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ECU professor: Vice president Biden is a ‘regular Joe’

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

Joe Biden is a regular Joe, according to the East Carolina professor who had dinner with him this week.

Jody Baumgartner, an ECU political science professor, said the vice president is a genuinely nice guy.

Baumgartner met Biden in Washington at a dinner the vice president held for experts on the vice presidency.

Baumgartner, who has written a book and several academic articles on the subject, was invited by Biden to join five other individuals who also were selected to share their knowledge at a dinner Tuesday evening.

“You spend a couple of hours with a man at dinner and you get a real sense of someone,” Baumgartner said. “He is just a regular guy. I got the sense that this was the genuine article here. It’s just a feeling you get.”

Baumgartner said he was impressed with Biden’s invitation of people to speak with him on the topic of being a good vice president.

“I was very impressed with how knowledgeable he is,” Baumgartner said. “Here is a guy who has clearly spent time on educating himself on national policy and he has not lost a personal touch.”

Baumgartner said he spoke with Biden about the power of the position and the obligation to support the president.

“You have to get your head wrapped around the fact that you are the second guy,” Baumgartner said. “If you can get your head around that then there is a lot of potential for doing some good.”

The power of the vice president has increased, especially in the last few decades, Baumgartner said.

“Ever since Mondale, every vice president has pushed the envelope a little further in terms of increasing power and how meaningful the office is,” Baumgartner said.

“I expect that Biden is going to push it a little further. He will do it in a little different way than Cheney but there is no reason for me to believe that he is going to sit by and say that Cheney took it too far.”

Baumgartner and the other guests spent about two hours chatting about ways that a vice president can be successful.

Baumgartner’s research interests include party politics, presidential power, campaigns and elections. He is the author of “The American Vice Presidency Reconsidered.”

Baumgartner received his doctoral degree in 1998 from Miami University, Ohio. He began teaching American and comparative politics at ECU in 2003 as a visiting professor, prior to becoming an assistant professor in 2006.

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Finding a job is hard work

Summer employment scarce, competition fierce for students

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

Students looking for summer work may find they face job competition from not only the guy who sat in the next desk in class but from someone who used to sit in an executive chair.

With millions of people out of work across the country, and a local jobless rate hovering about 10 percent, teens entering the job market have their work cut out for them. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the highest teenage unemployment rate in nearly 20 years, 21.7 percent, compared to 15.8 percent last year.

"I think this year is going to be a whole lot different," said Danny Alston, manager of Greenville's Employment Security Commission office. "Those types of typical summer jobs — your McDonald's, retail, fast food, etc. — a lot of those jobs may not even exist this summer just because of the local economy," he said. "Even if they do exist, one of the factors that's going to be a barrier for them is they're going to be competing with adults for those same jobs."

Alston said some companies that are offering jobs require applicants to be at least 18 years old. Others, including many that added seasonal workers last summer, are no longer hiring.

"People are just buying and spending less," Alston said. "The job market is tough, and it's going to be even tougher this summer."

According to a report from Northeastern University, last summer's job market was the most challenging since the Great Depression.

North Pitt High School guidance counselor Kim Bryant has already seen the signs. While many of her students were applying to colleges, others were looking for help applying for work.

"Unfortunately, I have very little to offer them," Bryant said. "I'm lucky to get one call (from an employer looking to hire students)."

She did get a call from one program, which was accepting applications from low-income students for its summer jobs program. Youth at Work of Pitt County is hiring people ages 14-24 to work 32 hours a week this summer as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Rufus Wilson, youth navigator for Youth at Work, said the program pays teens and twentysomethings above-average wages ($7.25-$8.25 per hour) for above-average jobs. Program participants are placed in professional areas, including child care or criminal justice.

"They want us to find jobs that not everyone can do," Wilson said. "There are skills attached to that job."

"We're trying to give the young people experience," he said, "so that they can go and be successful workers, which in turn, will stimulate the economy."

The federally funded program received more than 600 applications for 40 positions available in the county. Applicants not selected for the program can still use services at Youth at Work, which provides coaching for applicants on how to prepare a resume, market their skills and even how to dress for an interview.

East Carolina University's Student Employment Office provides similar services to help students at the university find jobs on or off campus. Three years ago, the university launched "Hire a Pirate," geared to
helping students find part-time or seasonal work. The program allows employers in the community to post free job listings for students and provides a Web site and career fair events to help match job seekers and openings.

"We tried to make it as simple as possible," said Larry Donley, ECU’s director of student employment. "We’re just basically trying to be the bridge."

Last semester, more than 100 local businesses participated in Hire a Pirate. That’s in addition to the 4,300 students ECU hires for on-campus jobs. Still Donley said more positions are needed.

"Students are concerned about how are they going to pay for school when it starts in August and ‘How am I going to pay my rent?’ he said. "We have not been faced with this employment situation in many, many years. It is definitely a tight market. There are a lot more people not being able to find jobs. It is difficult, but we’re trying to be as optimistic as possible."

Student Samantha Holland found her job as a waitress at the dining room of Cypress Glen retirement community through one of the university’s career fairs. Holland, a junior from Rocky Mount, Va., said even then, it wasn’t easy.

"I applied for so many positions to get a part time job," she said. "It was ridiculous."

"I had no difficulty finding a job back home. I probably put in 10 separate job applications (here). I have two years of college experience and this is the only job I can get."

ECU junior Christine Hewitt counts herself among the lucky ones. After starting out her freshman year as a waitress at Cypress Glen, she is now a full-timer there in a supervisory role.

"It took me six months to try to find a job in Greenville when I first started looking," she said. "A lot of people are looking, but everything is filled."

Hewitt said that fellow students she supervises now ask her about jobs for their friends.

Jeff Deering, owner of Michaelangelo’s Pizza in Greenville, said he has hired a few new drivers lately, but there are definitely more applicants right now than jobs available. Still, he said, that’s no reason for students to give up trying.

"They’re out there; someone needs some help out there," he said. "When the business starts coming back, they’re going to need people."

ESC’s Alston agreed that though jobs may be harder to find, they do exist.

"As they say, ‘looking for a job is a job,’” he said. "You don’t just go out for one day or two days or a week and say ‘I give up.’ You’ve just got to be persistent."

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Pros call on Pirates

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, June 10, 2009

When the Baltimore Orioles called Devin Harris on Wednesday afternoon, the East Carolina right fielder already had plans to get out of Greenville, but maybe not permanently.

The O's were calling Harris to confirm they had selected him in the eighth round of the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft. Instead of being flanked by family members when the news came, Harris was stuck in Greenville waiting for his brother to come pick him up. He was without a car after an accident a couple of weeks ago, but said he was anxious to get together with his loved ones in his hometown of Gastonia.

"I was excited," said Harris, who was selected with the 236th overall pick. "It's an honor. It's something that I'll be able to take with me for the rest of my life."

Three of Harris' teammates were also selected Wednesday.

Senior second baseman Ryan Wood was taken as a pitcher by Kansas City (11th round/332nd overall), junior right-hander Chris Heston was nabbed by San Francisco (12th/357) and senior left fielder Stephen Batts was selected by Philadelphia (19th/587).

While Harris was stuck in Greenville waiting for his brother, Wood was walking the links of Wilson Country Club with none other than ECU head coach Billy Godwin and some Pirate teammates like Batts, Brandon Henderson and Drew Schieber.

"I got called on the first hole," said Wood, who was also named second-team All-American Wednesday by the National College Baseball Writers of America, of his third selection in the draft by a third different club.

Out of Woodbridge, Va.'s, C.D. Hylton High School, Wood was drafted in the 49th round by Cleveland in 2005. Last year, he was the 42nd round choice of Milwaukee.

Wood said although he was drafted as a pitcher — he threw four innings as an ECU bullpen extra in 2009 while making 66 starts at second base and leading the team with a .379 batting average — he'll still be a middle infielder for now.

"The scout that called me said they're going to send me out as a shortstop," Wood said, adding that the call he received from the Royals following his selection lasted no more than 20 seconds and gave him no idea where he'll be assigned.

Wood belted 14 home runs, 22 doubles and drove in 57 runs during his final season at ECU.

The biggest question still awaits Harris — whether he'll be answering Baltimore's call and pulling out of Greenville for good, or if he'll return to ECU for his junior year.

"I'm not sure right now," said Harris, who hit a dramatic game-tying home run in the bottom of the ninth inning against South Carolina in the championship game of the Greenville Regional on June 7, then won it with a 10th-inning single. "I'm going to discuss it with a couple of people and kind of weigh my options."

Harris hit 14 home runs and drove in 48 runs for the Pirates in his second season, but none were bigger than his last one against the Gamecocks, and he admits that couldn't have hurt his stock with the scouts.

While Harris contends there is plenty left to work on when it comes to his development as a hitter — his 65 strikeouts were the most of any Pirate — the choice is his as to where to continue that development.
"They haven't really given me as timetable," Harris said of the Orioles, regarding his decision. "They called me before I got drafted and discussed the possibility and asked if I was still open to it. Then they drafted me, called me back and congratulated me and told me I'd be hearing back from them."

Heston transferred to ECU for the 2009 campaign from Florida's Seminole Community College. In his first season, he accrued a 7-0 record and 4.17 earned run average as a weekend starter.

But Heston was replaced in the rotation by freshman Kevin Brandt for the Super Regional round after making two appearances — one as a reliever — at the Greenville Regional.

Batts finished his senior season with a .352 average, 14 homers and 21 doubles. His 63 RBIs were second most on the team, and he led the club with 19 stolen bases.

Also selected in the draft were ECU commits Mike Trout (1st round/Anaheim), Nick McBride (5th/Texas), Walker Gourley (13th/Pittsburgh) and John Wooten (20th/San Diego).

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Mary Easley speaks, but says little

In a farewell letter, the former first lady lauds NCSU but doesn't mention controversy.

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

Mary Easley has finally spoken out, though only to say goodbye to N.C. State University.

As the controversy about how she got her job there built in the past few weeks -- culminating Monday in the resignation of Chancellor James L. Oblinger and her own firing -- Easley had stayed mum.

On Wednesday, though, her attorney, Marvin Schiller of Raleigh, issued an open letter from Easley. It lauded NCSU's faculty, staff and students, but referred only obliquely to the uproar over the political connections that got her the job in 2005.

"It has been one of the great privileges of my life to work with the brilliant and creative people at NC State," Easley wrote. "It has been a joy to teach, encourage and help the students.

"I urge all of the North Carolina State family to now focus on the best welfare of the students and be mindful of the great tradition of the university system in North Carolina."

The NCSU trustees voted to end her contract, which had four years left, because at least some of the work she had been hired for no longer existed. NCSU administrators decided last month to put a moratorium on new academic centers, citing budget cuts. Starting such a center had been listed as 35 percent of Easley's job.

There was no mention in the letter of whether she intends to fight her firing. Schiller has often represented state workers in job-related disputes.

Easley's firing was unusually public. It was done by trustees Monday in a hastily called
meeting hours after Oblinger resigned amid new revelations about his role in her hiring. The university released e-mail that showed Oblinger had participated in discussions with an NCSU trustee about hiring her, and that Gov. Mike Easley and at least one member of his staff also were involved. The trustee, Easley friend McQueen Campbell, also has resigned, as did Provost Larry Nielsen, who hired Mary Easley.

Journalists have sought an explanation directly from Mary Easley, to no avail. Last month, Schiller held a news conference in which she stood at his side smiling tightly for nearly an hour, speaking only to wish the crowd of journalists good morning and to tell Schiller he was strayng a little from the microphones.

It's still unclear whether Easley is entitled to a buyout package. Such packages have come under fire in the legislature after it was revealed that Nielsen got one, which Oblinger sweetened the day before the provost resigned.

Nielsen could get a total of $310,255 spread over three years above the teaching salary he will eventually be given. Oblinger is getting six months' leave at full chancellor's pay of $420,000 before his salary drops and he takes a teaching position.

There is no buyout package mentioned in Easley's brief contract, but before commenting on the matter, university officials want to perform due diligence on it, said Keith Nichols, an NCSU spokesman.

University policy lets it end such contracts because of "a significant decline in the financial resources of the University."

NCSU administrators are preparing a plan for a cut as high as 18 percent.

The policy also says the university must provide notice before terminating such a contract.

Spokesman: 2 contracts

Separately on Wednesday, a spokesman for the former governor issued a statement to "set the record straight" on some aspects of the situation, mostly to draw a distinction that his wife had two contracts, back-to-back with NCSU.

The spokesman claimed that the first contract from 2005 was the result of N.C. State approaching Mary Easley about a "lateral move" from her law job at N.C. Central in Durham to a position at NCSU. But e-mail and an interview with the first person who made the contacts, Easley aide Dan Gerlach, do not support that position.

Attempts to reach the spokesman, Ace Smith, for further comment were unsuccessful.

The spokesman said that the second contract, made in 2008, was altogether different and came under unfair attack.

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- Read Mary Easley's open letter
- Read the series about perks of Mike Easley's power.

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Underwater archeologists work to solve mysteries

Dianne P. Owens/STAR & ENTERPRISE

Though diving has not been permitted this week because of near flood-stage waters on the Great Pee Dee River, this past week was a productive one for East Carolina University students conducting field study at the site of Confederate navy yard in Marion County. Larry Babits, George Washington Distinguished Professor of History and director of the East Carolina University Maritime Studies program, checks the name on wrought iron band on an artillery shell recovered. Items are being catalogued and cleaned by students in the graduate program.

By DIANNE OWENS
Editor
Published: June 11, 2009
The high water of the Great Pee Dee River is murky and its current is moving at a good clip, but those obstacles are not keeping a group of seasoned and budding archeologists from finding treasures dating to the American Civil War.

In the mid-1860s, Secretary of the Southern Navy Stephen Mallory ordered that ships be built inland, hence the site on a steep bank of the river in Marion County, the George Washington Distinguished Professor of History and Director of the East Carolina University Maritime Studies program, Larry Babits, animatedly explains. Another reason for choosing this particular inland site, Christopher Amer, the state’s underwater archeologist said, is its rich oak, ash and pine stands. Lumber for the ships and turpentine were essential to the yard’s needs, he explains.

He and Babits are leading a group of journalists around a make shift exhibit of items recovered by underwater archeologists. He is pleased with the rare and important discoveries, he says, showing off iron shells that weigh 60 or more pounds and explaining ratchets and the significance of inscribed names, such as “Brooke.” The items recovered belong to the state, he says, and its people, the ordnance bellows to the U.S. Navy.

According to Amer, and to an article in a July 1997 issue of the Star & Enterprise, members of the CSS Pee Dee Research and Recovery team, Bob Butler and Tedd Gragg among the members of that group, contacted his office. And the most recent search to recover the navy yard, the CSS Pee Dee, its cannons and other items was born.

In 1925 and in 1954, the river was low enough to show what is believed by many to be the famed gunboat. The 170-foot wooden vessel, built in the ship yard, was blown up and burned, by some accounts, and sunk, to avoid capture by the advancing Union Army. In 1925, propellors from the vessel were torn from its stern. They are in the Florence County Museum. “We don’t know what damage was done to the boat,” Babits says, “or how they removed the propellors.”

“Using the philosophy that you don’t bring up anything you cannot conserve,” he adds, means the boat will likely not be brought to the surface.

For him, tracking how certain munitions came be in the navy yard and subsequently in the river is another mystery to solve. The state has long known the site of the Mars Bluff Navy Yard and historians have read accounts of the 14 buildings that supported the work there. What is less known, but highly suspected, is the location of the sinking of the boat.

The land where the yard sat was abandoned, has been looted, scavenged and more recently, changed ownership. These owners, Rufus Perdue and Glenn Dutton are divers, Civil War enthusiasts and historians. They have opened the site to the current recovery efforts.

Participating in the recovery are folks from the University of South Carolina, Maritime Research Division of the archeology and anthropology institute, Christopher Amer, Jim Spirek, Joe Beatty, Carl Naylor and Lora Holland. From the East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C., graduate Maritime Studies program, are Larry Babits, Lynn Harris and 13 field study students who hail from around the country.
Citizens still holding photographs, memories or family history regarding the site are invited to get in touch with those working on the site, Florence County Historical Commission member Marshall Yarborough says.

Students have been marking items in the river’s bottom, often in conditions with about four inches visibility, Babits said. The teams are recording what they find, where they find it and other information, Harris said, and the information is cleaned, documented, tagged and bagged for later research.

Discovered, to date, are two previously located cannons and several 6.4 inch and 7 inch artillery shells. What’s missing, though, is the largest cannon, a 15,000 pound one with a smooth bore, Amer and Babits say. The two cannons in the river each weigh about 9,000 pounds, Babits says.

According to historical documents from the Union lieutenant assigned to check the site and the Confederate lieutenant overseeing the site, there was the CSS Pee Dee, at least one torpedo boat under construction and three steam engines in the yard, Babits says. He also says the most important thing for residents to know is that the yard was filled with “locals working in it …” and the effort “was funded in large measure by local citizens … What’s in the river … is very little understood. What we’re finding has been hindered by the river and by people who meant well.”

We have an awesome responsibility to get the history right, Babits says, adding that the boat that has been mired in the mud of the River for more than 100 years will need to be authenticated as the CSS Pee Dee. The boat will likely not be raised, he says, adding, no one has $4 million or $5 million to spend on it.

The raising of the cannons is expected to take place this fall.

The ECU grad program students make drawings of all their underwater finds. This is Jessica Sneeks’ rendering of the Brooke ratchet.

Thirteen students are participating in the field school in Marion County.
Lynn Harris, a graduate of the East Carolina University Maritime Studies program and now a professor with the program, is shown with a clipboard containing waterproof paper. Divers are able to make notes while in the near 15’ feet deep water of the Pee Dee River.

Students will present their findings, reclaimed from the Great Pee Dee River, during a public presentation on Friday from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. near the dive site.
A two-year shift that saves money

BY JAY SCHALIN

RALEIGH - Shrinking tax revenues are forcing legislators and administrators to make many hard decisions about the UNC budget this year, but the shortfall also provides an excellent opportunity to make improvements.

One potential silver lining is the state House's proposed halt to UNC enrollment growth for the 2010-11 school year. While this is intended to be a one-time fix, it should be extended. Limiting enrollment at UNC for a few years at current levels (2009-10) would save taxpayers many millions of dollars and improve both the university and community college systems at the same time.

And nobody would be denied the opportunity to earn a UNC education.

This win-win solution is simple: while state universities hold the line on enrollment by admitting fewer freshmen, community colleges can pick up the slack by admitting the rejected applicants, at lower cost. The community college students can then transfer into the university system when they have proven themselves by earning a two-year associates degree.

Not only will this reduce the cost to the state by taking advantage of the lower-cost community colleges, but it will also improve the university system's graduation rates by being more selective about freshmen and will give the community colleges badly needed resources to improve their academics.

Penn State University has long employed such a two-tiered system, in which only the top applicants live at the main campus at State College as freshmen. A majority of freshmen and sophomores commute to one of the 19 branch campuses and switch to the main campus for their junior year.

In North Carolina, there is a huge difference between the subsidies to the universities and the community colleges. UNC received roughly $13,126 in state appropriations per full-time equivalent student for the 2006-7 school year. State and local appropriations to community colleges for each full-time equivalent student are approximately $5,344. For the sake of comparison and simplicity, let us say that the UNC per student subsidy is twice the subsidy for community college students.

For 2008-9, UNC received approximately $34 million for enrollment growth, and $44 million (proposed) on top of that ($78 million total) for 2009-10.

The two-year total is therefore $112 million. Had this new policy been in place two years ago, UNC would have received no enrollment growth money, while the community college system would have received $17 million the first year, and $39 million the second, a total of $56 million. The net savings to the state would have therefore been $56 million for the two-year period. And each year of the enrollment freeze, the annual savings would increase.

Students can make just as much progress toward the first two years of a bachelor's degree at
a good community college as they can at a university, with big personal savings. At N.C.
State, the average in-state undergraduate tuition and fees for 2007-8 were $5,002, while at
Wake Tech, for 2008, a full-time student paid roughly $1,426.

This proposed policy also addresses the poor graduation rates at many UNC schools. Only
58.8 percent of freshmen entering the UNC system graduate at that same school within six
years (63.4 percent at any school).

Many freshmen are either immature, academically unprepared or uncertain about what they
want to do with their lives. By making freshman admissions more selective, freshmen who
need time to "find themselves" or get their academic sea legs can do so in a less competitive
environment in their hometowns. Students who earn a two-year degree before transferring to
universities graduate at a slightly higher rate (69 percent in six years) than all entering
university freshmen, and at a much higher rate than the least academically prepared
freshmen.

The university system and community colleges have been attempting to make the transfer
process more "seamless." If the universities limit their growth, resources will become
available to make the necessary improvements to the community colleges to accomplish this.

But the state cannot continue to raise the number of highly subsidized students who spend up
to six years at the universities without getting a degree, or get a low-quality degree with bad
grades that qualifies them to do nothing in the work force. It is especially not fair when there
is a lower cost option available -- and there is just such an option in the community college
system. Shifting students and resources to the community colleges makes sense for
everybody involved.

Jay Schalin is senior writer at the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

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The practical place to expand education

BY J.B. BUXTON

RALEIGH - Closing a reported $4 billion state budget gap is a Herculean task. In recent days, we have heard a lot about what will be cut, but little of what will be protected.

Constructing a state budget for education is not just about meeting immediate needs. It is also about laying a foundation upon which further improvement is built.

That is why supporters of public education need to be as alarmed by the prospects of deep cuts to the community colleges as they are by cuts to prekindergarten programs, teachers and the length of the school year. As our political leaders craft a balanced budget, protecting the community colleges should be among the highest priorities.

But not necessarily for the reasons you might think.

Yes, community colleges provide opportunities for North Carolinians, especially the unemployed, to re-skill and re-tool in a changing economic time. Yes, companies looking to start up, grow or relocate rely on them for customized training. And, yes, they offer accessible, affordable education for North Carolinians of all ages.

A less apparent reason to protect the community colleges might seem heretical coming from a parent of public school kids and one who has spent my entire career working in K-12 education: the most important system to future improvement in public education in North Carolina is the community college system.

It's not that our state needs to turn away from our investments in public schools. It's that investing in our community colleges should be an integral part of our strategy for improving public education.

Simply put, our current education delivery systems are not going to get us to where we want to go. We aren't producing enough teachers. We aren't turning out enough high school and college graduates with the skills demanded in today's economy.

Our universities and public schools have been remarkably durable despite decades of economic and technological change. As a rural North Carolina manufacturing executive who also chaired his local school board once told me, "The business processes in our plant have evolved four different times in the last 30 years, but our high school hasn't changed once."

To build these new systems, the public schools have no better innovation partner than the community colleges. They are a different breed of institution. Adaptation and innovation are in their DNA.

They mirror the changing times: creating and canceling programs based on the needs in their communities. They have a workforce mission, a commitment to accessibility and an entrepreneurialism that makes them best equipped to lead innovative new solutions at the state and, more importantly, local level.

Furthermore, they are already serving at the front lines of education access and innovation.
Roughly 26,000 high school students took courses at community colleges last year. Nearly 50 community colleges house Learn and Earn early colleges, where students receive a high school diploma and an associate's degree in five years or less. And a number of community colleges are "piloting" new programs to prepare public school teachers in areas where we need them the most.

We need to increase, not reduce, the leadership role of our community colleges.

What could this look like? A few examples:

- Give the community colleges a much expanded role in teacher preparation for a state that doesn't produce enough teachers to fill our classrooms -- especially in rural communities.

This would mean greatly expanded partnerships with universities and school districts to offer more customized teacher preparation. It should also mean allowing those community colleges with the demonstrated capacity to offer full teaching degrees.

- Build on the highly successful early college high school concept and expand the role of community colleges to create new, customized forms of schooling for the diverse needs we have among high school students. To produce tens of thousands more students each year with at least an associate's degree or a work credential, we need new models of education that excite students and better support their learning needs.

- Use the workforce orientation, skills training and employer connections of community colleges to beef up the workforce readiness and economic development focus in public education. Use online courses, apprenticeships or other innovations to provide students with greater relevance and opportunities in a changing economy.

We are fortunate to have had governors and legislators who have made education a priority. In this difficult budget session, Governor Perdue and the General Assembly should be driven by what assets must be protected to spur innovation and dramatic improvements in public education. The community colleges have a place at the top of that list.

**J.B. Buxton is a principal with the Education Innovations Group, which provides consulting on strategic innovations in public education. Until February he was deputy state superintendent for the Department of Public Instruction.**

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Institute tackling drug safety

Opening today is just the start

BY ALAN M. WOLF, Staff Writer

A drug-safety institute opening today in Research Triangle Park expects to hire about 100 scientists and other employees over the next two years.

The Institute for Drug Safety Sciences is a collaboration of the Hamner Institutes for Health Sciences and UNC-Chapel Hill. It has about 20 workers but will expand rapidly, said Dr. Paul Watkins, the institute's director.

Hammer, which will house the institute at its 56-acre RTP campus, announced plans for the partnership with UNC-CH in September. The aim was to create a nonprofit research hub to improve the safety of experimental drugs and speed up development of promising medicines.

"The limiting factor in getting drugs to patients isn't if they work; it's if they're safe," said Watkins, who also is a UNC professor of medicine. "We have to be smarter about how we develop safe drugs."

The institute will work with researchers from UNC-CH and other universities, pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies and government agencies.

Janet Woodcock, director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, is scheduled to speak today at opening ceremonies and serve as a liaison between the FDA and the institute.

One big goal is to pool resources to identify medicines that help most patients but are toxic
to a small group. The collaborators want to determine how to identify the patients at risk before they're harmed.

"It's a unique model," said Hamner CEO William Greenlee. "We can bring around the table, industry, academia and regulators. ... The value we bring is as a facilitator."

The institute includes a 14,000-square-foot research lab. Hamner and UNC agreed to invest $10 million over the next three years.

During the past few months, institute officials have signed partnerships with Entelos, a California company, to study how drugs can cause liver damage in some patients.

And they are working with the Shanghai Center for Disease Control to study Chinese patients who develop liver problems after taking tuberculosis drugs.

Last month, Hamner signed a separate deal with a Chinese medical research park to develop and test new medicines in both countries.

Hamner was founded in 1974 to study the safety of chemicals, but shifted its mission in 2007 to drug research.

Officials expect to announce other partnerships in the coming months.

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