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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
   252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
Blount appointed special superior court judge

The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

A Greenville attorney who served recently on the state Board of Transportation has been appointed to serve as a special superior court judge for the next five years.

Marvin K. Blount III was appointed to the position by Gov. Beverly Perdue, the governor’s office announced Monday.

"I'm looking forward to it and feel honored to have been appointed," the 44-year-old Blount said Tuesday afternoon. "I've enjoyed being a lawyer and working with the law and other lawyers, but I also enjoy public service. This will be a continuation of that."

Special superior court judges hear both civil and criminal cases across the state as directed by North Carolina's chief justice.

"Marvin Blount is an accomplished professional with a broad and distinguished legal background," Perdue said in a news release. "Throughout the years, Marvin has shown a strong and continuous commitment to public service. North Carolina is fortunate to have an individual of his caliber joining the bench."

The appointee is a partner with the law firm of Blount and Blount, P.C., concentrating in civil litigation including class action and pharmaceutical matters in both state and federal courts. Prior to establishing his own firm, the Greenville native was an attorney with his father’s Blount Law Firm.

Blount previously served as special assistant and counsel to the chief of staff of the U.S. Department of Justice Antitrust Division in Washington, D.C., and as an assistant advocate for the chief counsel of the U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, in Washington, D.C.

Blount served on the Transportation Board for the eastern region, the East Carolina University Board of Visitors and the board of Pitt County Communities in Schools. He is also a member of "Keep Greenville Beautiful."

Blount attended East Carolina University, graduating Magna Cum Laude in 1993, and earned his law degree at Wake Forest University School of Law in 1996.

Judge Thomas D. Haigwood of Greenville retired April 30 as a special superior court judge. The former county prosecutor was appointed to the post in 1999 by then-Gov. Jim Hunt and was reappointed by Gov. Mike Easley for a second term.

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E-mail shot Oblinger's story down

'You could have knocked us over,' Erskine Bowles says

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

Late Friday afternoon, James Oblinger called his boss, Erskine Bowles.

They needed to talk, said Oblinger, N.C. State University's chancellor, and he headed west to
the Chapel Hill office of Bowles, president of the 16-campus UNC system.

Oblinger carried with him a package of e-mail messages. The men sat down, and the UNC system's lawyer and the chief finance officer joined the meeting.

Oblinger started talking, Bowles said, and the lawyer started reading the e-mail, at times out loud.

"You could have knocked us over," Bowles said.

Oblinger in recent weeks had constructed a simple story as questions mounted about how NCSU had hired the state's first lady, Mary Easley. He said he didn't remember. Other N.C. State officials said the interim provost, Larry Nielsen, had handled it alone.

The e-mail messages brought that story down. They showed extensive involvement by the chancellor and others, including at least 12 contacts in 2005 between Oblinger and a trustee who acted as a go-between for then-Gov. Mike Easley. The e-mails show the governor took an active role in the job's creation and salary.

Bowles said in an interview Tuesday that the messages made it hard for him to believe Oblinger.

Bowles and others provided a detailed account about the tumultuous days and four key moments that led to Monday's firing of Mary Easley and Oblinger's resignation. By far, the most crucial was in the Chapel Hill office as the e-mails were read. At that moment, Bowles said, he knew this problem was so big that the job of NCSU's 13th chancellor was in jeopardy.

Oblinger has not commented, and he said he would not be available for an interview because of a continuing federal investigation that has sought information about Mary Easley's hiring. But on Friday in Chapel Hill, the chancellor once known for his ability to remember things and hold onto details instead was faced with what he has called an embarrassing lapse in memory.

The messages showed that Oblinger helped orchestrate the formation of the position with trustee McQueen Campbell, a real-estate broker and close friend of the Easleys.

"I did not recall those communications until reviewing the e-mails," Oblinger said in a statement.

A few knew the truth

Records show that others knew the story put forward about Nielsen acting alone was false.

Nielsen was foremost. Two deans and a high-ranking administrator at N.C. State also knew. Dan Gerlach, a key aide to Easley who made the first contacts on behalf of the governor, knew as well.

Asked why he didn't speak up, Gerlach said he was frozen by the federal investigation, which has touched on trips the Easley's took on private aircraft, cars used by his family and a coastal land deal in which the governor obtained a waterfront lot at a low price.

"They have investigations going ... and I didn't know if it was appropriate for me to start talking about things," Gerlach said. "I want to make sure I have the complete facts before me before I were to comment on any of this. And I didn't know if somebody with a badge on was going to show up and start asking me questions. I talked to no one."

In late April, The News & Observer asked Linda Brady, a former dean at N.C. State who is now the chancellor at UNC-Greensboro, about Mary Easley's hiring. "I wasn't involved in that," she said. "I'm sorry that I can't help you."
But Tuesday, she issued a statement saying she had been contacted in spring 2005 by Oblinger regarding a teaching position for Mary Easley. Brady said she had no knowledge of how the actual job was formed.

On March 11, in an interview at The N&O, Campbell was adamant about how the governor's wife was hired. He said he never had any conversations with anyone about her. It was Nielsen, Campbell said, who did it all.

"And I would strongly encourage you to interview any and every person over there," Campbell said. "Ask them about how Mary Easley was hired."

Neither Nielsen nor Oblinger would agree to interview requests made repeatedly during the next five weeks, prior to publication of a two-part series that related aspects of the job deal.

The Easleys have not been asked about the 2005 hiring. Mary Easley's lawyer has said nothing improper took place and she was hired on her own merits.

Four crucial moments

Bowles, who was not in the UNC-system president's job at the time of the job creation, said Oblinger's story started breaking down when he got a call from Campbell after the newspaper series. Campbell didn't disclose much, but did say that he had told Oblinger that Mary Easley was interested in joining the university.

Bowles reacted strongly, asking Campbell to resign his trustee position, though he had no power to force it. Bowles confronted Oblinger, and the chancellor said he couldn't remember the exchange.

Then, about a week ago, Brady called Bowles.

"She said she wanted me to know that Jim Oblinger had been the one who talked to her about this," Bowles said.

Bowles said he again confronted Oblinger.

"Once again, he told me he just didn't recall that," Bowles said. "I struggled some here. But that's two conversations that he didn't remember. Still, I'm sticking with him at that point."

Then, five days ago, Oblinger produced the e-mail messages.

Bowles said it made him sick.

"Oh, God, what was in these e-mails."

On Saturday, Bowles attended a graduation ceremony at the N.C. School of Science and Math, then flew to Atlanta for a meeting. He returned late in the day, amid discussions with top UNC-system officials over how to proceed.

Bowles awoke Sunday to news of a shifting story about a pay-package deal that Oblinger had cut for Nielsen that stretched over three years and is worth $300,000. Oblinger had disclosed a different, smaller deal a few days earlier.

The deal violated university rules.

"As I learned all that Sunday," Bowles said. "I just... I just... I just knew I had to go over and meet with him."

Bowles and a lawyer drove to Oblinger's house in West Raleigh.

"He offered me his resignation," Bowles said, "and I accepted."

acurliss@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4840
Two have a right to stay at NCSU, Bowles says

UNC-system President Erskine Bowles on Tuesday defended plans to keep former Chancellor James Oblinger and former Provost Larry Nielsen on the faculty at N.C. State University.

Bowles said both hold tenure and have rights to return from their administrative jobs back to their six-figure faculty positions.

"I don't know if they will decide to go back," he said. "That's their decision."

Bowles acknowledged that the Mary Easley episode has tainted both Oblinger, who resigned Monday, and Nielsen, who resigned May14.

"It appears to me that they made some bad judgments in their administrative capacities. And it appears to me they have been less than forthcoming with me and others in their administrative roles," Bowles said. "But I think both of them have had long and good service to the university, and I'd like to see them have the opportunity to go back to their roles in the faculty."

Staff writer J. Andrew Curliss

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Telltale e-mails

Electronic messages surrounding the hiring of Mary Easley do more than contradict officials' accounts.

In resigning Monday as chancellor of N.C. State University, James Oblinger cited a "handful" of e-mails from 2005 that contradict his previous denials of involvement in the university's hiring of Mary Easley. The e-mail printouts certainly do shred those denials -- UNC system President Erskine Bowles said they made him feel sick -- but they do more. They lay out in black and white an abuse of privilege that goes beyond this week's sad events at N.C. State.

Although they concern the hiring of his wife, the e-mails really tell a story whose main character is Mike Easley, the Democrat who completed two four-year terms as governor in January. The story's title could be the same as The N&O series that helped unearth the shenanigans at State and much else: "Executive Privilege."

Executive privilege is the thread tying together the former governor and several people who were either unfortunate enough to be caught up in his wake (some of them were swamped by it) or who were happy to go along for the ride -- perhaps even to provide a ride for Easley on private planes, or a free vehicle, or to broker a deal on a waterfront lot.

A federal grand jury is looking into much of this, and it will be up to the jurors and federal prosecutors to say whether they think laws were broken. The verdict on the private side of Easley's governorship, however, is in.

The N.C. State e-mail file, being made available to the grand jury, is an illuminating example. The messages show that when Mary Easley sought to change jobs, moving from a law school teaching post at N.C. Central University in Durham to N.C. State in Raleigh, the process was never above-board, never open to rival job applicants, never normal. Much of it involved not Mrs. Easley herself but Dan Gerlach, a key aide to the governor, who at Mike Easley's behest negotiated directly with McQueen Campbell, an Easley pal and key N.C. State Board of Trustees member whom Easley had named to the board.

Campbell, the e-mails show, got the university to pump up the pay it was willing to offer Mrs. Easley for a job opening that it didn't really have. Oblinger, prodded by Campbell, obliged, although he assigned the detail work to provost-to-be Larry Nielsen. Easley himself is depicted in messages from Campbell as closely involved in the whole process. (April 30, 2005, Campbell to Oblinger: "The Gov called me back today and Mary is interested and would like to meet with you as soon as possible.")

Oblinger says he didn't recall any of this until recently, when the e-mails refreshed his memory. Certainly an e-mail (from Oblinger, April 29, 2005) reading "MCQ: We're ready to move on this; next step is in the Mansion, I think" is a powerful memory aid.

The corner cutting and lack of candor at N.C. State were bad enough. Worse, though, was the sitting governor's successful effort -- call it pressure, prodding or something else -- to orchestrate a job for his wife at a public university whose fortunes he had the power to
influence. Unless the hiring process had been bend-over-backward clean and proper, it was improper even to attempt it. But for Mike Easley, it was all a perk of executive privilege.

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What the Easleys forgot

BY RUTH SHEEHAN, Staff Writer

We once had a pastor who used to tell his teenage children when they would go out with friends, "Remember who you are."

He didn't mean: Remember you're preacher's kids who would embarrass your parents if you got in trouble. Rather, he meant, remember who you are at your very core. Remember your values, follow your morals.

I've thought about our preacher's admonition a lot this week while watching the carnage at N.C. State and watching a former governor's reputation disintegrate.

I have never been an intimate of the Easleys, but I've known them for years. They were charming and smart; Mike was hilarious, a wicked mimic of others in the political sphere.

I covered Mike in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate in 1990, when he was a hard-charging prosecutor who had built a reputation putting away drug dealers. Later, as attorney general, he and my husband, Harry Payne, served together on the Council of State.

When my oldest son was born, Mary knit him a hat shaped like a strawberry.

After Mike was elected governor, I wrote a column about Mary, also a former prosecutor, being the first wife of a North Carolina governor to work outside the mansion; she continued teaching at N.C. Central.

Funny how that turned out.

In December 2001, Mike Easley appointed my husband to be chairman of the state Employment Security Commission. That's the reason I didn't write about Easley during most of his two terms.

I mention all this by way of saying that I'm not one of the longtime Easley bashers who thought he didn't do a darn thing but crash a few race cars during his years in the governor's mansion.

For those of us who liked and admired the Easleys, the last few months of revelations have been hard to comprehend.

Mary Easley was a well-respected law school professor, a natural hire for N.C. State, a no-brainer -- until she got the 88 percent pay raise and her bosses and protectors started changing their stories about the arrangements to cover their own butts.

Former Chancellor James Oblinger, he of the famed photographic recall, "forgot" that he had exchanged e-mail about the hiring of the first lady. Nor could he remember the details of Provost Larry Nielsen's payout, even though he himself sweetened those details the day before Nielsen resigned last month.

But the more troubling memory loss, it seems to me, has been by the Easleys themselves.
Mary and Mike were at one time idealistic, enthusiastic public servants hoping to crack down on crime, strengthen education and improve the lives of regular North Carolinians. Their appeal was to the common man. Heck, when Mike first got elected, there was talk the Easleys wouldn't even live in the mansion.

Somehow, though, they seemed to have lost their way.

I don't know that the Easleys ever did anything illegal. That's for the legal system to decide.

But taken all together -- the free use of cars for Mary and the Easleys' son, the free plane trips for campaign and fun, the exorbitantly paid job for Mary -- it seems the Easleys acquired a sense of entitlement.

That's something that would have been repugnant to the dynamic couple I first met years ago.

In short: They didn't remember who they were. And that, I'm afraid, is how history will remember them.

ruth.sheehan@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4828

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Jim Woodward is now at the center of the budget fray and other concerns at N.C. State University. A former chancellor at UNC-Charlotte, he came out of retirement to fill the leadership void at NCSU after the chancellor and provost quit.

Chris Seward, Staff photo by Chris Seward

Jim Woodward, interim chancellor at N.C. State University, glad-hands deans during a meeting in his office. He takes over for James Oblinger, who resigned as controversy swirled about former first lady Mary Easley.

Chris Seward, Staff photo by Chris Seward

Deans or their representatives gather at NCSU to hear Oblinger.

Chris Seward, Staff photo by Chris Seward
Interim NCSU chancellor gets down to business

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

With N.C. State University caught in a double-barreled budget and leadership crisis, its newly minted interim chancellor moved quickly Tuesday to settle the campus.

First, at his wife's suggestion, Jim Woodward hurriedly swapped the yellow necktie he had picked for one that was Wolfpack red. Then, he immediately plunged into a long day of meetings with deans, senior administrators and faculty senate leaders. He even was master of ceremonies at an awards ceremony for university employees, most of whom hadn't heard of him until a few hours earlier.

"I suspect that when you woke up Sunday morning, you did not expect to see me here today," he told the university's deans at a quick get-acquainted meeting. "And when I woke up Sunday morning, I didn't expect to see you today, either."

UNC system President Erskine Bowles named Woodward as NCSU's interim leader Monday, following the resignation of Chancellor James Oblinger.

At every chance Tuesday, Woodward tried to reinforce a message that NCSU's recent problems were confined only to the top tiers of leadership.

"Faculty and staff are wondering, are things going to change dramatically? Will what I do no longer be considered important?" Woodward said. "Well, there won't be a lot of change. It will be the same stable, supportive work environment that it was Friday."

"I want to reinforce to people that unless they let it, it doesn't have to impact you every day."

Two of the day's meetings were solely about NCSU's potential double-digit budget cuts. And with more layoffs and class trimming inevitable, the subject arose at most of the other places Woodward went, including a meeting with the deans.

"We'd be remiss if we didn't raise the topic," said Ira Weiss, dean of the College of Management.

Woodward has seen more than a few university budgets in his day: He is a veteran of 16 years at the helm of UNC-Charlotte, an unusually long tenure for a chancellor. He was involved in many budgets as he worked his way up the academic career ladder.

This time, though, is different. Woodward is parachuting into the budget fray as it reaches a peak. The legislature is working its way through draft versions of the state budget as chancellors and UNC system leaders lobby the lawmakers for smaller cuts.

Across NCSU, leaders of departments, schools and colleges are putting together proposals for a hypothetical 18 percent cut to the university's budget. They're supposed to turn in those proposals to the administration Monday.

Woodward said that if everything goes perfectly, the cuts will likely exceed 10 percent. If things go poorly, the cuts could be 16 percent to 18 percent.

Depleted leadership team

Woodward has to face this with an executive team that includes an interim provost. The same controversy that prompted Oblinger to resign -- the furor over NCSU's hiring and promotion of former first lady Mary Easley -- also led his provost to quit. NCSU's board of trustees chairman quit, too, and the trustees on Monday moved to fire Easley.
Bowles called Woodward over the weekend to ask if he would take the job. Woodward told the deans that he agreed after consulting with his wife, and did so only because he has a personal affection for the university -- his first faculty job was there -- and because of its importance to the state and nation.

"I would not have taken this position anywhere else in the country," he said. "I was happily retired."

Woodward told the deans, "My request to you is, don't let me fail to do something that's important to this institution."

Asked why he had picked Woodward, Bowles said in a written statement that he was looking for steady leadership and someone with experience running a major university. He called Woodward "solid as a rock."

Woodward was one of the UNC system's most effective and most respected chancellors, and UNC-Charlotte grew significantly under him, Bowles said.

In an interview, Woodward said that he knows state Sen. Marc Basnight and Rep. Joe Hackney from long years of working with them while he was chancellor in Charlotte. He also knows the governor and lieutenant governor well, and organized fundraising events for both after he left the UNCC post.

That edge could be crucial, because Woodward is jumping into the budget fight so late.

A pledge of openness

Bowles didn't mention it, but, in Woodward, he also got someone without much ethical baggage, which seems important given the circumstances.

Woodward was earlier appointed to the state's lottery commission, in part, to stabilize it after a member resigned over a serious conflict of interest and later was sent to prison.

At UNCC, Woodward was so careful about ethical matters that he paid for his own parking and demanded that his staffers raise questions about his expense account if there was even a minor issue. He told them they were obligated to do so.

The NCSU leaders who quit have been repeatedly criticized for not simply explaining how Easley got her job from the beginning. Woodward vowed to be completely open and always available to the media.

At UNCC, he said, it was his policy to call journalists to alert them when something went wrong rather than waiting for them to find out on their own.

"When we did something really dumb, I'd call some of the people at the [Charlotte] Observer and say, look, we did this and if you want to, come on out and we'll talk about it."

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

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East Carolina professor to dine with VP Biden

The Associated Press

GREENVILLE, N.C. - A political science professor at a North Carolina university is having dinner with Vice President Joe Biden.

East Carolina University says that Jody Baumgartner, an assistant professor of political science at the school, has been invited to dine with Biden on Tuesday night. Baumgartner and five other guests will speak with Biden about the vice presidency and how other leaders have approached the job.

The guests will also discuss with Biden about what vice presidential tactics have worked and what tactics have not.

Baumgartner authored the book "The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered," which documents how the role of vice president has changed over time.

Baumgartner said "the invitation came as quite a surprise."

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Duke Chapel's Oscar Dantzler will be featured in a documentary about words of wisdom from university custodians.

CHUCK LIDDY, Staff photo by Chuck Liddy

Dantzler is equally careful about chair arrangements and topics such as the chapel's stained glass. 'He likes the history, and he wants it to be accurate,' says William King, a former university archivist. 'I have complete confidence in anything he'd say.'

CHUCK LIDDY, Staff photo by Chuck Liddy

He looks after students, and Duke Chapel, too

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

DURHAM - Much of what Oscar Dantzler does at Duke Chapel falls well outside his job description.

Like when an elderly worshipper becomes ill during a church service and he leaps into action, offering comfort while summoning help. Or when he charms visiting dignitaries like author Toni Morrison or former President Jimmy Carter. Or when he offers up his two cents to the many Duke University students who pass through the doors, young folks he calls "my babies."

Dantzler is a custodian at Duke Chapel. But more than that, he's the heart and soul of the place. Not only does he want the chapel clean when you visit, he wants you to leave with plenty of knowledge and a respect for its history.

"Anything we need to know, we go to Oscar," said Layne Baker, the chapel's visitor and university relations specialist. "Not the historians: Oscar."
So this will be a big week for Dantzler, 57. On Thursday, Duke Chapel hosts a celebration of the life of John Hope Franklin, the longtime Duke historian and civil rights pioneer who died in March. Former President Bill Clinton is speaking. The phones are ringing off the hook. Overflow seating is in the works. Dantzler expects it to be a bigger to-do than the 1998 funeral for former North Carolina governor and Duke President Terry Sanford.

And he doesn't want anything -- including the Secret Service and its bomb-sniffing dogs -- to get in the way of a smooth ceremony.

"I know they'll have the dogs in here checking things out," Dantzler said recently, shaking his head a little. "I'll tell them to be sure the dogs don't mess things up."

Even without the Franklin ceremony looming, these are heady days for Dantzler. He's about to get his moment in the spotlight, thanks to the upcoming debut of a documentary film chronicling the lives and wisdom of eight university custodians across the country. Dantzler is one of those profiled; the 70-minute film, called "The Philosopher Kings," debuts June 18 at a film festival in Silver Spring, Md.

'I'm their Duke parent'

Dantzler grew up in Florida, one of eight siblings raised largely by his mother, Pauline Washington, who watched over her brood while Dantzler's father was away for extended periods, working for the railroad. He credits his mother's strength but acknowledges that a child needs a father, too.

A half-century later, Dantzler, now a divorced father of one grown daughter, is parenting the students who come through the broad chapel doors. Many of them need advice, he says. Some go a little wild when they get to college, and he figures it's his job to put them in their place. Mostly, he wants them to prosper.

"After their parents drop them off," he says, "I'm their Duke parent."

That paternal instinct caught the eye of Patrick Shen, the director and producer of the upcoming documentary. Shen's co-producer came upon Dantzler during a screening for another film. When they started documenting his life, Shen realized that although the custodian was so charming he almost seemed to speak in sound bites, his intentions were pure. And endearing.

"He kept referring to the students as his babies," Shen recalled. "It's so charming. He lives to care for the students on the campus."

Shen and his crew shadowed Dantzler twice for several days each, chronicling his work and even following him to his favorite fishing hole, in Creedmoor. That could have gone better, Dantzler recalled.

"Normally, I fish for largemouth bass," he said. "That day, we stayed for three hours and I didn't get a bite. I think the fish were scared of the cameras."

Tall and slender, Dantzler is quick with a handshake or an anecdote drawn from a lifetime of varied pursuits. He served in the U.S. Air Force, worked in banking in New York and construction in Durham before coming to Duke a dozen years ago because he liked the university's benefits package.

Dantzler is meticulous about his work, whether it's arranging the rows of wooden chairs just so or holding court about the chapel's stained glass or archways. He's a Duke Chapel history whiz, thanks to his many conversations over the years with William King, who as university archivist was a frequent chapel visitor until his retirement in 2002.

"He has two things that a historian likes; he likes the history, and he wants it to be
accurate," King said recently. "I have complete confidence in anything he'd say."

Dantzler now swears by Duke Chapel and says it's the only place he'd work, so grateful is he for the support people there showed during a horrific five-year stretch during which five siblings and his mother all died. The cards and phone calls from his co-workers got him through some dark periods.

"I call it the House of God," he said of the chapel. "My mother always said, 'If you can't keep the house of God clean, you can't keep your own.'"

eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com or 919-932-2008

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**Why custodians?**

"The Philosopher Kings" debuts at the upcoming AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Film Festival in Silver Spring, Md. Why a film about college campus custodians?

"The janitor, he's the epitome of that invisible, unseen person in our culture who nobody really sees," explained Patrick Shen, the film's director and producer. "And we liked the university settings because we liked the juxtaposition of everyday wisdom versus academic wisdom."

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Hard times hit agency that helps in hard times

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

Saturday, June 06, 2009

An American tradition of community service is facing a crisis in Greenville, another apparent victim of the economic recession, its local director said.

When disaster strikes a family or an entire community, volunteers from the Pitt County chapter of the American Red Cross have been there to offer free relief and support services.

But when financial hardship forced the Bertie and Martin county chapters of the American Red Cross to close last year, the national organization directed the Pitt County chapter to absorb those counties and provide services to their residents in addition to those it offers residents here, Deborah Horn, executive director of the chapter, said.

The Pitt chapter now faces budget hardships of its own, and could eventually share the same fate, Horn said last week.

"(If) client services can no longer be provided due to lack of funds, the Pitt County chapter will be closed and absorbed by a nearby county," the director said.

While that outcome is not imminent, there will be no government bailout or rescue plan if things get that dire. The Red Cross is not a government agency. It depends almost entirely on the people in the counties that it serves for funding, Horn said.

Headed into fiscal year 2008-09, which ends in June, the chapter projected it would raise $328,400. As of April its revenues were well below that at $228,400, and expenses have topped $252,000. The situation didn't improve through May, Horn said, with the projected deficit for this year expected to pass $30,000.

When expenses exceed revenues, the chapter relies on its savings to make up the difference, Horn said. The agency has about $184,000 in reserve, she said.

"We haven't had to reduce our services so far, but we're using our savings to make up for the difference. We cannot help people without money," Horn said.

Horn attributed part of the loss to reductions in United Way contributions and grants, but said the ability to operate in a community boils down to donations from individuals and families within the community.

"We can't cut disaster services while we operate. (Displaced) people must still receive a motel room and meal allowances, clothing and other resources and services, so we have to cut in other places," she said. "We scrimp on everything to get by."

The chapter relies on a minimal paid staff — Horn has already reduced the number from six to three and is expecting to reduce some more — and about 70 volunteers, including a volunteer board of directors.

It also relies on work from about eight interns each year from educational programs at East Carolina University. All the training of volunteers must be paid for by the chapter, about $60 per person.

Volunteers do much more than provide food and water to emergency personnel and fire victims, or operate shelters for people displaced when hurricanes and other natural disasters occur. They operate programs to
support members of the military and their families; offer educational classes that promote health and safety, such as CPR and lifeguard certification; and participate in international relief and development efforts. But disaster relief is prominent among the services provided.

On average, the agency helps victims of 70 fires annually. This fiscal year, it's helped in 73 fires, many with multiple victims.

"You can't make the pain go away for people, but you can reduce the suffering," Horn said. "We find out whatever it is that the family needs at that time and get it for them."

Robbie McCraw and Jonathan Shepherd found out about sudden loss on April 15 when their apartment at Village Green on Heath Street and everything inside was lost to a fire.

"It was traumatic. I lost everything except what was on my back," McCraw said.

"A volunteer was right there and gave each of us a voucher for $130 at Wal-Mart to buy clothes and shoes. She also gave us each a $30 voucher for meals at Denny's. It was very relieving to know that we had help so quickly," McCraw said.

McCraw has been telling everyone at work to donate to the Red Cross, whether it is money or spare clothing and goods to help people like her, she said.

Horn said she recognizes that the chapter has to make some changes in the way it approaches fundraising.
More college-bound grads ruling out plan ‘A’
In recession, prestige universities are simply becoming too expensive
The Associated Press
updated 12:20 a.m. ET, Tues., June 9, 2009

The wretched economy has taught many of the nation's college-bound seniors a hard lesson: You can't always get what you want.

In a survey to be released Tuesday, 71 percent of high schools reported that more of their students are forgoing their "dream schools" this year than in previous years. And there is little doubt money is a big reason.

"With the exception of one or two students, it was THE determining factor in their decision," one high school official wrote. Said another: "Parents were willing to pay for prestige in the past. This year they wanted prestigious schools IF the financial aid packages would work for them."

The survey was conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, made up of high school and college admissions and financial aid professionals. This is the first time the organization has done such a survey; it set out to study students' picks in light of the economic downturn.

Laura Mueller-Soppart, graduating Thursday from Walter Payton College Prep in Chicago, knew Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service was her dream school when she visited last year.

The campus was sparkling with erudite conversations about international affairs. Her hero, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, is on the faculty. She had worked for President Barack Obama's campaign, and attending college in Washington would put her at the center of the political universe.

She got accepted, but when the financial aid award letters arrived, her family's expected contribution was way beyond what they felt they could afford, given how the drop in the stock market had cut their savings by more than half. She also had two younger brothers to think about.

So when Northeastern University in Boston offered her a nearly full ride, she asked herself: "Do I go $200,000 in the hole because so many told me Georgetown was indispensable, or do I take the full ride?"

She is taking the full ride.

"It was really hard for me, hard to the point where I cried all the time because I felt it was so incredibly unfair," Mueller-Soppart said. "I told myself I could have worked half as hard as I did and ended up in the same place."

Of the 632 high schools nationally that responded to the survey, nearly 85 percent reported no change in the number of students planning to delay college.

However, the survey had a disproportionate number of private and better-off public high schools, said David Hawkins, NACAC director of public policy and research. That means the findings probably understate the number of students forgoing their dream schools or postponing college altogether.

It is still not entirely clear how the recession will affect the college outlook for most of the nation's 3.3 million 2009 high school graduates.

Sixty percent of high schools surveyed said they were seeing more students enroll in public instead of private universities, and more than 70 percent of public universities said applications were up. But more than half of private colleges also saw applications rise, indicating students are trying to give themselves more options.

Public universities stand to gain as students stay closer to home, but may also lose students to even less expensive community colleges; 37 percent of high schools reported more students attending two-year schools.
Most students have already sent in deposits, but some are covering all the bases by putting down deposits at more than one school. The final picture won't be clear until students actually show up on campus in the fall.

What is clear is that money played an outsized role in this year's college search. Students are lobbying for every last financial aid dollar.

Doug Fortenberry, lead counselor at Wylie High School, about 30 miles east of Dallas, reported a significant decrease in the number of students leaving Texas.

"It's very frustrating," he said. "I've had families in my office up in arms, and I've had numerous phone calls. I've had to call three financial aid offices this year — last year I called zero — advocating for students and trying to get an explanation about an award letter."

In some cases, students' decisions about where to go to college may be influenced primarily by their parents' financial worries, and not necessarily by any cutbacks in financial aid. A December survey by National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities found 92 percent of private schools responding planned to increase their financial aid budgets this year.

Some guidance counselors fear families have been too quick to give up on their dream schools.

"Parents and students just had the conversation that 'You're going to have to go to a state school,'" said Barbara Gajewski, college admissions counselor at Vestavia High School near Birmingham, Ala. "They didn't even want to look and take a chance, even though we counsel them the colleges will do their best to make it possible. But they didn't want their kids to end up with loans."

Georgetown promises to provide enough in grants and loans to meet the full demonstrated financial need of all students it admits, but the school relies partly on the federal financial aid form to calculate what families can afford. Mueller-Soppart said her family was punished by that formula because their savings aren't in retirement accounts; if they were, they wouldn't count against the expected family contribution.

Mueller-Soppart revisited Northeastern and has gotten more excited about the school. And her dream school will still be there in four years.

"Every day I tell myself I can still go to grad school at Georgetown," she said. "For now, I just have to suck it up."

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Financial advisers invest in ECU

By John Henderson
Rocky Mount Telegram

Sunday, June 07, 2009

A financial adviser at Edward Jones in Rocky Mount has spearheaded a new endowment program that will fund annual scholarships for business students at East Carolina University.

Richard Cobb, an ECU graduate who works at the Edward Jones office at 210 Bryant St., coordinated the fundraising drive. Edward Jones employees from across the state pledged their money toward the $100,000 endowment. They are hoping for a company match of $25,000.

Each year, about $6,000 from the fund will pay the tuition of an outstanding student at the College of Business.

"It is something to give back to the community and to be a good corporate citizen and have a positive impact economically on our region," Cobb said.

Other Edward Jones area financial advisers who contributed to the fund were Rocky Speight and Sherlon Page in Rocky Mount and Chet Osterhoudt and Cliff Joyner in Nashville.

Edward Jones is a company known for its community involvement, Cobb said, and the fund was set up for ECU students because it is the university serving this region.

"Down East, we kind of rally around the area. We are part of its economic base," he said.

Cobb pointed out that 55 Edward Jones employees, including a majority who did not graduate from ECU, contributed to the endowment. He said 100 percent of the firm's ECU graduates, or 22 advisers, contributed to the program.

Osterhoudt graduated from the university in 1988. He recalled that he counted on grants to get through school.

"I felt (the endowment) was a good program. Edward Jones is matching our funds," he said. "It helps the whole program. I just wanted to give back."

Frederick Niswander, dean of the College of Business, expressed his gratitude for the endowment in a prepared statement.

"Just as Edward Jones is a client-centered company, the College of Business takes pride in being a student-centered school — focused on teaching tomorrow's business leaders how to make a difference in their communities," he said. "We deeply appreciate the support from Edward Jones, which will help recognize and open many doors for our students."

The first recipient of the scholarship is Chelsea Spalding out of Fayetteville. After the first $33,000 came in, she was awarded $1,200 to help pay her tuition.

When all the pledges come in, future recipients will receive the $6,000 yearly grant, Cobb said.

The College of Business was founded in 1936. It has more than 3,100 undergraduate students, 870 graduate students and 135 faculty members, and offers 30 degrees, majors and concentrations.
Bridging aphasia-based language gaps

Sarah Campbell
June 6, 2009 - 4:17PM

Nestled on the fourth floor of the East Carolina University Health Sciences Building is a room where those suffering from aphasia have found a safe haven.

"(Aphasia's) an impairment of language, the ability to use and comprehend words, Sherri Winslow, clinical supervisor for the ECU’s Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, said. "It includes talking, listening, understanding, reading, writing and numbers - all of those things relate to language."

East Carolina University's Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders began hosting free aphasia support groups during March.

"One of the main purposes (of the group) is getting people together because some of those with aphasia may tend not to try to attempt to communicate out in public or with other people," Sherri Winslow, clinical supervisor for the department, said. "It's a comfortable place for those making attempts to communicate."

Half of the meeting is designated for attendees to practice communication with graduate students.

"The students think of activities to lead the group in practicing expressive and listening comprehension skills," Winslow said.

During each meeting individuals also participate in discussions on relevant topics and receive presentations about maintaining a healthy lifestyle after stroke.

Family members of those with aphasia are also encouraged to attend the support group.

"They could see different techniques that the students are using to help elicit the language," Winslow said. "Especially if some of them don't get to come to therapy sessions with the person. They get to see how to encourage and motivate the language skills."

Sarah Campbell can be reached at (252) 559-1076 or at scampbell@freedomenc.com.

Upcoming meetings

June 17, July 1, July 15 and July 29

All meetings held from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. in Room 4415 in the Health Sciences Building on
West Fifth Street in Greenville. For more information about the aphasia support group call Sherri Winslow at (252) 744-6142.

Did you know?

Aphasia is an acquired communication disorder that impairs an individual's ability to use language.

Although a person with aphasia can have difficulty retrieving words and names, memory of situations, appointments, people and general knowledge remain relatively intact. The ability to access ideas and thoughts via language is disrupted.

It has been estimated that one million Americans or 1 in 250 people have acquired aphasia. About 2/3 of these are the result of strokes and 1/3 are head injured persons.

*Source: National Aphasia Association*
Staffer: Clemson manipulated rankings

Associated Press
Posted: Thursday, Jun. 04, 2009

A rogue Clemson University staffer has accused the South Carolina school of manipulating its U.S. News & World Report ranking – reviving a debate over what critics call the pernicious influence of the magazine’s annual college ratings.

Among the steps reportedly alleged by Catherine Watt, who until 2006 headed Clemson’s institutional research office: Clemson manipulated class sizes, artificially boosted faculty salary data and gave rival schools low grades in the rankings’ peer reputation survey, which counts for 25 percent of the score.

Watt said Thursday that reports on her remarks had missed the point of her presentation to a conference and that she regretted any suggestion of illegal activity. Meanwhile, the university denied several of the allegations, but acknowledged it aims to improve in the influential rankings. Clemson jumped from No. 38 among public universities in 2001 to No. 22 in 2008 – an unusually quick ascent considering the rankings typically change little from year to year.

"It’s very shortsighted. It’s misguided and it’s educationally damaging," Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy and a prominent rankings critic, said of the allegations.

"Colleges have been ‘rank-steering,’ – driving under the influence of the rankings," he said. "We’ve seen over the years a shifting of resources to influence ranks."

Watt's comments came Tuesday in Atlanta at a meeting of the Association for Institutional Research – usually a staid venue for arcane discussions about data collection. However, Watt dropped a bombshell that stunned the audience, detailing Clemson's single-minded pursuit to become a Top 20 public research university, according to reports from The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed, which covered the conference.

Watt, now director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute, described practices many rankings critics believe are common, but rarely acknowledge. Clemson, she said, "walked a fine line between illegal, unethical and really interesting."

U.S. News & World Report, for instance, takes into account how many classes a university has with fewer than 20 students and those with more than 50. Clemson, Watt reportedly said, capped many classes at 18 or 19 students, while letting others already over the limit grow. The 2004 edition of the rankings reported 22 percent of Clemson classes had fewer than 20 students; last year it reported 48 percent did.

Most explosively, she reportedly claimed Clemson officials ranked other institutions as "below average" in the magazine's peer reputation survey. She reportedly later clarified that Clemson administrators had not been told to do that, but their surveys "had that effect."

Clemson issued a three-page response that didn't name Watt but called the reported statements "outrageous." The university denied that "all decisions at Clemson are driven by rankings" and denied reporting faculty salary data differently to U.S. News. The "insinuation of unethical behavior crosses the line," the statement said.

The statement did not address Watt's reported statements about the peer surveys, but Chief Public Affairs Officer Cathy Sams said by telephone Thursday she had spoken with the three officials who participate in the survey and had "not found any evidence of that."

In an e-mail to The Associated Press on Thursday, Watt wrote she had no "full comment" but criticized the published descriptions of her comments. She added: "The strategic efforts to decrease class size and increase full-time faculty have only built upon an already excellent experience for our students."
Sams, the university spokeswoman, said Clemson remains committed to its stated goal of becoming a Top-20 ranked institution.

"The notion that there's this day-to-day obsession (with rankings) is simply not true," she said. "The fact we use that as one of our benchmarks for improvement is something we're very comfortable with."

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