THE DAILY CLIPS

June 15, 2009

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Grant funds research opportunity for ECU senior

An East Carolina University senior will have the chance to pursue a lifelong goal while gaining research experience thanks to a grant awarded by the North Carolina Biotechnology Center.

Jennifer Satterwhite and her faculty mentor, Eli Hvastkovs, assistant professor of analytical chemistry at ECU, received an Undergraduate Research Fellowship Award from the center's Education and Training Program last month.

The one-year, $5,000 grant — one of 15 awarded to North Carolina universities — will fund their project titled "Development of a Sequence Specific Electrochemical Genotoxicity Sensor."

For Satterwhite, a native of Hickory, it's an opportunity to study a topic that interested her since childhood. The chemistry major chose her field after seeing family members deal with diseases including cancer.

"I studied chemistry because I wanted to help find a cure for cancer or another disease affecting people," she said. "That is the dream — to cure something. Ever since I was a little girl, I've always wanted to do this."

Now, with grant funding, Satterwhite will dedicate more than 400 hours to investigating a new way to detect cancer.

The project expands on earlier research by Hvastkovs.

"What we're trying to do is develop a sensor to test certain gene sequences to see if they would be prone to carcinogenic damage," he said.

Typically, he said, scientists analyze large stretches of DNA to determine whether a dangerous molecule will change the proteins permanently, which can cause cancer. This project hopes to provide evidence of a faster and cheaper way to get the same results.

"We want to try to take little segments of DNA that we think could be reactive and important to cancer pathways, put them on the sensor, expose them to dangerous metabolites and see if we can detect the DNA damage that is happening," Hvastkovs said.

The process is done electrochemically, using electricity to analyze the changes in the DNA molecule.

Satterwhite, who hopes to pursue a master's degree in chemistry after graduating from ECU, said she appreciates the opportunity to participate in real-world scientific research while learning more about the field of biotechnology.

She had to brush up on her biology knowledge before beginning the experiment. "I had to do a lot of research on DNA. It's a really interesting topic, but very complicated," Satterwhite said.

She and Hvastkovs will work this summer to compile data for the project. Research will continue in the fall. As part of the grant, Satterwhite also is required to deliver a seminar on her research at ECU, present a paper or poster at a professional conference and attend a state meeting on the business aspects of biotechnology.

Researchers receive conservation award

ECU researchers were among those presented Partners in Conservation Awards by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar last month.

The award recognized the Battle of the Atlantic Expedition for collective efforts in the preservation of historic World War II shipwreck sites in the "Graveyard of the Atlantic" off the North Carolina coast.

In the July 2008 mission, which included Nathan Richards, Steve Sellers and John Wagner of ECU, baseline data were collected in several sites that included underwater wreckage of German U-boats, British naval vessels, and US Merchant Marine ships lost during the war. This data, gathered through scientific mapping and photo and video documentation, will allow for future monitoring of both cultural and environmental changes of these "war graves."

The program seeks to edu-
cution sciences and disorders, has been elected chairwoman of the ECU faculty. Her term begins July 1 for the 2009-10 academic year.

This is the first time a faculty member from the College of Allied Health Sciences has held this position. Others elected to represent ECU faculty are vice chairman Dr. Mark Sprague, associate professor of physics, and secretary Hunt McKinnon, AIA, teaching assistant professor of interior design and merchandising.

Walker received bachelor’s and master’s degrees in speech language and auditory pathology from ECU.

She earned a doctoral degree in literacy and language from N.C. State University. She serves as chairwoman of the North Carolina Board of Examiners for Speech & Language Pathologists and Audiologists and is a fellow of the American Speech Language and Hearing Association.

In August, Walker was named the Barbara W. Bremer Distinguished Professor in Language Learning and Literacy Disorders, the first endowed professor in the College of Allied Health Sciences.

FBI recognizes ECU faculty members

The Federal Bureau of Investigation recently recognized eight physicians from the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University for their work in developing a tactical medicine course for law enforcement officers.

Dr. Juan March, a professor of emergency medicine, helped lead the development of the course. Other ECU physicians who participated in the training were Drs. Jeffrey Ferguson, Anthony Frank, William Price, Skip Robey, Scott Sagraves, Paul Schenarts and Lisa Schlitzkus. Drs. Judge Robinette and Michael Coan of Eastern Radiologists were also recognized.

The course, held March 25 at Pitt Community College, included practice on an active firing range, classroom education on tactical medicine, and then a combination of using the medical training while on a simulated tactical mission on the firing range. More than 65 members of local, state and federal law enforcement attended the course.

Upcoming events:

- **Tuesday** — The musical “Big River” begins its run at McGinnis Theater. Shows through June 27. See http://www.ECUARTS.com for specific times.

- **Thursday** — Art auction hosted by City Art Gallery and East Carolina University Medical & Health Sciences Foundation to benefit the East Carolina Heart Institute, 4-8 p.m. at the East Carolina Heart Institute, 115 Heart Drive, ECU’s Health Sciences campus.

  Funds raised from the sale of artwork and the auction of donated pieces by painter Michael Knoch and photographer Dr. W. Randolph Chitwood will benefit the outfitting of the building. Call 744-2238 for more information.

  See www.ecu.edu/es-ecu/calendar.cfm for times, places and more information on these events and other ECU upcoming activities.

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Marianna Walker elected chair of ECU faculty

Dr. Marianna Walker, associate professor of community engagement, was elected chairwoman of the ECU faculty. Her term begins July 1 for the 2009-10 academic year.

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Laurels — To all of this year’s high school graduates. Nearly 1,300 Pitt County students are set to receive diplomas this weekend, with two ceremonies having occurred on Friday and four planned for today. Completing a high school education should be celebrated as the important and memorable achievement it represents. Congratulations to the graduates and their families on this joyous weekend.

Darts — To the theft of a 5-year-old mixed pit bull from the Humane Society this week, a crime that has the staff of that facility greatly concerned. The dog, Lucy, was taken Wednesday from the building on Tucker Drive and Humane Society workers are concerned she may be used for fighting in some fashion. People with information should please contact law enforcement at once.

Laurels — To Flag Day, the annual holiday that celebrates the Star Spangled Banner. The Pitt County community is unfortunately populated with people either ignorant or uncaring about the proper care, respect and treatment of that banner. Please use Sunday as an opportunity to learn about the flag and how it should be displayed in a respectful and appropriate manner.

Darts — To the absence of public speakers at hearings on the budgets for Greenville and Pitt County. So few local citizens avail themselves of the time allotted to discuss these very important spending blueprints, and it is a shame. Public officials are best served learning the views and ideas of their constituents, so it is always shameful when so few — or none — come out to do so.

Laurels — To the youth baseball season, which has started in earnest lately. Several leagues provide the chance for children to take to the diamond to play, programs that get them outdoors, interacting with a team and learning important lessons that will serve them throughout life. Gratitude should be given to the many local residents who volunteer their time to teach these children.

Compiled by Brian Colligan, editorial page editor of The Daily Reflector. Contact him at 329-9507 or via e-mail at bcolligan@coxnc.com
Letter: Appointment not in line with budget cuts

Monday, June 15, 2009

To the citizens of Pitt County, it has just come to my attention that our wonderful governor is at it again. Beverly Perdue has appointed Marvin Blount III as a special Superior Court judge.

Now, as I work in the court system, I am aware of the cuts being asked of our state employees.

I do not agree that the state budget be balanced on the backs of state employees. We have been asked to reduce our salary for two months and take a furlough for 10 hours. In addition, we are set to lose four positions in my office alone. This is on top of the salary reduction and furlough.

I am all for these concessions if it means I get to keep my salary, which is way below private industry salaries. The problem that I have is that Blount's salary would easily save the four positions in our office. Retired Superior Court judge Tom Haigwood would probably do the job for free if called upon by his governor. Instead it is politics as usual in Raleigh.

The little guy loses and the citizens of Pitt County are going to be the ultimate losers. People demand a lot of their local district attorney’s office and I am sorry to say we are stretched as it is. I cringe to think what is going to happen. Victims of crimes will be victimized a second time.

Thank you, Gov. Perdue. Myself and my fellow state employees will make sure you do not have a second term.

HEATHER TEPPER
Greenvilllee_SPgB

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City, ECU reach agreement to keep local center open

By Josh Humphries  
The Daily Reflector  

Sunday, June 14, 2009  

The city of Greenville and East Carolina University have reached an agreement that will keep the doors of a vital community center open.

The Greenville City Council agreed Thursday to waive ECU’s rent on the building that houses the Lucille Gorham Intergenerational Center in West Greenville.

The board gave City Manager Wayne Bowers the authority to waive the building’s rent to help address current financial concerns at the center.

A letter from ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard requested the rent waiver because some of the grants used to run the center are running out and will not be available again until this fall.

The center “continues to be a productive and successful effort which is a model for cooperation between community entities,” Ballard’s letter states.

“Currently, it faces financial challenges, in part due to the ending of a number of grants and challenges to the university’s budget as a result of reductions from the state.”

Bowers said he has agreed to waive the rent for the months of July, August and September, a total cost of $6,250. ECU pays $25,000 per year for the use of the city-owned building.

The city and ECU entered a memorandum of understanding in September of 2006 that set the rent before the center opened in January of 2007.

The memorandum of understanding will run out at the end of the year and the two entities will have to draft a new one for the center to continue operating.

The Lucille Gorham Intergenerational Center provides a variety of educational and outreach services including after-school programs, summer camps, tutoring, GED and college-level classes and other classes aimed at the community. It is considered a national model for community organization and urban planning.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9565.
From Cairo to Capetown

ECU grad bikes through Africa

By Kristin Day
The Daily Reflector

Sunday, June 14, 2009

If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be? What would you do?

What will you claim as your life’s great adventure?

Would you visit Paris? Thailand? Australia or the Netherlands? Or would you, say, pedal through Africa for four months on a bicycle?

That may be a bit too extreme for some, but it’s how East Carolina University graduate John Stowe spent the first part of the year in the 2009 Tour d’Afrique.

It’s an annual event that originated in 2003, years after founder Henry Gold began plotting its inception in the early ‘90s. Terrorist attacks and lost business partners delayed his dream.

But Gold had determination and a benevolent vision for the tour. By bringing attention to the riders, he believed he could also help set a different perception of Africa, promote bikes as an environmentally friendly form of transportation and champion humanitarianism. In several major cities, the tour holds a celebration and donates bicycles to local health-care workers. Many of the cyclists also ride to raise money for their own favorite charities.

"It’s an adventure, but it has hidden meanings," Gold said. "We thought by doing this, we’d make a statement."

Stowe, the 30-year-old son of a military man, has a history of international travel and cycling — his father was coach to the West Point Cycling Team. He ended up at ECU and graduated with bachelor degrees in English and International Studies while studying abroad in England and Belize. Afterward, he led backpacking trips and bike tours for underprivileged youth with organizations like Outward Bound and Princeton University. He also took on his own cross-country bike trips from Seattle to New York, up the Atlantic Coast, and through Scotland and England.

"I love the pace (of cycling),” he said after his return to Greenville. "It’s a great way to see the world because you’re immersed. It’s better than driving a car.”

Before he heads back into ECU classrooms this August for a graduate degree in Counselor Education — and possibly an MBA — Stowe said he wanted one more great adventure.

"I’m very, very big on personal challenge," he said. "... So I needed to do one big trip before I kind of settled down.”

Stowe said the first day of Tour d’Afrique was like a mid-point to the entire trip. Beforehand, he was applying to graduate school, training, finding a place to store his furniture, finding sponsors, getting vaccinations and insurance coverage, and basically preparing to put his life on hold for one-third of a year. Then, in early January, he flew to Cairo, Egypt, where he attended group meetings for days until riders approached the starting line by the world-famous Egyptian pyramids and Great Sphinx.

"I was pretty nervous," he said. "I don't know why. You just don't know what's about to happen."

They started east out of Cairo, and bicycled for about 70 miles into the wind, uphill, that first day. It was
probably the most difficult day, Stowe said, and some riders wanted to quit.

By the end of their journey, most of them would agree that Egypt was actually one of the easier countries to bike.

“There’s not a way to prepare for it, except mentally,” Stowe said. “At a certain level I think we were all unprepared.”

Then, there was camping. Some people had inadequate equipment, or didn’t know how to assemble it all at first. After a hard day of riding, these poor souls would have to spend up to 30 minutes preparing a place to lie down.

On Day 2, the journey continued.

A typical riding day, Stowe said, began around 5:30 a.m. Canadian cook James would prepare and serve breakfast, and shortly after the riders would pack their belongings into the two support vehicles and leave. Some days, they would ride on paved roads for the approximately 80 miles. On other days, they could be on sand, dirt and rocks as they rode toward the equator. The 21-day trek through Ethiopia was the hardest. And in northern Kenya, the roads were horrible.

Sometimes, they would ride in groups. Other times, Stowe rode alone, listening to his iPod when it was safe to, or just daydreaming as he rode past the Nile, the Simian Mountains, Mount Kilimanjaro, Victoria Falls — where Stowe went bungee jumping — and along the Kalahari and Namib deserts.

There was plenty of time to think. And riding became easy, quickly.

Gold said the first five days are usually tough, but if you have the right attitude, you can pull through just fine.

“(Riders) just have to be mentally strong,” he said. “Getting in shape on a bike isn’t difficult if you’re determined to do it.”

At lunchtime riders would stop to rest while James served sandwiches, or perhaps they would get some local fare.

They ate a lot. And while burning 5,500-6,000 calories a day, they had to. Everyone still lost about 25 pounds.

There were 59 intrepid cyclists from 11 countries, four from the United States. They were 18-71 years old, male and female. Stowe said everyone just got along and became each other’s motivation.

One of his favorite riding partners was Paul Porter, a professor of agronomy at the University of Minnesota. He studied the food, agriculture and eco-systems of Africa along route and taught his class through telephone or Internet.

“I looked up to him as a good representative of an American,” he said, adding that Porter left after falling and suffering an arm injury in Tanzania. “We lost something big when he left the group.”

They lost two more travelers, as well: one after he was bumped by a passing truck and another decided to go his own way in Malawi.

“He wanted to see things we weren’t seeing,” Stowe said.

And that was OK. People came and went and returned as they wished. While the typical group breaks would be for a few days every week or so, if riders wanted to stay longer and catch up later, they could. If they wanted to leave altogether, they could.

In towns, sometimes the travelers would decide to stay in motels, lodges or maybe youth hostiles, just to sleep in a bed. They washed their clothes by hand or paid a local to do it — a bonus to the local economy. Those who stuck around were immersed in the local culture and the people who were absolutely fascinated by these Westerners.

In Ethiopia there was always people around. The locals would come in groups, sit and simply watch whatever the riders were doing.

“It made you kind of nervous,” Stowe said. “Like you were in the zoo. But they were just curious and if you talked to them, they were cool.”
Except for, perhaps, the time Stowe went to use his man-made toilery, looked up and saw a bunch of kids in the trees, laughing.

There was no fear of danger. Precautions were taken with local officials to ensure the cyclists would be safe, especially through the Sudan. Aside from a few rocks thrown by some rambunctious children, there were no injuries caused by Africans from Cairo to Capetown.

By the time they reached the finish line on May 10, Stowe and the other riders had spent 120 days in Africa, riding almost 12,000 kilometers (about 7,456 miles) and visiting countries that rarely see American tourists, much less cyclists.

Stowe spent the next week in Capetown — in a hotel.

Gold says that every time the year's tour ends, he hears back from riders, who all concur that the trip changed them.

"I hear over and over that it changes their life and perceptions," he said. "... There's nothing compared to the feeling I had riding through Africa. It was one of those moments when you feel right (OK) about everything."

Stowe says he hopes to study overseas during graduate school, but now that he's 30, he'll focus more on getting that "real job."

"I'm ready to start taking responsibility," he said, still tanned from the African sun and visibly contemplative. "Yeah, I think I'm ready for that. Whatever that looks like, I'm not sure."

For more information on Tour d'Afrique's new DeamTours, read this press release.

Contact Kristin Day at kday@coxnc.com or 329-9579.

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**NC House, Senate Dems readying for budget talks**

The Associated Press

Saturday, June 13, 2009

RALEIGH, N.C. — Their marathon budget week now over, House Democrats soon must get to work again on crafting a compromise with their Senate counterparts over the right mix of spending cuts and higher taxes.

The negotiation clock started early Saturday when the state House gave final approval after midnight to its $18.6 billion budget for state government next year that would include taking in $784 million more taxes.

The bill passed on a largely party-line vote of 64-53 following a three-hour debate during a rare Friday night session.

Democrats who drew up the House plan called it a balanced approach to handle the state’s worst fiscal situation in a generation: more than $2 billion in cuts, combined with the taxes and federal stimulus money.

"With the new revenues focused squarely on education and helping those who genuinely need our help, we have avoided the worst of the cuts," said House Speaker Joe Hackney, D-Orange.

The House tax package would raise the sales tax by a quarter-penny so that most residents would pay 7 percent. It would also add two new marginal income tax rates for the wealthy and create or raise taxes on liquor, movies and digital downloads.

Passage of the House plan allows Democrats in the House and Senate to begin negotiating a final two-year spending plan in earnest in the coming week. The Senate passed a budget bill in April. Senate Democrats are lobbying hard for their own tax package that would raise more revenues but change dramatically sales and income taxes and lower their rates.

Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue wants to have input on the bill, and wants it ready to sign before the new fiscal year begins July 1, but that deadline will be hard to meet.

"I’m expecting it to be a long process," said Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, senior co-chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "I’m hoping that it’s not."

The competing House and Senate plans are far apart in sheer size, the result of the Senate drawing up its proposal weeks before lawmakers were told dwindling tax collections had deepened the budget hole by $1.5 billion.

House Democratic negotiators may have an advantage at the bargaining table since their proposal was based on the more realistic tax projections. The outcome will depend largely on what level of additional taxes lawmakers believe they can bear politically and citizens can bear in their wallets.

Regardless, some cuts are more likely to take effect because they appear in both plans. They include:

— Elimination of funding to pay salaries for 3,400-6,000 public schoolteachers as average class sizes are increased.

— Elimination of an undetermined number of vacant and filled jobs within state government. Remaining employees should expect no pay raises, and furloughs are possible.

— Coverage reductions for Medicaid patients and frozen or decreased payments for doctors who treat them.

— Closing of several prisons.

Michaux said a key fight in negotiations may center on the University of North Carolina system, which
historically has had strong allies in the Senate.

Any tax hikes carry political risks.

"A lot of folks in my area that contacted me, they couldn't afford additional taxes at this time," said Rep. Van Braxton of Lenoir County, one of two Democrats who voted with the Republicans in opposing the House budget bill.

And raising income tax rates that are already the highest in the southeastern U.S. may be a deal-breaker for some Democratic senators who believe it would discourage companies from moving to the state. The rate was raised temporarily in 2001 but didn't expire for six years.

"I'll never vote for that — ever, never," Sen. David Hoyle, D-Gaston, one of the authors of the Senate tax plan, said recently. "It's just anticompetitive."

Republicans, who are in the minority in both chambers, have argued unsuccessfully the budget could be balanced without new taxes that would delay the economy's recovery.

"I am convinced there are hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts that wouldn't harm citizens," said House Minority Whip Thom Tillis, R-Mecklenburg.

Negotiations begin as more outside groups try to step up pressure on legislators.

Together NC, a coalition of more than 80 nonprofits and service providers, scheduled a Monday evening rally outside the Legislative Building to urge lawmakers to consider more taxes.

The American Beverage Institute said it would run full-page ads in the state's two largest newspapers Sunday to oppose the House proposed 1.5 percent tax increase on liquor.

Lawmakers have already raised taxes on liquor this decade.

"Now they want to tax your drink even more to pay for their bloated budget," one ad reads. "Tell legislators it's time they cut spending, rather than taxing your cocktails."

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June 13, 2009 - 07:57 a.m. EDT

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Pitt confirms first H1N1 case

The Daily Reflector

Friday, June 12, 2009

A Pitt County adult has tested positive for the Novel H1N1 Influenza virus, also known as swine flu, the Pitt County Health Department announced this morning. It is the first confirmed case in Pitt County.

Public health officials said they are working closely with the individual's health care provider to ensure that all proper disease containment measures have been taken. Those measures include isolating the case and checking with close personal contacts to see if additional testing or follow-up is needed.

More than 80 cases of swine flu have been reported in more than 20 North Carolina counties. The virus has affected every state, officials say, and on Thursday the World Health Organization declared it a pandemic because of its rapid spread.

"Based upon how quickly this virus is spreading throughout the world and the fact that new cases are being reported daily in the state, we felt it was only a matter of time before this novel influenza would be identified in Pitt County," said Dr. John Morrow, Pitt County public health director.

Symptoms of the virus include: fever, sore throat, cough, stuffy nose, headache and body aches and fatigue.

For most people, the illness can be managed at home without medical treatment, health officials say.

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Heels lose pitchers’ duel

The Associated Press

Sunday, June 14, 2009

OMAHA, Neb. — After Arizona State’s Josh Spence and North Carolina’s Alex White tangled in a rare College World Series pitchers’ duel, a bad break for the Tar Heels and a good swing of the bat by Kole Calhoun decided the outcome.

Calhoun’s three-run homer off Brian Moran in the top of the 10th inning, after Carolina right fielder Garrett Gore’s error led to the go-ahead run, carried the Sun Devils to a 5-2 victory Sunday in a game that left ASU coach Pat Murphy shaking his head.

“How many games do you strike out 14 times, get picked off twice, make an error and still win? Pretty lucky,” Murphy said.

ASU (50-12) plays Tuesday night against the Southern Mississippi-Texas winner. The Tar Heels (47-17) will play the Southern Miss-Texas loser in a Bracket 2 elimination game the same day.

Things finally broke open for the Sun Devils after Jason Kipnes reached when Gore misplayed his one-out fly ball near the warning track. The ball nicked Gore’s glove and dropped. Carlos Ramirez followed with a base hit up the middle, scoring Drew Maggi from second to break a 1-1 tie.

Calhoun, who had grounded out to the mound his first three at-bats and struck out looking on his fourth, sent Moran’s 1-1 pitch four rows into the stands in left-center field for a four-run lead.

“I wanted a better at-bat than the last four, and that wasn’t hard to do,” Calhoun said. “Murph told me to take what he gives me and hit it into left center. Fortunately, it got up in the air and got out of here.”

White, who went nine innings in his fourth CWS start, matched his career-high with 12 strikeouts. The Cleveland Indians’ first-round draft pick was touched for three doubles in the first two innings, but he allowed only four singles the rest of the way in his 131 pitches.

“Cleveland’s got a good one,” Murphy said. “Every big situation we had, he turned it up a notch. You knew you were in a fight with someone who was pretty special. That’s why Cleveland needs to pay him even more than they set out to pay him.”

Spence allowed eight singles over seven innings. The Los Angeles Angels’ third-round pick walked three and struck out eight in his 122-pitch outing, then gave way to lefty Mitchell Lambson (9-3) in the eighth.

Lambson gloved Gore’s hard liner and threw to first to double up Levi Michael, ending the eighth. He caught Dustin Ackley looking at a pitch on the inside corner just above his knees to end the ninth and struck out Mark Fleury and Gore to end the game.

Faced with the choice of starting Spence or Cincinnati Reds first-round pick Mike Leake, Murphy went with the Australian lefty because Carolina’s lineup has six left-handed batters.

“Brilliance on my part,” a smiling Murphy said.

Spence and Lambson stymied a Carolina offense that had been batting .400 in the NCAA tournament, 99 points above its regular-season mark of .301. The Heels came in averaging 10 runs in the postseason and had scored 45 in the previous four games.

Ackley, taken second overall by the Seattle Mariners last week, went 2 for 5 and extended his postseason hitting streak to 20 games.
Moran, the Tar Heels' All-Atlantic Coast Conference reliever, struggled against the Sun Devils after having allowed just five runs in his previous 31 innings.

Colin Bates (4-3), who faced one batter in the 10th, took the loss, but Moran was clearly off his game when the Tar Heels needed him most.

"He got the ball up on the home run," Carolina coach Mike Fox said. "He didn't look like he had the life he usually has. The home run shocked him a little bit."

Carolina won its CWS opener each of the past three years but now finds itself one game from elimination.

"Just a tough loss," White said. "The good thing is that we get to play again."

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Sheehan:
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A speech for kids to live by

BY RUTH SHEEHAN, Staff Writer

No knock on Oprah Winfrey, Desmond Tutu or Joe Biden. But I recently heard a graduation speech that put all these luminaries to shame.

It was at a fifth-grade "bridging" ceremony at Poe Elementary. The speaker was Aziel Faison, 18, a coulda-been thug who brought an unusual message to his young audience.

Forget that most fifth-graders still get a good chuckle out of fart and booger jokes. Forget that the typical graduation script calls for sunshine and standard advice.

Over the chatter in a crowded gym, Faison began with a grim account of the troubles he'd seen in the past two weeks. One cousin dead as a result of gang violence. Another in a coma. A close friend's home strafed with gunfire. Again, gangs suspected.

You could have heard a pin drop.

Faison made no bones about how he could easily have come to a similar end. One of his older brothers was in a gang; another sold drugs.

As he said jokingly in his speech, he became close to Poe Principal Sally Reynolds because he was in her office every other day from first to fifth grade.

"It wasn't because I was so involved in the school," he said.

In a subsequent interview, Faison said there was no kind of trouble he didn't get into. "You name it, I did it," he said.

But through the guidance of his parents, his teachers and his advisers at the Loaves and Fishes after-school program, Faison chose a different path from the one that seemed to be stretching out before him. It didn't happen early, and it didn't happen overnight. Faison said he was in the seventh grade, trying out for football, when he realized he needed to get his act together.

On Saturday morning, Faison attended his own graduation from Enloe High School.

This fall, he will be attending Methodist University in Fayetteville. He hopes to study criminal justice and play a lot of football.

"It is never too late for any student," Faison said. "Parents, teachers and staff, do not give up on us! Because we are the future, and you are our guidance."

Future what? he asked.

"Future high school dropouts, menaces to society, inmates and lowlifes? Or are we the future doctors, lawyers, scholars, professional athletes and business owners?"

Faison said he purposely didn't bring the kids a message of staying in class, staying out of
trouble, blah blah blah. "They just tune that out," he said.

Instead, he offered up these pearls:
Learn to count your blessings.

Acknowledge who you are, who you want to become and what it will take to become that. "Do what you need to do in order to get where you need to be."

Observe the world. Think about who is helping you for the better, and who isn't.

Always stay humble. Never forget where you come from or those who helped you get where you are. Always remember and know why you are striving; know your purpose and reasons.

And finally, when others doubt you, make sure you continue on. Not to prove them wrong, but to give them reason to believe.

That's what Aziel Faison did. He beat the odds. He continued on. He gave one class of fifth-graders reason to believe, and he gave their loved ones a lot to think about.

Listen to Ruth at 5 p.m. today on WPTF 680 AM's Bill LuMaye Show.
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Griffin Hall, 27, had expected to buy 'a few Ferraris my first year' out of law school. He got $46.20 selling scrap metal.
Corey Lowenstein, Staff photo by Corey Lowenstein

Buy Photo

For lawyers, a season of layoffs

Others face delayed job starts, pay cuts

BY SARAH OVASKA, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Even lawyers are hurting.

Once guaranteed a shot at the good life, a growing number of those who practice law find themselves among the unemployed. This spring, out-of-work attorneys are being joined in the brutal job market by hundreds of newly minted lawyers graduating from the state's seven law schools, many planning to take the bar exam this summer.

"It's not a happy picture," said Allan Head, director of the N.C. Bar Association, a voluntary professional organization with 13,500 members across the state. "I can't remember a time when lawyers were being laid off.'"

The Bar Association has started a program to help unemployed lawyers, offering aid in dealing with the stress, job placement services and encouraging the unemployed lawyers to think of different types of jobs where a law degree can be used. So far, less than a hundred are participating, but Head suspects they're just seeing a fraction of those who have been sidelined.

Nationally, the unemployment rate in 2008 for the legal profession, including paralegals as well as lawyers, was at the highest it's been in years -- 2.6 percent, approximately 44,000 people, according to data compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That compares to an overall 5.8 percent national unemployment rate.

The national unemployment rate has since risen to 9.4 percent, and while state and federal governments haven't compiled numbers for lawyers yet, their unemployment rate is thought to have climbed, too.
Griffin Hall doesn't need to see the numbers to know how bad it is. The 27-year-old graduated from Campbell University's law school last year and thought he was on his way to a new life after he was certified as a patent lawyer.

But he was laid off in mid-April from a small family firm specializing in estate work and has been looking for a new job in law since, with little luck. He's only gotten one call for an interview, for a position in the Harnett County district attorney's office.

He also has $110,000 of law school debt. Hall said he's been able to defer making payments, but he worries about the mounting interest on the loans.

To make ends meet, Hall has been working at a job he had in high school and college, making trophies for a small family company. He's hoping to do some work for a company reviewing electronic legal documents, but he hasn't gotten a contract yet.

He'll be moving back into his parent's Apex home next month.

"I figured I'd be picking up a few Ferraris my first year," Hall said. "I didn't think I'd still be spongeing off my parents at 27 years old."

Six months behind

Law schools around the state say their graduates are emerging into the toughest economic climate they can recall in years. At UNC-Chapel Hill's law school, many of the May graduates had job promises but were being told their start date would be six months to a year later than they had initially thought.

Others were given reduced pay by firms and have been doing pro bono work, said Brian Lewis, the law school's assistant dean for career services.

Head said the legal market generally lags about six months behind that of the larger economy, meaning the decline in the job market for lawyers, as well as the recovery, may be delayed.

Most of the layoffs in North Carolina appear to be at firms or companies with connections to real estate, or at businesses that are choosing to let go of their in-house counsels to cut costs, Head said.

Several of the state's big law firms are also feeling the pinch. Womble Carlyle, one of the state's larger firms, eliminated eight positions in its Triangle offices, cut some employees' pay and lowered starting salaries for first-year associates by about 11 percent, to $115,000, said Johnny Loper, who manages the firm's Raleigh office.

The firm also eliminated its summer program for law students in its Raleigh office after it became clear it would not be able to offer them permanent jobs.

Hunting good for firms

Some people's troubles are another's opportunities, though, with law firms in better financial positions able to hire away talented lawyers worried about the shaky nature of their current jobs.

Both Poyner & Spruill and Smith Anderson, two of the state's larger firms, have done that while still looking at ways to cut costs, their managing partners have said.

"We've been able to pick up more senior, more talented, more well-known lawyers in North Carolina," said Joseph "Bo" Dempster Jr., managing partner for Raleigh-based Poyner & Spruill. "It's a great chance for us."

Tarek Azhari, 31, of Chapel Hill is hoping for one of those chances. He's been searching for
another job after being laid off in January from Lenovo's legal department.

Since then, Azhari has noticed that the competition is fierce, with some firms and companies adding an extra round of interviews because of the large number of qualified candidates.

And some of the staff-level positions he's applied for have been filled by lawyers with manager-level experience, he said.

He still hasn't found a fit, though, and the climate is taking a toll.

"This is my first experience with a layoff," Azhari said. "It is still quite stressful."

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Piled-up perks carry hidden costs

North Carolina lawmakers have chosen repeatedly to offer the state's workers benefits rather than pay raises, and now the piper awaits his millions.

BY DAN KANE AND DAVID RAYNOR, Staff Writers

Two years ago, State Highway Patrol Capt. Marc Nichols was on leave for nearly three months to deal with an extended illness that required two surgeries.

For many workers in the public and private sectors, that much time off the job would have exhausted their sick leave and vacation time and perhaps pushed them into reduced disability pay. But Nichols continued to get his $82,424 yearly salary without taking a single sick or vacation day.
That's because Nichols, like other supervisory employees in state government, had built up hundreds of hours of comp time during the previous year. The compensatory time, which is not required under federal labor law, allowed Nichols to finish the year without touching the 417 days of sick leave he had accrued in 24 years on the patrol, or the maximum number of vacation days state employees can accrue: 30 days.

"I had my sick leave and vacation, and thank God I didn't need it," said Nichols, 46, who is now a major overseeing the patrol's Special Operations Section. "But it was there if I needed to go into it."

While state employees and teachers annually do battle with lawmakers over pay raises and health benefits, other policies -- often passed to compensate for meager or no raises -- can quietly add tens of millions of dollars to the state's payroll in future years.

That extra cost is important now because of the state's budget crisis. Legislators are struggling to close a $4.5 billion budget shortfall for the fiscal year that starts July 1, but they have been reluctant to take on key constituencies or powerful special interests, such as state workers.

A News & Observer review showed that North Carolina offers its workers and educators compensation and retirement benefits that are often much better than the private sector's and, in at least one case, unusual even among public-sector employees. Each additional benefit tends to amplify the existing ones; the state is now obligated to pay $714 million in accrued vacation and bonus time, more than double what was on the books six years ago. And that number is just for employees of state agencies and the UNC System. It doesn't include public school or community college workers.

Much of the compensation data for the public universities, schools and community colleges -- a combined 215,000 employees -- are not provided to the State Controller's Office, which collects that information for all other state agencies. A University of North Carolina system lawyer said information on individual employees regarding their comp time, vacation, bonus or sick leave should not be considered public record, and she declined to make it available. A 2007 state law declared that all forms of public employees' compensation are public record.

Because of the incomplete data, The N&O could include only 84,650 employees in our analysis of the way the state's policies have played out over time. Here's a look at some of those policies:

- North Carolina does not cap the amount of comp time supervisors and other salaried employees can earn. The only rule is that they have to use it within a year or lose it. Wage-earning employees can accrue up to six weeks of compensatory time, but if it's not taken within a year, the state has to pay it in overtime.

- All employees can substitute comp time for sick leave or vacation time, protecting those balances for the future. They can also use comp time to protect weeks of bonus leave that many state workers have received in lieu of raises since 2002.

- Thanks to a 1993 law, vacation time in excess of six weeks gets rolled into sick leave. And in 2001, state lawmakers eliminated the cap on the amount of sick leave employees can accrue. That perk can significantly boost an employee's retirement compensation. The additional sick leave is added to an employee's tenure, so someone who worked for 30 years and accrued two years of sick leave would have a pension based upon 32 years of service.

Millions and millions

These changes are having an expensive effect on the state's finances:

- Nearly 24,500 of the 84,650 state employees The N&O looked at already carry the maximum six weeks of vacation time they can bank, worth a combined $154 million at
current salaries, and many will cash out that time at retirement -- when they typically earn their highest salaries. Compensation experts say a six-week carryover on vacation isn't uncommon in the public sector, but it's rare in the private sector.

- More than 10,800 of those employees have held onto five weeks of bonus time, and an additional 28,300 have a lesser amount. The combined cost at current salaries is just under $100 million, and that price tag will grow as salaries increase. State lawmakers offered the bonus time in the 2002, 2003 and 2005 sessions to make up for little or no pay raises. It is an unusual practice in the public and private sectors.

- More than 8,000 of those employees have converted unused vacation time into additional sick leave to take advantage of the 2001 law. The state Treasurer's Office estimates that in the first seven years, the additional sick days cost the pension system close to $1 million. Last year alone, more than 540 retirees had accrued extra sick days that boosted their pensions by as much as 4 percent. That cost is expected to grow dramatically as more people retire with a larger number of sick days.

Compensation decisions are made mostly by chief budget writers in closed or unpublicized meetings. The lawmakers deal with data that are scattered across state agencies, UNC schools, community colleges and public school systems, which makes it difficult to pull together. There is no standard annual report, for example, of how much overtime was paid, or comp time taken, across state government.

Some state agencies don't allow supervisors or salaried employees to accumulate unlimited comp time. For example, the Office of State Personnel says its employees have to take their comp time within 90 days.

Employee advocates say the compensation and retirement benefits should not be scaled back or eliminated. They say the benefits make up for lower pay and higher health-care costs not borne by the state.

"When you look at the side of the ledger for sick leave and vacation time, look at it in the context of health benefits and overall pay," said Dana Cope, executive director for the State Employees Association of North Carolina.

Pros, cons of comp time

Former Rep. Art Pope, a Raleigh Republican, sponsored bipartisan legislation in 2001 that provided unlimited accrual of sick leave for retirement purposes. He said he saw it as a way to reward state employees without costing the state budget in a recession year. A 1 percent raise for state employees and teachers costs about $130 million a year.

Pope and others say the sick-leave policy also can save the state money because it encourages employees and teachers not to use the days. When a correction officer uses a sick day, for example, it can cost the state that employee's pay, plus the cost of finding someone to cover for him.

But the comp-time policy can quickly negate that advantage. In 2007, 34 state Highway Patrol members, most of them supervisors, each took five or more weeks of comp time. In nearly every case, those patrol members were out sick or taking care of sick family members, said Maj. Michael Gilchrist, the patrol's head of administrative services.

In one case, the patrol gave a trooper more than two months off because he had earned that comp time as a supervisor, even though he had been demoted to the rank and file, Gilchrist said.

Last year, the patrol changed its policy to limit to 240 hours the amount of comp time that supervisors can accrue.
As of March 30, employees in state agencies were carrying a combined $13.5 million in comp
time for the fiscal year ending June 30. The employee with the most comp days in those nine
months was Jeffrey Beane, a manager with the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh.
He had accrued 141 comp days. That averages out to 62-hour work weeks for this year, if no
vacation, holidays or sick days were taken.

Beane, an expert on reptiles and amphibians, said he rarely uses the comp time he accrues.
The museum reported that he has used nearly eight days worth of comp time in this fiscal
year.

He said he spends much of his regular work days answering requests for information and
accrues much of the comp time doing field work. He is also working on a second edition of a
book on amphibians and reptiles in North Carolina and Virginia.

"I just choose to work all these hours because I like my job," Beane said.

His boss, Bryan Stuart, said Beane is one of the most dedicated employees he has ever
seen, working long days and weekends, driving his own car for field work and not charging
the state for the gas. Beane, 48, makes $37,160 a year.

"The state is very lucky to have him," Stuart said.

Overtime costs doubled

At the Highway Patrol, Commander Walter J. Wilson Jr. said he and his officers have earned
every hour of comp time. Wilson reported accruing 63 days by the end of 2006. That number
dropped to 57 days by the end of 2007, but he took the equivalent of 24 extra days off that
year. He became the patrol commander in July.

He, Gilchrist and Maj. Nichols said patrol supervisors often work more than 40 hours per
week. Wilson and Gilchrist said the force is not growing fast enough to keep up with the
increasing numbers of drivers and miles of state roads, which means supervisors are
stretched. Accidents, shootings and other calamities happen around the clock, and when they
do, supervisors have to respond.

"You get called out a lot of times," Nichols said. "You miss a lot of the family things that you
would like to be there for. It's just the way the job is."

Retired Trooper Terry Story, a past president of the N.C. Troopers Association, is skeptical of
the comp-time hours patrol supervisors are accruing. Records show that rank-and-file
members are accruing far fewer hours than supervisors.

"They are in a salaried position, and unless they've got some kind of special project going on,
they should have enough supervisors to share the load," he said. "Shoot, I don't see how
they are accumulating so much."

The state offers comp time to wage-earning employees to avoid paying overtime, but that
hasn't stopped the state from paying it. In the first 11 months of this fiscal year, the state
paid close to $53 million in overtime to employees in state agencies and universities,
controller records show. Those overtime costs have doubled in the past six fiscal years, from
$34.5 million in 2002 to $68.5 million last year.

Two veteran budget writers in the legislature said they were not aware of the level of growth
in employee vacation, bonus leave and overtime costs. Both said that the growth is troubling
and that lawmakers have to get a handle on it.

"It says we're not being as careful as we need to be in spending our state money, and it also
says when you don't pay people what you think you should, you may be more generous on
the benefits end without being mindful of these costs," said state Sen. Linda Garrou, a
Winston-Salem Democrat.

But Rep. Jim Crawford, an Oxford Democrat, said lawmakers likely won't take a deeper look until next session, because state workers won't receive a raise for the fiscal year beginning July 1. In April, Gov. Beverly Perdue cut employee and teacher pay by 0.5 percent to help close a $3 billion budget gap for this fiscal year.

Gilchrist, the patrol's head of administrative services, isn't waiting on the lawmakers. He is developing a policy that would cap accrued comp time at three weeks. He figures that's enough for troopers to get the time off they need after going above the call of duty.

News researcher Brooke Cain contributed to this report.

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By the numbers

Nearly $1 million Cost to the state retirement system since lawmakers eliminated a cap on accumulated sick leave in 2001.

$68 million Overtime paid to state agency and university employees last year.

$100 million Cost of unused bonus leave given to state agency employees in 2002, 2003 and 2005.

$154 million Cost of maximum accrued vacation that nearly 24,500 state agency employees are carrying.

With the state

With the state budget in chaos, lawmakers and Gov. Bev Perdue still resist serious changes to state policy and spending.

In five parts, The News & Observer examines difficult decisions the state could make to save hundreds of millions.

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Bowles' authority in a crisis

BY ROB CHRISTENSEN, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Having been lied to by President Bill Clinton about Monica Lewinsky, Erskine Bowles was in no mood to accept backing and filling by the leaders of N.C. State University.

By the time Bowles, the University of North Carolina system president, finished cleaning house, the chancellor, the provost, the trustees chairman and former first lady Mary Easley were gone from N.C. State.

"It made me literally sick," Bowles said after receiving e-mail messages showing that Chancellor James Oblinger was involved in the hiring of Easley, despite previous denials of any involvement.

Bowles used similar language when he learned that then-President Clinton had lied to him about having an affair with Lewinsky. It was Bowles' job as White House chief of staff to keep the government running during the impeachment proceedings.

The White House days, in the view of friends and colleagues, colored his handling of Wolfpackgate.

During his job interview for UNC president, Bowles, like the other candidates, was asked to give an example of a big decision he either made or helped make, according to Hannah Gage, chairwoman of UNC's governing board.

Bowles replied: "Shooting at Osama bin Laden. Is that big enough?" (On Clinton's orders in 1998, a Tomahawk missile was fired into a guerrilla training camp in Afghanistan in the hope of killing bin Laden.)

"Needless to say," Gage said, "he's been very good at putting the crisis in perspective."

The White House, as it turns out, is a good training ground for campus politics.

"Erskine learned through the White House that if he was going to be effective he had to make tough decisions and timely decisions," said Nelson Schwab of Charlotte, Bowles' former business partner and longtime friend.

"That kind of carried over," said Schwab, a former chairman of the UNC-Chapel Hill trustees. "Here you had a situation that was sensitive from a political standpoint, sensitive from a legislative standpoint, sensitive for the campus and faculty and all sorts of things."

The timing of the NCSU controversy could not have been worse. The legislature is in the midst of the most sweeping budget cuts since the Great Depression, and the UNC system is fighting to minimize the cuts.

"To date, it hasn't had the negative effect that I think it could," Bowles said. "I'm confident at the end of the day the legislature will want to support the university regardless of the fact that we had some trouble here at N.C. State."
The NCSU controversy could hardly be pushed under the rug. N.C. State is one of the few major public research universities in the country that is in a state capital. If Hillsborough Street had more of a tilt, you could almost launch a bowling ball from the Capitol and knock over NCSU students.

One of the reasons Easley wanted an NCSU job, apparently, is she was tired of the long commute to N.C. Central University law school in Durham. If Interstate 40 weren't so congested, Oblinger might still be chancellor.

Oblinger was a popular and effective chancellor. He didn't lose his job because he hired Easley, but because he misled his boss about it.

Bowles couldn't fire Clinton, but he could and did oust Oblinger.

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

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NCSU gears up to find top talent

Hope abounds in chancellor search

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

Amid the chaos as N.C. State University Chancellor Jim Oblinger formally resigned last week, some were already thinking ahead to the next difficult task -- finding just the right leader for the state’s largest university.

Chancellor searches are inevitably lengthy and difficult, but this one has additional layers of complexity, given the major budget cuts under way at NCSU and the scandal related to the hiring of former state first lady Mary Easley. In addition to Oblinger, Provost Larry Nielsen and trustees chairman McQueen Campbell have resigned in recent weeks.

Such a startling string of departures might look like the kind of turmoil that would give smart potential candidates pause.

Word has spread widely in the tightknit club of high-end academic leaders, including a lengthy article about the Easley situation in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

From the beginning, though, UNC system President Erskine Bowles and NCSU leaders have said they don’t think the bad publicity will hurt the quality of the applicant pool.

An inviting position

"I really think this could be one of the best jobs in higher education anywhere in the country," said interim NCSU trustees Chairman Bob Jordan. His goal is to announce a search committee at the board’s next meetingJuly14.

"The amount of state support that the system gets is among the best anywhere, and I’m really optimistic that a number of really good people will be interested," Jordan said.

Outside experts agree. The job and the university are simply too good for a serious candidate to spurn, said Claire Van Ummersen, who has headed universities or university systems in Massachusetts, Ohio and New Hampshire and is now a vice president of the American Council on Education.

"N.C. State is an excellent institution and has had an excellent reputation," she said.

It also helps greatly, Van Ummersen said, that Bowles was able to quickly find a highly regarded interim chancellor, Jim Woodward, who previously led UNC-Charlotte for 16 years. That eases any pressure to make a hasty search, she said.

A solid interim

Having Woodward in place for the interim also will assure potential candidates that the university will remain strong during the months it will inevitably take to select a permanent chancellor, Van Ummersen said.
"That really bodes well for a search," she said.

Or, as Jordan put it: "The good Lord blessed us that [Woodward] was available when we found ourselves in this situation."

Still, Jordan said, there is no reason to slow the search down either, in part because that would be taking advantage of Woodward, who had been happily retired in Charlotte, where his wife will stay while he works in Raleigh.

The process is so deliberate that it will likely be a year before a new chancellor starts work, especially if he or she is chosen from academia, where major moves are usually planned around the rhythm of semesters.

This search is expected to be similar to the one that led to Oblinger's selection in 2004, Jordan said Friday. A search committee that includes representatives from not only the board of trustees but also the faculty, staff, students, alumni and university supporters will decide the characteristics the university needs in a new chancellor. Then, the committee will work with a search company to attract a pool of applicants, then thin it to a handful, perhaps two or three.

At that point, the candidates will be submitted to Bowles without any type of ranking. He will talk with them and weigh their qualifications, then recommend his pick to the UNC Board of Governors.

"It takes a fair amount of time just to do your homework and schedule all the public meetings required," Jordan said.

If the process follows the normal pattern, that would probably happen sometime in winter, Van Ummersen said. It's likely the real work won't get revved up until fall, when all the players are back on campus.

Typically after a pool of candidates is developed, the committee will narrow it via telephone interviews, then a round that interviewers call "airport interviews," because they are often held near an airport, either at a central location, such as Chicago, or near the university's local airport. These save the expense of sending the selection committee somewhere.

Soon and very soon?

It's possible that a new chancellor could start work before next summer if the pick comes from outside academia -- like Donna Shalala, the former U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services who became president of the University of Miami. Also, a selection may not be in another job when picked, Van Ummersen said, or an internal candidate could get the job. That was the case when Oblinger moved up from provost.

Woodward told NCSU officials he would be happy to be replaced between the fall and spring semesters, but he doesn't think that is likely.

The interim chancellor also said last week that he recommends that the candidates' names remain secret throughout the process, because making the names public would scare off good candidates.

Those who hold a high job with another university may lose their credibility there, and if they do not win the new job they may find their old one in jeopardy.

"It sort of sticks in my craw, but it's the best way to do this," Woodward said.

Jordan agrees.

The Easley scandal isn't the only huge problem on campus. NCSU, like the other members of the UNC system, is struggling to figure out a way to cut more than 10 percent of its budget.
Not just the money

But state budget problems are a national phenomenon, so even a big cut may not seem like a serious factor for someone who is considering an application.

Indeed, a smart move to generate good will could be to come in at a cut from the salary of the last chancellor, $420,000, Van Ummersen said.

"A new person coming in would want to get off on their best foot with the community there, including the legislature and faculty and staff," she said.

It's also possible that the economy might help reduce costs for the search, she said. Some of the companies that assist with searches are offering ways to trim their fees if universities will take on more of the labor, such as scheduling the travel of the candidates being interviewed.

Woodward said the plan is also to have the top search companies bid for the job.

In tune

Meanwhile, a faculty member said, the university will be fine.

"You can't deny that damage has been done," said Art Padilla, a business school professor at NCSU and head of the department of management, innovation and entrepreneurship.

"The good news is that universities are like symphony orchestras. The conductor is important, but a lot of knowledge about how it works is with the musicians."

Staff writer Eric Ferreri contributed to this story.

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Accident report: Easley train wreck

BY STEVE FORD, Associate Editor

We who have spent careers in the news business, where the pay was adequate so long as your tastes, and your family size, were modest, often consoled ourselves with the rueful observation that nobody became a news person to make money.

Some did, of course. Some climbed the ladder into executive positions. Some worked for the big papers in Washington or New York. But in general, someone who wants to become Mr. or Mrs. Moneybags won't be signing up for newspaper duty, no more than for teaching, preaching or policing. The business has a service component. One is called to it, more or less.

The same holds true for those who carry on the work of our universities. (No laughing, please.) Just because university work can be a very attractive gig -- well compensated, intellectually rewarding, self-directed and secure, at least for those fortunate enough to become regular faculty members -- by no means does that rule out the altruistic, service impulse. Our university professors, those scholars who teach, conduct research at the cutting edge of their fields, endeavor to bring knowledge to bear for society's benefit -- theirs are noble pursuits.

There's no denying that the Mary Easley fiasco has cast the university culture in an unflattering light. High officials drawing extraordinarily handsome salaries have compromised themselves rather than risk offending the powerful.

The former first lady, propelled not only by her own qualifications and buoyant personality but by influence flowing from her husband, in 2005 wound up with a job at N.C. State University that proved to be her ticket to an even better job, paying $170,000 a year. Was what she was doing worth all that? Hardly obvious that it was -- hardly obvious, anyway, to the folks who just fired her.

But let's try to frame on Mrs. Easley's behalf a positive interpretation of her little saga. First, stipulate that Mary Easley is a talented and appealing professional -- a lawyer who gravitated not toward the high-dollar law firms that crowd the capital but toward the academic world.

Mrs. Easley spent several years on the law faculty at N.C. Central University in Durham. As it happens, my wife, who took a mid-career law school plunge, had a class with Easley and found her to be an excellent professor. How could anyone have found fault with her eventual desire to cut down on the commuting, to see what she could find at the big university in Raleigh that suited her talents and that would further satisfy her zeal for public service?

For that matter, could it not have been a matter of good-faith judgment on someone's part that Mary Easley's portfolio of professional assets, combined with her visibility and contacts and influence as first lady, amounted to an opportunity that NCSU should be eager to seize?

To ask that question is to answer it. Of course such a judgment could have been reached. Yet insufficient attention was paid to doing things by the book, in a way that would have defused
the sense that this whole deal was an exercise in big shots throwing their weight around and then having to cover their tracks.

What if, for example, Mrs. Easley had asked her dean at N.C. Central to be her intermediary, instead of relying on a key aide to her husband and one of her husband's appointees? The dean could have inquired of a counterpart at NCSU -- here's what she's interested in, do you have any openings? Mrs. Easley could have followed through as any job applicant would. Or, if she had an idea for a position to be created out of whole cloth, she could have pitched it to a dean or the provost.

The train instead derailed because of an irregular hiring procedure that featured 1) instigation by the governor's office, and involvement by Gov. Mike Easley himself, 2) brokering by the NCSU trustees chairman, an Easley political ally with a record of exchanging favors with the governor, and 3) an appalling lack of candor by the principals. Mrs. Easley's considerable merits and the value she brought to NCSU were overshadowed by the impression that she was hired as a matter of privilege -- the governor's wife claiming what she was entitled to claim.

Larry Nielsen, the now-former provost who hired and later promoted Mary Easley, spoke memorably to the joys and rewards of the "know business" in a 2007 speech to the NCSU faculty (The N&O recently printed excerpts). Professors, he said in essence, have it made. They hold an open-ended hunting license in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. They have no bottom line, only a top-line mandate to "Do good." And they have rock-solid job security.

Well, that's fine, even if a bit out of register with the usual notion of a "calling" and its touch of sacrifice. But don't abuse the privileges granted by people who, it seems by Nielsen's lights, can't possibly be as fortunate as the professors they're supporting in such comfortable style. In Mary Easley's case, there was abuse that in the end couldn't be swept aside.

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Truth emerged at NCSU

BY JOHN DRESCHER, Executive Editor

Four weeks ago, N.C. State University alum Gary Pearce offered Chancellor Jim Oblinger some advice on how to handle the festering problem surrounding the hiring of Mary Easley.

Pearce develops media strategy for politicians, businesses and nonprofits. "Get out of the defensive crouch, determine exactly what happened when and put it all out for the public to see," he wrote on his blog, talkingaboutpolitics.com.

Unfortunately, Oblinger didn't take that advice. He waited until a week ago to tell his boss, UNC system President Erskine Bowles, that e-mail messages showed he had been actively involved in the hiring of Mary Easley when she was first lady.

At that point, Bowles lost confidence in him.

A few weeks earlier, Oblinger wrote in a letter to The N&O: "We have been and will continue to be forthcoming about our actions." But he wasn't forthcoming then, and he wasn't forthcoming in the weeks after.

Which is sad. Because it didn't have to end this way, with Oblinger resigning. He is a talented academic and leader who loves N.C. State and, in many ways, was a successful chancellor.

Also sad was the performance given this week by Bob Jordan, the board chairman at NCSU. Jordan, a 1954 graduate, is one of this state's distinguished elders. He is a successful businessman, a former lieutenant governor and a committed giver of his time and money to many good causes, including NCSU.

Yet on Monday, Jordan let his frustration get the best of him.

At a news conference, he confronted N&O reporter Andy Curliss, the lead reporter on the story, and criticized our coverage.

"It's not fair to come in here and try to nitpick little stuff to try to tell a story," Jordan said. "Y'all took after him [Oblinger] and these little nitpicking things."

Let's assess the damage. The UNC president lost confidence in his chancellor. The provost resigned. The former board chairman changed his story about Mary Easley's hiring. And Jordan's board fired her.

Nitpicking? Bob Jordan knows better. At a moment that called for leadership, candor and courage, Jordan went for the cheap shot -- to criticize the reporter who uncovered the truth. Curliss did for NCSU what it couldn't do for itself: He got to the bottom of Easley's hiring and the provost's severance deal.

Jim Martin, faculty chairman, offered a better assessment. "In a time of crisis, leadership that is honest and credible is an absolute imperative," he said. "Sadly, that is not what we've
experienced in the last few weeks."

Our coverage of Easley's hiring at NCSU grew out of our May series, "Executive Privilege," about former Gov. Mike Easley, who left office in January. Some have asked why those stories didn't run when he was in office.

The series was built around secret flights Easley took from friends, including McQueen Campbell, then board chairman at NCSU. Campbell was a key player in Mary Easley's hiring.


Once we knew Campbell had flown the Easleys often, we asked questions about their friendship. That led us to Mary Easley's job at N.C. State.

We'll keep reporting.

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NCCU seeks to open dialogue

Black colleges' future is theme

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

DURHAM - To celebrate its 100th birthday, N.C. Central University will host an academic symposium examining the future of historically black institutions.

Chancellor Charlie Nelms wants a multi-day, "national conversation" on race and higher education at the nation's 105 historically black colleges and universities. While the idea is still evolving, he said the symposium will be the first to bring together so many scholars, social activists, politicians, students and others to address the subject.

NCCU is one of 10 HBCUs in North Carolina and one of five in the public university system. "It's a big topic for us to tackle," Nelms said in an interview. "For us to be turning 100 years old is an opportunity to have an informed discussion on the future of HBCUs. It's a contribution we think we should make."

NCCU's centennial observance began this month and runs through July 2010. He expects the symposium will be held next spring. The university is now looking for sponsors.

Marybeth Gasman, a University of Pennsylvania historian who teaches the nation's only course about historically black colleges and universities, said the symposium would be a one-of-a-kind event if it does bring together the broad range of people that Nelms is targeting. But to be successful, it needs to be far more than just a pep rally.

"People would have to be really honest," Gasman said. "What tends to happen is that there tends to be a general feeling of support -- which is good -- but you should also keep a critical eye to make sure HBCUs are doing the best they can."

To that end, Gasman said the symposium should bring in people not only with varied backgrounds but of many different ages as well. The leaders of many black colleges and universities see things far differently than younger ones do -- and different as well from the views taken by today's black college students, she said.

"The old guard is greatly influenced by the civil rights movement," Gasman said. "But, if you talk to young people today, they have a little bit of a different attitude."

It will come as the role of the nation's historically black colleges and universities is being debated anew. On many black college campuses, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency was a watershed moment. But in recent weeks, some HBCU leaders have questioned the president's commitment to black higher education, questioning his decision -- through his budget proposal -- not to renew a two-year, $255 million allocation to historically black colleges and other institutions that serve minorities.

The Department of Education provided the funds two years ago, saying then that it was one-time money. Still, some HBCU leaders say the funding should have continued.
Lezli Baskerville, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, told the Chronicle of Higher Education recently that Obama's decision "suggests that HBCUs are not a priority."

Nelms disagrees.

"It was very clear that this was a two-year type of contract and we shouldn't expect to continue receiving those dollars," he said. "Do we need the money? Yes. Did anyone renege? No."

NCCU, which received about $1.3 million from this year's funds, spent half of it on a campus emergency warning system and put some of the remaining money toward salaries for advisers. When the money runs out, Nelms pledges to shift money to keep paying those advisors.

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