THE DAILY CLIPS

July 1, 2010

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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Bowles: Legislators stood up for students
By JOSH HUMPHRIES
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, June 30, 2010

With North Carolina facing serious financial pressures, officials from the state’s university system are generally pleased with the budget that Gov. Bev Perdue signed on Wednesday. The House and Senate passed a $19 billion budget Tuesday that includes $2.6 billion for the University of North Carolina system.

“Legislators really stood up for our university and our 225,000 students in these hard times when money is scarce,” UNC system president Erskine Bowles said. “On a relative basis, and particularly considering the economic climate, the 2010-11 state budget we received from the General Assembly was nothing short of remarkable.”

Bowles said the system expected some cuts, as every state department faced them, but was pleased with the outcome for the UNC system.

“In the end, the General Assembly also committed to fully fund the university’s requests for need-based financial aid, enrollment growth, and operating reserves for new buildings,” Bowles said.

“It also adopted the Board of Governors’ alternative tuition plan for the coming year and authorized additional tuition increases to help offset the impact of budget cuts.”

East Carolina University will receive $6 million for faculty and operating needs in preparation for opening its dental school in the fall of 2011 and a portion of the state’s systemwide allotment of $19 million in operating funds to open its Family Medicine Center in early 2011.

“There are pluses and minuses of course, but there are some significant pluses for the UNC system,” said Kevin Seitz, ECU’s vice chancellor for administration and finance.

Seitz said financial aid, enrollment growth funding, operating funds for new buildings, the Board of Governors tuition requests, and building repair and renovation funding are important for ECU. The university did not receive additional funding for indigent care provided by the ECU Brody School of Medicine.

The state has allotted $2 million in recurring funds for indigent care, but the university was requesting an additional $3 million. For years, the state did not provide any indigent care funding to ECU to provide care to underserved and underprivileged citizens of eastern North Carolina.

Seitz said funding for the operation of the new Family Medicine Center, including maintenance, security and utilities, will prove to be important as the center opens up in 2011.
Students will face increases in tuition. The budget allows for each campus to increase tuition up to $750 on top of previously approved tuition increases for next year to make up for state budget reductions across the system.

ECU’s proposed tuition increases will have to be approved by the UNC system but the proposal includes an additional $300 on top of a previously approved $90 increase for in-state undergraduate students.

Out-of-state students could face a $1,630 increase, and medical students could face a $750 increase. In-state graduate students could face a $135 increase while out-of-state students would face a $506 increase for next year.

The budget also repeals the out-of-state athletic full scholarship tuition waiver for all UNC campuses. Previously, out-of-state athletes on full scholarship were charged in-state tuition, which saved UNC system scholarship funds more than $9 million per year but cost the state revenue.

ECU athletics officials estimate that the change will cost the university more than $1 million as out-of-state athletes on full scholarship will be charged the regular out-of-state tuition rate.

Contact Josh Humphries at jhumphries@reflector.com or (252) 329-9565.
Budget offers ammo for all

Democrats are proud they avoided deep education cuts. Republicans point to a $3 billion deficit next year.

BY BENJAMIN NIOLET
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH — Democrats celebrated the state's new $18.9 billion budget with a public signing ceremony Wednesday, but the anti-incumbent sentiment among voters means Republicans see potential political gains as well.

House and Senate Democrats are touting tax breaks for small businesses and plans to spare primary and higher education from the most painful cuts. Democrat Gov. Bev Perdue, flanked by schoolchildren at a signing ceremony Wednesday, touted programs she says will create jobs and a pet program that will give teachers diagnostic tools to keep a close eye on their students' progress.

Republicans can go back to their home districts and talk about how the Democrats' budget doesn't prepare the state for a deficit that could grow to $3 billion next year. They will talk about how Democrats put off a decision on how to cope with the increasingly likely possibility that the state won't get half a billion dollars in federal Medicaid money.

Both sides believe they won political talking points for the fall election.

"Those that favor the budget are talking about it like you talk about your grandchildren," said Rep. Ronnie Sutton, a Robeson County Democrat who

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Surrounded by schoolchildren, Gov. Bev Purdue signs 2010-11 budget.

JOHN ROTTET - jrottet@newsobserver.com
lost his primary and won't be back next session. "Those who hate the budget are talking about it like the guy who broke into your house two weeks ago."

With an ethics and criminal probe into former Democratic Gov. Mike Easley's administration and a national electorate that so far appears hostile to incumbents, the budget battle took on greater weight than dollars and programs this week. The tally was almost entirely along party lines.

"We kept our eye on the goal and that goal in every decision has been about a competitive North Carolina that works for all of our citizens," Perdue said at the signing ceremony Wednesday night. "I can't tell you how happy I am about the work of the House and the Senate."

All the ceremonial pens and congratulations were in stark contrast to last year's budget, which included a tax increase and deep cuts. Perdue signed that budget in private.

"This budget for them is about getting past the next election," said Sen. Phil Berger, an Eden Republican and the chamber's minority leader.

**Talking points both ways**

Democrats control each chamber by at least 10 votes and dominate the budget writing process. This week they accused Republicans of calling for spending and tax cuts that would not have met the constitutional requirement for a balanced budget.

"I have found that 90 percent of the time when you say, 'Where shall we cut?' Nobody wants to offer up their ox," said Sen. A.B. Swindell, a Nashville Democrat.

For Republicans, the budget offers them a chance to talk about a familiar theme: that the state budget should be written from scratch and ineffective or inefficient programs should get cut. Republicans routinely demand that the state lower its tax and regulatory burden on business and complain that Democrats don't give their ideas as full consideration.

"They grow government at the expense of the private sector," Berger said.

The budget protects teachers' jobs by capturing money from the state lottery. It fully funds a surging enrollment in community colleges brought on by high unemployment, and it spares the UNC system from the more draconian cuts proposed in the House version of the budget. Health and Human Services spending took a deep hit, including hundreds of eliminated positions and a $50.7 million cut to in-home personal care services for Medicaid recipients.

Lawmakers and Perdue faced an $800 million revenue shortfall brought on by the recession. That problem would grow worse by another $519 million if Congress fails to deliver federal Medicaid money the budget anticipates.

**Without Medicaid...**

The solution to that problem is a contingency plan. If the Medicaid money isn't delivered by January, the budget includes a prioritized list of actions that starts with raising reserve funds. It gets progressively worse. Medicaid provider rates would be cut, the state would slash its contribution to the state retirement system and then spending would be cut by 1 percent across the board.

Treasurer Janet Cowell, a Democrat, has noted that cutting the retirement system payment would leave an even bigger bill for next year.

'**A dangerous path**'

"We are starting down a dangerous path," Cowell told lawmakers in a message Republicans quoted in floor debate this week. "I urge legislators to uphold the 69-year tradition of meeting our pension obligations lest we go the way of too many credit card debtors who find themselves in a deep hole they cannot get out of."

Cowell repeated a Republican warning that next year's budget deficit will be $3 billion because the tax increases last year will expire and federal stimulus dollars will lapse.

"We got a budget that is shrinking. We got a budget with no new taxes. So they had to find something else to complain about," said Rep. Hugh Holliman, a Lexington Democrat and the House majority leader. "Now it's next year's budget."

Perdue has not ruled out ordering more spending cuts through executive order.

No one is arguing that next year's budget won't present problems.

"It is our job to fix the budget now," Swindell said. "We will fix the budget again, whoever is in charge."

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What the budget would do

For K-12 education

- Capture $121 million from the state lottery, including $16.8 million from the lottery’s reserve fund, for teachers’ salaries.
- Cut in half a reserve fund used to help school systems that experience greater than expected enrollment. The fund would still have $2.6 million.
- Cut instructional supplies funds by 3.5 percent to save $3.3 million. The cut leaves $89.9 million for instructional supplies.
- Eliminate funding for mentoring programs for one year to save $4 million.
- Cut funding for transportation personnel salaries and maintenance of school buses by 2.4 percent to save $10 million, with $403 million left.
- Eliminate $11.9 million for buying new school buses for one year. Leave $1 million for emergency bus replacement.
- Include $10 million to expand a diagnostic program for students, a priority of Gov. Bev Perdue.

For community colleges

- Provide $81 million to fully fund 15 percent enrollment growth, or 33,013 full-time students. This supplements $41 million previously authorized for enrollment growth.
- Increase tuition for students from $50 to $56.50 for residents and from $241.30 to $248.50 for nonresidents. The maximum tuition increase for full-time resident students will be $208 a year, bringing tuition to $1,808 per year.
- Provide $900,000 to assist minority male mentoring programs, which provide academic and personal counseling, drug intervention and personal growth development. The money would be distributed through competitive applications.
- Provide $24 million for a program to teach job or basic skills to inmates in state prisons.

For the UNC System

- Mandate a systemwide cut of $70 million. System and campus officials would decide how to make the cuts, but should focus on non-teaching-related programs and expenditures.
- Repeal a subsidy that provided in-state tuition rates to out-of-state scholarship athletes to save $9.4 million. Booster clubs will now have to raise more money for scholarships.
- Cut the state-funded advertising budget for UNC campuses by 24 percent to save $2.5 million. Last year, the campuses spent $10.6 million of state money on advertising. Another $13.2 million came from institutional trust funds.
- Provide $19.1 million in recurring money and $4.8 million in one-time money to pay operating costs of 40 new or renovated buildings.

For natural and economic resources

- Cut nine vacant and three filled positions (egg inspectors) in the N.C. Department of Agriculture to save $590,000.
- Cut $200,000 from the Department of Labor’s apprenticeship program and force the program to become more self-sustaining.
- Cut $470,000 from the Environment and Natural Resources’ Forest Resources Division by cutting pilots and aircraft used for forest fires. The budget also requires the division to sell at least 10 aircraft.
- Transfer the Commerce Department’s aircraft division to the Department of Transportation, eliminating one pilot and one mechanic position.

For justice and public safety

- Eliminate 7.5 jobs in the Justice Department to save $501,000.
- Require a 1.5 percent or $6.7 million cut this year from the court system’s operating budget.
- Cut $400,000 for equipment purchases from the State Bureau of Investigation.
- Provide $221,000 to the SBI to hire four new people for the crime lab to analyze DNA samples.
- Eliminate more than 30 vacant positions in the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to save $1.2 million.
- Reduce the Department of Correction’s proposed budget by $22 million because of a lower-than-projected inmate population. Prisons remain overcrowded, but after a surge in 2008 and 2009, the population has leveled off.

For general government

- Reduce the janitorial budget to save $291,775.
- Spend $493,000 to add four positions and increase resources for the State Ethics Commission.
- Cut the Senate budget by $609,000 and the House budget by $1.6 million.
Editorial: **State budget plan fails to make long-term preparations**
Thursday, July 1, 2010

For the first time since 2003, North Carolina expects to have a budget in place at the start of the fiscal year. Predictably frugal, this spending plan makes cuts across the board to close an $800 million revenue shortfall, reductions that will affect all manner of state services from public education and mental health to transportation and Medicaid payments.

Yet, despite those cuts, the Legislature will leave a deficit for the coming fiscal year that could reach $3 billion, reflecting the short-term thinking that has become commonplace in Raleigh. North Carolina will continue to see these tough choices repeated annually until it confronts the need for revenue reform, a battle that requires a level of fortitude obviously absent in the state capital.

The $19 billion budget that received Gov. Beverly Perdue’s signature Wednesday reflects the difficult economic times facing North Carolina and the choices they have created. After closing a $3 billion shortfall one year ago through a combination of tax and fee hikes and sharp cuts to several state agencies, the Legislature addressed an $800 million gap this year with across-the-board spending reductions that will be see throughout the state.

However, the budget includes few long-term solutions. It avoids teacher layoffs through the application of lottery funds, a use not outlined when the games won legislative approval. Deep cuts to Medicaid and mental health promise to harm thousands of residents who need medical care and rely on state funding for treatment. By slashing funding to the University of North Carolina system, lawmakers have all but assured students will see tuition hikes in the coming year. The list goes on.

At the root of it all is the pressing need to reform the state’s antiquated system of revenue collection. Engineered during the Depression era, its reliance on personal income tax, corporate tax collection and sales taxes fails to reflect the modern, dynamic state economy that produces ideas and services more than the furniture, textiles and agriculture products of old. It has been argued that this system has exacerbated job losses and makes more difficult the task of economic development.

By failing once again to address this pressing need, the Legislature has abdicated its obligation to plan for North Carolina’s future. But the state simply cannot afford for the status quo to persist. Changes must be made, and lawmakers will have to demonstrate the courage to make the tough decisions at long last.
Tuition break down

With a state budget still reeling from the recession, North Carolina lawmakers at long last pulled a gift from beneath the tree of university booster clubs that never should have been offered in the first place. Scholarship athletes from out of state no longer will be classified as in-state for tuition purposes, which they were for five years thanks primarily to the lobbying heft of UNC-Chapel Hill boosters.

The break saved the booster clubs about $9 million, which means it cost taxpayers that much. And it made the university system in effect sanction a lie: Students from out of state are not in fact in-state students. The wealthy Rams Club in Chapel Hill had friends on Jones Street, including former state Sen. Tony Rand of Fayetteville, their chief advocate. And UNC-CH also has a political action committee that contributes to key lawmakers friendly to their aims.

This was a bad idea from the start, although those who pushed it tried to cover it in a cloak of virtue by also including in the tuition break full scholarship students with prestigious academic scholarships. The foundations that sponsor them will continue to get the break under a deal hammered out during state budget negotiations. They argue that they will be able to bring more top-notch students to campuses as a result, and with more out-of-state students and foreign students, the educational experience for in-state students will be enhanced.

Yes, some smaller schools will have to scramble if they want to continue bringing in as many out-of-state athletes. But the poormouthing on behalf of the well-heeled Rams and the Wolfpack Club of N.C. State is ridiculous. Their members will simply have to cover the difference, and they're perfectly capable of doing so. Considering the millions of dollars lavished on improvements to stadiums and the millions paid to coaches these days, to stick the taxpayers with a bigger tab is and always was unfair.

There is little good news in the budget this year, but the lean times have at least forced the elimination of this ill-advised and, for taxpayers, insulting policy.
Hurricanes May Be Good for Gulf Oil Spill, Experts Say

Storms may help disperse slicks, but oil surging inland still a worry.

Christine Dell'Amore
in Grand Isle, Louisiana
National Geographic News

Published June 30, 2010

For Louisiana resident Merry Schultz, a trip to her regular vacation spot this year wasn't exactly a day at the beach.

Standing on a long pier at Grand Isle State Park on Tuesday, Schultz surveyed a shoreline littered with crusty tarballs and bordered by water shining silver with crude from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

(See pictures of eight national parks threatened by the Gulf oil spill.)

To add insult to injury, low-lying storm clouds darkened a beach pounded by angry waves—calling cards of tropical storm Alex, now Hurricane Alex, roiling out at sea.

"What's sad about this is it's June," Schultz said, sweeping her arm over the scene. Usually at the start of summer, "this would be full of tents and campers."

Although Hurricane Alex is not predicted to directly affect the Gulf oil spill, strong winds and waves have hampered cleanup and containment efforts. Experts are also sounding alarms that Hurricane Alex's storm surge may push oil deeper into already threatened marshland.

Still, there could be a silver lining to the storm clouds: The "extremely active" Atlantic hurricane season predicted for 2010 could help break up and disperse offshore oil, giving a boost to nature's self-cleaning abilities, experts say.

"It's hard to find good news in a hurricane," said Edward Overton, an environmental chemist at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. "But it's not all death and gloom."
"Eggbeater" Hurricane Winds Can Break Up Oil

Powerful hurricane winds can act like eggbeaters, tearing big pools of oil into smaller globs, which are more palatable to oil-eating microbes, according to Siddhartha Mitra, an organic geochemist at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.

Though oil-munching bacteria are abundant in the Gulf of Mexico, the organisms can't penetrate solid sheets of oil, and so they chew only on the edges of oil slicks.

Breaking oil into smaller pieces allows the bacteria to attack oil globs from all sides, making the microbes "fat and happy," LSU's Overton said.

"Our environment can really handle oil. It's very acclimated. It might take a year or two, but the bacteria will eat [most of the oil] up very, very quickly," Overton said. (See "Nature Fighting Back Against Gulf Oil Spill.")

More manageable pieces of oil also boost the rate at which dissolved oxygen in seawater can chemically weather the oil, changing the crude's properties. Over time, weathering can reduce the oil's overall toxicity, East Carolina's Mitra said.

Likewise, oil in smaller droplets evaporates faster at the water's surface, LSU's Overton noted.

One of the few known examples of a hurricane helping an oil spill occurred in 1979, said Chris Hebert, lead hurricane forecaster for the private forecasting company ImpactWeather, based in Houston, Texas.

That year winds from Hurricane Henri scoured clean most of the Mexican beaches stained by the Gulf of Mexico's Ixtoc oil spill, Hebert said by email.

But the impacts of hurricanes on oil spills is still poorly understood, noted East Carolina's Mitra, who warned that any predictions are "guesswork" at best.

**Hurricane's Negative Impacts on Oil "Far Worse"**

Overall, ImpactWeather's Hebert cautioned, "the negative impacts [of a hurricane] would likely be far worse" than its upsides.

For example, just the threat of a hurricane headed directly for the oil spill site would shut down efforts to control the oil still spewing from the damaged *Deepwater Horizon* wellhead, he said.

LSU's Overton also pointed out that any benefits from hurricanes hold true only for oil "meandering" far offshore. Nearshore oil, which is already creeping into Louisiana's marshes, will likely be pushed farther inland by tide surges, he said.

(See "Hurricane Could Push Spilled Gulf Oil Into New Orleans.")
It's even possible hurricanes could pick up oil and deposit it as rain in areas far from the coast, East Carolina's Mitra said.

**Hurricane Alex to Send Oil Splashing Inland?**

At one of Grand Isle's fishing harbors, out-of-work shrimper Ronald Theriot said that hurricanes bringing oil farther inland is a "big worry."

The native Grand Isle resident recently saw two large pockets of oil just a few miles offshore, and he predicts storm waves could soon send that oil splashing across the region.

(See pictures of oil from the Gulf of Mexico spill on Florida beaches.)

Workers were busy Tuesday trucking in dirt to build levees along the road to the harbor in an attempt to block oily waves whipped up by Hurricane Alex or future storms.

If hurricanes do drive oil inland, "Lord have mercy," Theriot said. "I don't think you can have enough people to clean that mess up."

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Some Marines can be fast-tracked into North Carolina universities

Published: Thursday, July 1, 2010 at 8:31 a.m.

Honorably discharged Marines with North Carolina residency status have a short time left to be fast-tracked into one of 13 University of North Carolina schools including the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Under the Elite to Elite Academic Mission program, the Commanding General, Marine Corps Installations East has the authority to bypass the normal college application processes and personally recommend Marines.

To be eligible there are certain military requirements including scoring a 69 or above on the AFQT and above 114 on the GCT. To learn about the other requirements and for details on the program, e-mail MCIEast's Regional School Liaison David Schock at david.schock@usmc.mil or Robert Songer at songerrl@usmc-mces.org.

The other schools participating in the Elite to Elite program are East Carolina University, Fayetteville State, Elizabeth City State, North Carolina A&T, North Carolina Central, North Carolina State, UNC Asheville, UNC Charlotte, UNC Greensboro, UNC Pembroke, Western Carolina State and Winston-Salem State.

— Amy Hotz

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Progress boosts UNC wind study

UNC-Chapel Hill's planned $1 million study of offshore wind energy potential will get a $300,000 gust from Progress Energy.

The UNC study, to be completed over three years, is expected to be the most comprehensive analysis of wind power potential on the state's ocean waters.

The area to be studied would feed directly into Progress Energy's service area in coastal North Carolina. Raleigh-based Progress would be the likely candidate to buy any electricity that's produced by wind power in the sounds and off the coast. If other power companies contract to purchase the electricity, it would be transported inland over Progress Energy's transmission system.

Progress's contribution matches a $300,000 stimulus grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Areas off the coast of this state are thought to contain some of the best wind energy resources in the nation. However, building hurricane-proof wind turbines miles offshore raises logistical, environmental and financial issues.

Progress spokesman Scott Sutton said the study would fill in the blanks left open by a preliminary study done by UNC and would develop an atmospheric modeling system to improve wind forecasting capabilities.

UNC's Department of Marine Sciences conducted a preliminary wind analysis in 2009. Charlotte-based Duke Energy, a participant in that project, plans to install one to three wind turbines in the Pamlico Sound for continued testing.

The planned Duke wind turbines, from 3 megawatts to 5 megawatts, would be paid for by the company. The tips of the blades would extend more than twice as high above the water as the 208-foot-tall Cape Hatteras Lighthouse.

+ Staff writer John Murawski
Cancer survivors urged to exercise early, often

By LAURAN NEERGAARD
The Associated Press
Wednesday, June 30, 2010

Washington — Cancer survivors, better work up a sweat.
New guidelines are urging survivors to exercise more, even — hard as it may sound — those who haven’t yet finished their treatment.
There’s growing evidence that physical activity improves quality of life and eases some cancer-related fatigue. More, it can help fend off a serious decline in physical function that can last long after therapy is finished.
Consider: In one year, women who needed chemotherapy for their breast cancer can see a swapping of muscle for fat that’s equivalent to 10 years of normal aging, says Dr. Wendy Demark-Wahnefried of the University of Alabama at Birmingham.
In other words, a 45-year-old may find herself with the fatter, weaker body type of a 55-year-old. Scientists have long advised that being overweight and sedentary increases the risk for various cancers. Among the nation’s nearly 12 million cancer survivors, there are hints — although not yet proof — that people who are more active may lower risk of a recurrence. And like everyone who ages, the longer cancer survivors live, the higher their risk for heart disease that exercise definitely fights.
The American College of Sports Medicine convened a panel of cancer and exercise specialists to evaluate the evidence. Guidelines issued this month advise cancer survivors to aim for the same amount of exercise as recommended for the average person: about 2 1/2 hours a week.
Patients still in treatment may not feel up to that much, guidelines acknowledge, but should avoid inactivity on their good days.
“You don’t have to be Lance Armstrong,” stresses Dr. Julia Rowland of the National Cancer Institute, speaking from a survivorship meeting this month that highlighted exercise research.
“Walk the dog, play a little golf.”
But how much exercise is needed? And what kind? Innovative new studies are under way to start answering those questions, including:
Oregon Health and Science University is training prostate cancer survivors to exercise with their wives. The study will enroll 66 couples, comparing those given twice-a-week muscle-strengthening exercises with pairs who don’t get active.
Researchers think exercising together may help both partners stick with it. They’re also testing if the shared activity improves both physical functioning and eases the strain that cancer puts on the caregiver and the marriage.
“It has the potential to have not just physical benefits but emotional benefits, too,” says lead researcher Dr. Kerri Winters-Stone.
Demark-Wahnefried led a recent study of 641 overweight breast cancer survivors that found at-home exercises with some muscle-strengthening, plus a better diet, could slow physical decline.
Duke University is recruiting 160 lung cancer patients to test if three-times-a-week aerobic exercise, strength training or both could improve their fitness after surgery. Lung cancer has long been thought beyond the reach of exercise benefits because it’s so often diagnosed at late stages. But Duke’s Dr. Lee Jones notes that thousands who are caught in time to remove the lung tumor do survive about five years, and he suspects that fitness — measured by how well their bodies use oxygen — plays a role. People with cancer usually get less active as symptoms or treatments make them feel lousy. Plus, certain therapies can weaken muscles, bones, even the heart. Not that long ago, doctors advised taking it easy. Not anymore: Be as active as you’re able, says Dr. Kathryn Schmitz of the University of Pennsylvania, lead author of the new guidelines. “Absolutely it’s as simple as getting up off the couch and walking,” she says. Exercise programs are beginning to target cancer survivors, like Livestrong at the YMCA, a partnership with cycling great and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong’s foundation. The American College of Sports Medicine now certifies fitness trainers who specialize in cancer survivors. But anyone starting more vigorous activity for the first time or who has particular risks may need more specialized exercise advice, Schmitz says. Mary Lou Galantino of Wilmington, Del., is a physical therapist who specializes in cancer care — and kept exercising when her own breast cancer was diagnosed at Penn in 2003. Then 42, she says she was on the treadmill within 24 hours of each chemo session, to stay fit enough to care for her two preschoolers. “You can feel more energy” with the right exercise, says Galantino, a physical therapy professor at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. “I was giving my body up to the surgeons and chemo, but I could take my body back through yoga and aerobic exercise.”
Coaching can help qualified students aim higher
By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

CHICAGO — Diana Lopez always knew she wanted to go to college. She also knew her Advanced Placement courses and 4.0 grade-point average gave her a good shot at becoming the first person in her family to get there.
What she didn't know was how to find a college that would suit her best. That's where Hector Gonzalez came in. As a "post-secondary coach" for John Hancock High School, which serves mostly Latino students on this city's South Side, he put Lake Forest College, a selective liberal arts school in Chicago's far-north suburbs, on Lopez's radar screen. She's going there this fall with a full scholarship.
From the moment she set foot on the campus, "I felt like I belonged," says Lopez, 17, who graduated this month. "I didn't know Lake Forest existed until Hector."
Coaching, a college advising model launched in 2004-05 by Chicago Public Schools, is part of an ongoing project aimed at improving the college completion rates of its graduates. It's based on University of Chicago research showing that many students who aspire to college and are academically prepared never enroll. Among those who do, only about a third earn a bachelor's degree within six years. The trend has been particularly acute among Latinos, and subsequent research, inspired by University of Chicago research, has shown similar patterns among low-income and minority students nationwide.
One of the most surprising findings suggests that only 38% of the top-ranked students enrolled in a college with admissions criteria that match their academic qualifications. Students weren't enrolling in colleges that were too demanding; they weren't demanding enough. Researchers call it "undermatching."
The finding "knocked me off my feet," says lead researcher Melissa Roderick, co-director of the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research at the University of Chicago. "For students who have worked (to achieve) high levels of performance, you want them to be going to the best college they can get into. I don't think that's controversial. What's controversial is: Why the heck aren't they going there?"
From the student's point of view, the reasons are complex. Lopez, for example, had little support from her father, who for a long time argued that women belonged at home. A host of recent research suggests that some students or parents don't understand financial aid, or assume incorrectly that they must choose a major before deciding on a college, or think all colleges are the same. Now, as schools and school districts nationwide experiment with how to turn that around, much of the focus is on high school guidance counseling.
The American School Counselor Association, whose members address a range of issues related to students' academic planning and personal behavior, has long argued that schools treat counselors as ancillary, which makes it harder for them to do their jobs. For example, the association recommends a pupil-to-counselor ratio of 250 to 1 but puts the national average at 467 to 1. In some districts, it's 1,000 to 1.
A Public Agenda survey released in March offers a troubling critique of the potential effect of inadequate counseling. Based on a survey of 614 adults ages 22-30, about a third of whom didn't finish college, the report found that students who gave poor ratings to their college counseling in high school were less likely to get financial aid and more likely to delay college — two factors that increase the chances that a student will never complete a degree.
A call to action
The survey "can serve as a wake-up call for all of us who care about the futures of our young people by sparking substantial and needed changes," says Patricia Nailor, president of the school counselor group, which plans to address the survey findings at a national conference that starts this week.

Nailor and other counselors argue that the survey fails to consider other factors, such as parental influence. In April, for example, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, with an assist from the nonprofit Advertising Council, launched a campaign and website designed to empower parents with no firsthand knowledge to take a more active role in their child's college planning.

Yet few disagree there's room for improvement. "If parents do not engage for whatever reason, schools need to ... help the students even more. Schools cannot assume that the parent does not care," says Eric Bierker, a high school counselor in Manchester, Pa., who studied college preparation and counseling as part of his doctorate degree.

Meanwhile, pressures on college advising continue to mount. The global economy increasingly demands more workers with college degrees, for example, while changing demographics mean more college students are the first in their families to pursue a degree. Yet a 2003 study found that in 57% of public high schools, counselors spend less than 20% of their time on college advising.

"The responsibilities of counselors have increased, and structures within school systems have not kept up with changes in society," says Liz Monge-Pacheco, who works with Hancock's counselors and other schools as part of a collaboration between Chicago Public Schools and the University of Chicago.

Hancock began addressing those challenges about two years ago, when principal Pam Glynn made a number of changes. First, to encourage more cooperation among counselors, she moved the staff of three out of individual offices and into a more open physical environment.

Then, a new, temporary challenge arose: Two of the three counselors left, leaving one to handle about 1,000 students.

"I was never in here junior year," Lopez says. "I didn't want to be a bother." The school last year hired two more counselors.

Hancock and other schools also participate in an initiative that provides professional development to counselors and coaches. Through a partnership with the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, which represents 14 selective private colleges, for example, college admissions officials have walked counselors through the process they use to evaluate applications and essays.

That relationship "is a huge piece," says Hancock head counselor Mary Corral, even if just "to be able to call someone on the phone by their first name."

And Gonzalez came on board in the fall last year. Unlike Hancock's counselors, he does not have a master's degree in school guidance, nor has he taken a national counseling certification exam. He has a bachelor's in Latino studies and a background in community organizing.

**Encouraging students**

A big part of his job is to encourage students to apply to colleges with admission criteria that match — not "undermatch" — the student's academic qualifications. And that means making students aware that their options go beyond the six or so colleges where most Chicago Public School students tend to enroll.

You might call him a surrogate parent. "Coaches help make explicit the knowledge that is implicitly known by many middle-class families and students," says Jim Rosenbaum, a Northwestern University professor who is studying the impact of the coaching program.

Last year, most of Gonzalez's efforts focused on helping students and parents navigate the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, arranging campus tours and keeping students on top of their myriad deadlines.
It's too early to know whether coaching will lead to more college graduates, but preliminary results are promising. Rosenbaum's study shows much bigger gains in college enrollments among students at schools with coaches than the rest of the school system. Similar efforts in North Carolina, where a program was launched in 2007, also show signs of success. College-going rates among rural, low-income students at schools with the program increased by 14 percentage points, including a statistically significant 3.1 points at four-year schools, in the 2008-09 academic year, compared with similar students at four schools without the extra advisers. That program is part of the National College Advising Corps, housed at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, which works with 14 partner universities nationwide. Hancock's class of 2010, meanwhile, is celebrating a banner academic year. Of 148 graduating seniors, 88% will attend a two- or four-year college, up from 49% two years ago. Students were offered $3.5 million in scholarships, more than four times the $850,000 offered last year and $5,000 the year before that.

Ten students, including Lopez, plan to attend Midwest liberal arts colleges this fall, up from zero last year. Three top-ranked students will attend local two-year colleges, primarily for financial reasons, Corral says.

The work is hardly over. Gonzalez plans a summer workshop to help rising seniors get a head start on scholarship applications. Last year, "we kind of focused on it really late," he says. And Lopez is hoping her liberal arts education will help her chart her future. "I see the start of something new in attending college," she says. "I don't know what I want to do because I want to know everything."