala Smith and Shaun Deese - fellow medical students, Pembroke natives and Lumbee Indians. Howington and Deese hope to become pediatricians after medical school, and Smith favors family medicine. All three are graduates of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

"Being from Pembroke, we all recognize the health disparities and the need," Howington said. "And we all want to go back home and practice."

In the 2000 census, 38 percent of Robeson County's 123,339 people were Native American. Among Native Americans, heart disease is by far the leading killer in North Carolina, according to the N.C. Center for Health Statistics. Cancer is second, and diabetes is third. The death rate from diabetes is more than twice as high for Indians as for whites.

Howington's goals are to teach young people about health, nutrition and exercise through a two-week program. It's part of a larger summer program the Pembroke Housing Authority is holding at the Olivia Maynor Revels Community Building on Locklear Street. The program runs from June 15 to July 1.

"We're counting on it being a big part of what we're going to do this summer, and we think it's going to make a difference," Lemark Harris, executive director of the Pembroke Housing Authority, said.

For more information about the summer program, contact the housing authority at (910) 521-9711.

The Brody Medical Scholarship Program at ECU offers scholarships to incoming medical students who show high scholarship ability with evidence of leadership, service, moral character and a promise of distinction in medicine. The scholarship provides full tuition and fees and most living expenses for four years of medical school.

Visiting scholar to speak at exhibit's closing

The faculty and staff of Joyner Library's Special Collections Department at ECU will host a closing presentation and reception for the A.R. Ammons Poetry and Art Exhibit on June 29.

Visiting scholar Robert M. West, associate professor of English at Mississippi State University, will present "The Shape/Things Will Take: Looking Ahead to the Complete Poems of A.R. Ammons." West's talk will complete his weeklong research stint at ECU.

The A.R. Ammons exhibit is drawn from material given to the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences by Reid and Susan Overcash. The couple acquired the materials from Stuart Wright, an expa...
trait North Carolinian and Ammons’ longtime publisher and friend who had collected it over many years. Reid Overcash, an ECU alumnus, and Wright were childhood friends, born and raised in Roxboro in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.

The Overcashes donated the Ammons Papers to the Special Collections Department of the Joyner Library.

The presentation will be held on June 29 at 3 p.m. in Administrative Conference Room 2409, Joyner Library, second floor. The final viewing of the exhibit will begin at 4 p.m. in the Special Collections Department on the library’s fourth floor. Joyner faculty and staff will provide refreshments. This event is free and open to the public.

purposes.

“I want these kids to have the opportunity to develop relationships with ECU faculty,” said Lopez, a communication major who served as SGA Freshman Class President. “By the professors serving as mentors to minority populations, the students will be encouraged to advance certain liberal arts skills they may already possess such as writing, poetry, writing music, playing music, drawing, painting and public speaking.”

Lopez, a graduate of J.H. Rose High School, is a first-generation college student.

She invested in this project for a simple reason: She wants to make a difference in the world. “I’ve always wanted to be involved in politics and have a direct influence on my community and country,” she said.

Her vision for the project is clear and explains the group’s name. “Escape is but a mere description of how I want the kids in my program to know it’s not about where you start, it’s about where you end,” she said. “Here they can ‘escape’ any unfortunate circumstances they find themselves in with determination and faith.”

Lopez hopes to start allowing youth into the program this fall or next spring.

Lopez has been awarded the Kiwanis Club of Greater Greenville Scholarship, a Golden LEAF Scholarship, and the First in My Family Essence Scholarship, all based on high academic achievement, volunteer service and community involvement.

Student’s nonprofit to help minority youth

An ECU sophomore has organized and launched a nonprofit aimed at pairing local middle and high school students with ECU faculty and staff for mentoring and tutoring.

Ariel Lopez, 18, of Greenville designed the Escape Foundation to provide underprivileged youth opportunities to enhance their talents, become effective citizens, improve their educational abilities and discover their
Mary Easley is fired; Oblinger resigns

Documents show the NCSU chancellor was aware of the effort to
employ the first lady in 2005.

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

N.C. State Chancellor James L. Oblinger resigned and former first lady Mary Easley was fired Monday in a stunning new round of fallout over her job at the university.

They join two earlier casualties: the provost who hired her, Larry Nielsen; and McQueen Campbell, the trustees' chairman and Easley family friend who suggested the idea to Oblinger. Both stepped down last month.

University trustees said that it's not clear whether anything illegal occurred and that most of the problems could have been prevented if those involved had been forthright from the beginning.

Oblinger's resignation came minutes before the university released documents showing that he had conferred with Campbell and members of then-Gov. Mike Easley's staff to secure a job for Mary Easley in 2005.

Oblinger originally maintained that he wasn't involved. He said in a resignation letter Monday that he had simply forgotten his role and had not intentionally done anything wrong.

He said he was quitting "because that is what leaders do when the institutions they lead come under distracting and undue public scrutiny," he wrote. "This is particularly true for leaders of public institutions."

His resignation came after days of shifting explanations about a buyout deal he struck with Nielsen the day before the provost quit.

In 2005, Nielsen, then the interim provost, hired Mary Easley. He gave her an 88 percent pay increase last year that took her annual salary to $170,000. The raise violated UNC-system policy, and later the system's Board of Governors had to review it, and then voted to approve it.

In an emergency meeting Monday afternoon, the N.C. State trustees voted unanimously to end Mary Easley's contract, which had four years remaining. Trustee Burley Mitchell, a former state supreme court chief justice who moved to terminate the contract, said it was in the best interest of the university and because Easley's duties no longer exist.

University leaders ended one project last month that was listed as 35 percent of her job, citing budget cuts. A House committee voted last week to end funding for another component of her post, a speakers series that she ran.

Events move quickly

Easley's attorney, Marvin Schiller of Raleigh, said Monday that he might issue a statement, but not immediately.

"There have been many events that have occurred this morning and this afternoon and I haven't had time to assess them," Schiller said.

UNC-system President Erskine Bowles, who was Oblinger's boss, sat in on the closed meeting as the trustees decided to fire Easley, then joined trustee Chairman Bob Jordan in a news conference. Jordan was elected to finish the last few weeks of Campbell's term, but said he does not plan to seek a full term once that is done.

Bowles said that he had believed Oblinger, but lost confidence in him after reading e-mail messages that show how Oblinger, Campbell and others had worked to secure the N.C. State job for Mary Easley.

The university has provided those e-mails to a federal grand jury conducting a wide-ranging
investigation of Mike Easley after getting subpoenas. Investigators are looking into trips he took on private aircraft, the use of cars by his family, and a coastal land deal in which the governor obtained a waterfront lot at a low price.

"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 in his resignation letter. "A handful of those documents -- all emails -- indicate that I was made aware of Mrs. Easley's potential availability as a faculty member by 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."

Nielsen, like Oblinger, cited the intense scrutiny over Easley as the reason for quitting, and said he had done nothing wrong.

Former UNC-Charlotte Chancellor Jim Woodward will serve as N.C. State's interim chancellor, Bowles said.

Gov. Perdue's reaction

Gov. Beverly Perdue released a statement calling Oblinger's resignation the right move.

"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."

Bowles said the past weekend had been one of the worst in his life. He said he had been an Oblinger fan and that NCSU had thrived under the chancellor, hitting milestones such as raising $1.3 billion for the university from private sources, and undertaking more than $1 billion in construction.

Questions about Oblinger's handling of Nielsen's benefit package began last week. Initially, Oblinger said that he had given Nielsen a six-month study leave at his full provost pay, $298,700, which would then fall to $156,715 as Nielsen returned to teaching. The deal, which Oblinger described as typical in academia, had been part of Nielsen's contract when he got the job in 2005, the chancellor said.

But on Saturday, university officials changed the story, saying that Nielsen would be paid at an elevated level for 18 months. Hours later, they changed the story yet again, saying that a higher salary actually would continue three years.

On Sunday, the university released documents that showed that 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. Oblinger's resignation letter indicated that he would say no more about 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."

Both Bowles and Jordan said they were unaware that Oblinger had changed the payout package the day before Nielsen resigned. Bowles said it violates university policy and will be taken up soon by trustees.
Buyout still possible

Buyout packages have become a big part of the controversy, but Mary Easley herself may not get one. No package is mentioned in her brief contract, though university officials said they have to do some research before saying for sure that she wouldn't get one.

Oblinger will return to teaching at the university. He 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, Bowles said.

Oblinger joined the faculty at N.C. State in 1986, then was dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 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 the school.

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," he wrote.

Jordan, a former North Carolina lieutenant governor, said during the trustees meeting and again in the news conference that Oblinger loved the university too much to have ever intentionally done anything that would hurt it.

Jordan led the search committee that picked Oblinger for the job and made it clear he still felt the decision was one of the best the university had made.

"I've worked with a lot of chancellors, but [Oblinger] has done more in the four or five years he has been here than any of them," said Jordan, who has been involved in N.C. State affairs since 1961.

"Just because someone can't remember something, and just because they made a mistake, doesn't mean it's intentional," he said. "This is a tough day."

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E-mail messages chronicle the hiring of Easley

Excerpts of messages about the hiring of former first lady Mary Easley by N.C. State University:

From Jim Svara, then a professor and head of the Department of Political Science & Public Administration at NCSU, to Dan Gerlach, then a senior adviser to Gov. Mike Easley, April 25, 2005: "It was good to talk with you this morning. I suspect that this matter falls into the miscellaneous category in your job description. Attached is a list of courses. Except for PS205 and the 500-level which are usually taught by members of the regular faculty, we use visiting instructors in all the other courses. We would be happy to have an ongoing relationship with Mary Easley to teach one or two courses a semester in addition to the AOMP teaching. Her title would be Teaching (or Extension) Assistant Professor. Our normal salary is $4,000 per course."

From Gerlach to Svara, April 25, 2005: "Would it be possible to consider her for something closer to regular faculty status?"

From Gerlach to McQueen Campbell, chairman of the NCSU board of trustees, April 27, 2005: (Jim refers to Svara.) "I asked Jim to keep this between me and him, which is why people up the food chain don't know about the conversation."

From James Oblinger, NCSU chancellor, to Campbell, April 27, 2005: "It's obvious that our poly sci people would like to have her on board. 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? I recall you using that word this morning along with a salary figure. Is that what we need to be doing, i.e., contract and salary in that range???????? Please advise. Jim."

From Campbell to Oblinger, April 27, 2005: "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 to explain."

From Oblinger to Campbell, April 27, 2005:

(Dean Brady is Linda Brady, then dean of NCSU's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. "COM" is NCSU's College of Management)

"MCQ: ok, I have a call into Dean Brady--and I think there are COM possibilities, as well. More as I know it. ....... Jim"

From Oblinger to Campbell, April 28, 2005:

(CHASS is the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.)

"MCQ: Have spoken with both deans--should hear back today or tomorrow. CHASS particularly interested; COM so new is discretely checking potential use. I must speak with Provost as this is an academic matter--appointment, contract, etc. Am thinking contact mediated by me but discussion of subject matter by the dean with her, ok?"

From Oblinger to Campbell, April 29, 2005: "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. Jim."

From Campbell to Oblinger, April 30, 2005: "The Gov called me back today and Mary is interested and would like to meet with you as soon as possible. She is tied up with school until 11am. Monday so she could probably meet with you after 1130am. What I planned to do was meet her so that I could introduce her to you then I would leave you two to your business. Let me know if you can work it in your schedule Monday late morning or afternoon and I will set it up. Also I'd like to chat with you before you two meet to bring you up to speed on my talks with Easley."

From Larry Nielsen, NCSU provost, to Campbell, May 11, 2005:

(Weiss is Ira Weiss, dean of NCSU's College of Management.)

"Dear McQueen: Just wanted to let you know that I've spoken again to Mrs. Easley, and things are proceeding famously. Both deans (Brady and Weiss) and I have agreed to a teaching plan and an overall plan. We're setting up a meeting for early next week for the deans, Mrs. Easley and I to get together, just so we get to know each other. Then I'll have a contract worked out, hopefully by next week. We also agreed today that a 3-year contract is best, as that is our usual practice--she's happy with that. So, it's a go! Larry"

From Nielsen to Campbell, May 19, 2005: "Dear McQueen: On Tuesday, Mary met with me and Deans Brady and Weiss, and we agreed on the work plan for the coming year. I'm getting the contract drafted now, so we can get everything signed, sealed and delivered! Larry"

From Campbell to Nielsen, May 19, 2005: "Great! The meeting obviously went well and I chatted with the Gov last week and he says she's very excited about it and he said if we take this seriously, which I assured him we were, this could really be a great program for everyone involved. I think she can really take this program to a new level!"

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Related Content

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In April 2008, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, center, chats with, from left, N.C. State board of trustees Chairman McQueen Campbell, Chancellor James Oblinger, first lady Mary Easley and Gov. Mike Easley before a tour of a research facility on NCSU's Centennial Campus.
N.C. State News Service photo

Top-level talks led to job for Easley

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

Newly released documents show that Mary Easley's N.C. State University job was arranged at the highest levels of state government and that then-Gov. Mike Easley was directly involved.

E-mail messages that university lawyers made public Monday show that a key aide to Mike Easley approached top N.C. State officials in April 2005, touching off a negotiation that resulted in a position for the first lady. The records show that James Oblinger, the university's chancellor, and trustee McQueen Campbell, a longtime friend of the Easleys, were integral to the creation of the position.

Averell "Ace" Smith, a political operative and friend of the former governor, downplayed Mike Easley's role, saying late Monday that it was "false and misleading to in any way insinuate that Gov. Easley 'orchestrated' Mary Easley's hiring."

Until now, officials had said no one was involved in Mary Easley's hiring besides former Provost Larry Nielsen, who records show created the position with a three-year contract to oversee a speakers series and help teach a class.

Oblinger has maintained that he could not recall any events surrounding the creation of Mary Easley's job, which was filled without a search.

UNC system President Erskine Bowles said he first read the e-mail messages Friday.

"Those e-mails made me feel sick," Bowles said. "I had believed the chancellor. ... But when I saw these e-mails and the extent of the involvement, it was much more difficult for me to believe."

Talks between Bowles and Oblinger took place over the weekend, Bowles said, and Oblinger then offered his resignation.

The e-mail messages show that the job discussions were started by Dan Gerlach, who was Easley's chief fiscal adviser and now heads a foundation that distributes money from the national tobacco settlement. Gerlach handed off the issue to Campbell. The ties between Campbell and the Easleys
were reported in a two-part series in The News & Observer in May.

Mary Easley secured the position a month after the first talks. Last summer, she received a new, five-year, $850,000 contract that officials say Nielsen handled.

Campbell had denied speaking about Mary Easley's job with anyone but later acknowledged that he may have passed information to Oblinger.

The e-mail messages released Monday show Campbell, who at the time headed the trustees' personnel committee, was more deeply involved.

Bowles and N.C. State Board of Trustees Chairman Bob Jordan both said the documents alone do not indicate anything criminal took place. A federal grand jury is probing issues surrounding the former governor, including the Mary Easley hiring. The e-mail messages have been given to federal authorities.

Bowles said the chancellor should have been more forthcoming.

"If he had just said, when asked about it, that, 'Yes, they came to me; I thought it was a good idea; I passed it along to the people who work here for them to explore and follow up on,' then I think that would have been the end of it," Bowles said.

"But that didn't happen."

Quiet discussions

The e-mail messages indicate that Gerlach made the first contacts on behalf of the Easleys quietly. "People up the food chain don’t know," Gerlach wrote.

In an interview Monday, Gerlach said that the governor approached him about possibilities at N.C. State because Gerlach was teaching a course there. At the time, Mary Easley was teaching law at N.C. Central. Gerlach said he didn’t think that it would raise many eyebrows for her to shift from one school to the other.

Mike Easley "said the first lady's contract is coming up at N.C. Central and, you know, it's kind of a hassle driving all the way over there, and she's done what's she done over there, and is thinking about doing something different," Gerlach said. "He kind of ruminated about this -- would you check it. Would there be anything for her to do over there in law or business?"

Gerlach said he contacted Jim Svara, then head of the political science department. "I was feeling him out," Gerlach said. Gerlach said the governor asked him to forward his exchanges to Campbell, who took it from there.

Campbell sent the e-mail exchange to Andy Willis, who was lobbying lawmakers and the governor on behalf of N.C. State. Willis is now Gov. Beverly Perdue’s lobbyist.

That same day, Oblinger wrote to Campbell, saying Mary Easley would be a welcome addition:

"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? I recall you using that word this morning along with a salary figure."

Campbell wrote back to Oblinger, appearing to refer obliquely to a salary number they discussed.

"I think that is more what he had in mind to try and get her at least where she is now," Campbell wrote. "I can speak more in person later."

The next day, Oblinger wrote 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."

Campbell wrote 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 (?)"

Nielsen then took over and began working out a plan for Mary Easley.

On May 19, Nielsen wrote to Campbell that he had met with Mary Easley and two deans, and that the job was settled.

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."

Easley was hired May 26 by Nielsen, who was interim provost at the time. He waived a search and created the position as part of the provost's office.

In a statement issued Monday, Oblinger said he did not recall any of it until reading the e-mail messages.

"The e-mails themselves indicate that I referred the issue to the appropriate university officials and they indicate no impropriety in the process," he wrote.

Easley's 'sterling record'

Mike Easley's friend, Smith, said Monday that Mary Easley was hired on her merits.

"Mary Easley was hired for her sterling record at NCCU, as a prosecutor and the unique skills she brought to this position," Smith said. "Furthermore, this has nothing to do with the present contract. Three people discussed that contract -- the provost, the chancellor and Mary Easley. It is unfortunate that people want to play political football with the distinguished career of a talented woman."

Jordan, the board chairman who is a former lieutenant governor and longtime N.C. State supporter, said questions about Oblinger's actions were "nitpicking."

"There are some things we didn't know all about," he said in a news conference. "In nothing we have examined have we seen any criminal intent or any intent to defraud. ... It's not fair to come in here and try to nitpick little stuff to try to tell a story. Y'all did the chancellor. Y'all took off after him and these little nitpicking things."

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Interim chief led UNCC 16 years

He saw it through transformation

BY JIM MORRILL, The Charlotte Observer

Jim Woodward can't quite seem to retire.

Not long after stepping down as chancellor of UNC-Charlotte in 2005, he agreed to join the state's lottery commission after scandal chased out Commissioner Kevin Geddings. For the past three years, he also has served as an adviser to the university system and taught graduate courses at UNCC.

On Monday, he took on another job -- as interim chancellor at N.C. State University.

Woodward, 69, will replace Chancellor James Oblinger, who resigned under fire for his role in the hiring of former first lady Mary Easley. UNC system President Erskine Bowles offered the job to Woodward on Sunday.

"It's hard for me to tell Erskine no," Woodward said Monday. "And I have a sense of how traumatic it is for a university to lose a chancellor."

In Woodward, NCSU gets both an insider and an outsider, a leader who knows the political landscape and has the ability to put fresh eyes on the NCSU situation.

UNCC accomplishments

Woodward was UNCC's longest-serving chancellor, spending 16 years in the job. He changed the face of campus through a $350 million building program. He saw the school become one of the state's four public research institutions.

Energetic but low-key, he built a reputation as a consensus-builder, always giving credit to others.
"He's always listened to the people around him ... before he makes a decision," said Phil Dubois, Woodward's successor, who served under him as provost. "I worked for him for six and a half years. I couldn't have asked for a better boss."

Ray Farris, a Charlotte attorney who served 12 years on the UNC system's Board of Governors, said Woodward "can be firm when he wants to be."

"His judgment is good, and he has good political instincts," Farris said. "He can make a hard decision without offending people. He's straight-up. He'll tell you what he thinks."

Plans for NCSU

Woodward expects to start meeting with NCSU's faculty and student leaders right away.

"It's not what I consider to be a troubled campus," he says. "It's one that's had good leadership. My goal will be, to the extent I can, to continue to guide the university in the direction that Jim Oblinger has taken it."

He'll serve until a new chancellor is found. Bob Jordan, the chairman of N.C. State's board of trustees, said Woodward will help fill other key vacancies.

"He reads people well," said Jordan, who spent eight years on UNCC's board during Woodward's tenure. "He knows how to get along with people, he knows how to evaluate people, ... and we need to build a new team here at N.C. State."

Woodward, who earned a doctorate in engineering at Georgia Tech, hoped for a career with NASA before finding his home in academia. In his spare time, he makes cherry and walnut furniture in his garage. He's an avid hiker who has trekked in the Italian Alps and plans a 10-day hike next month with his son through Nova Scotia.

His new job takes Woodward back to a school where he taught for a year four decades ago.

"This in many ways is like going home again," he said. "I would rather go as a visitor, though."

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Hard falls

Mary Easley was hired at N.C. State after strings were pulled, and she and the university's top official now pay the price.

At some point quite early in the going, the unpleasant reality must have dawned on Jim Oblinger: He had gotten himself into a situation that could not withstand the light of day.

If the full circumstances that surrounded N.C. State University's 2005 hiring of then-first lady Mary Easley became publicly known, there would be no hiding the fact that Oblinger, as the university chancellor, had allowed himself to be enlisted in a scheme that fell somewhere on the spectrum between unseemly and corrupt. He thus had betrayed his duty to defend the university against politically powerful, self-serving meddlers.

From then, things only grew worse. Sins of omission and commission were compounded. Yesterday, with Oblinger's resignation, came the downfall that had been set in motion four years ago. And to cap it off came the university's decision that Mary Easley, too, had to leave.

All it took for the scandal to mushroom was for facts to emerge -- facts about the string-pulling, the special deals and the failures of candor that accompanied the Easley hiring and its embarrassing aftermath. Those facts have been laid out in recent days by The N&O, which yesterday reported communications showing that former Gov. Mike Easley had been personally involved in arranging for NCSU to offer his wife a job.

The governor's behest

No surprise there to the cynics, perhaps, but it nevertheless amounts to a brazen abuse of his clout as governor. A governor has plenty of patronage appointments at his disposal and awards them with few questions asked. But he has no right to award a nice job to his wife -- or to lean on university administrators to take care of her.

As it happens, Mary Easley's original position morphed into one paying $170,000 a year for work that, as an N&O story yesterday illustrated, hardly seemed to justify such generosity. Her duties as an executive in residence included lining up notables for a university speakers series and sharing the teaching load for one course per semester (for which her rate of compensation was about five times that of her colleague).

She also was supposed to set up and administer a center dealing with leadership in the public safety sphere. These could have been worthwhile activities, but the cobbled-together nature of her position made the value of the whole less than the sum of the parts.

Larry Nielsen, the university's interim provost at the time, maintained that he had decided to hire Mary Easley on his own initiative. That turned out to be pure hokum. Board of Trustees chairman McQueen Campbell, an influential Mike Easley political supporter and patronage beneficiary, acknowledged that he'd been a go-between as Mary Easley sought to move from her law professor's job at N.C. Central University in Durham to a position with NCSU.
In the fallout from that disclosure, Nielsen -- on whom Oblinger had bestowed the regular provost's position, jumping him ahead of four other candidates -- decided to return to the faculty. Oblinger announced that his severance package included a six-month continuation of his $298,700 provost's pay. Except that it came to light over the weekend, in reporting by The N&O's J. Andrew Crliss, that Nielsen's salary actually was scheduled to drop in steps to the level of a professor's over three years -- making his windfall even more lucrative.

Those were the terms set last month by Oblinger in a deal with Nielsen that was not cleared by the Board of Trustees. (The board by then was minus the services of McQueen Campbell, who resigned after confessing his role to Erskine Bowles, president of the UNC system.) Did Oblinger think those terms, which Bowles yesterday said appear to have breached university policy, could be kept secret indefinitely?

Of course by then Oblinger must have realized that he was badly compromised because of his own part in the Mary Easley matter. That role was illuminated through e-mails compiled by the university as it cooperates with an investigation being carried out by the U.S. attorney's office in Raleigh.

The messages make for an awkward chronicle. Dan Gerlach, Easley's budget adviser, opened discussions with Campbell. The trustees chair got word to Oblinger, who responded favorably and appeared eager to accommodate the governor. Details as to Mary Easley's teaching assignment could be worked out with Nielsen, he suggested -- an appropriate delegation of responsibility to the chief academic officer, but one about which Oblinger failed to be forthright until it was too late.

Righting the ship

To lose a leader amid scandal can be traumatic for an organization, especially in the case of a chancellor who seemed capable and well-regarded. Mary Easley herself could have been a fine asset to the state's largest public university had her hiring not occurred under circumstances that the university itself finally was unwilling to defend.

Campus trustees and system president Bowles now have a heavy responsibility to find new leaders who can restore confidence in university executives' integrity and put N.C. State back on an even keel. Bowles' selection of UNC-Charlotte chancellor emeritus Jim Woodard to step in as Oblinger's interim replacement seems like an apt move. And the university's posture of disclosure and cooperation with authorities, for which the new trustees chair, former Lt. Gov. Bob Jordan, can share the credit, stands to go far toward healing its self-inflicted wounds.

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