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Shakespeare's Macbeth, pondering murder, muses that if the deed is to be done, "twere well it were done quickly."

The General Assembly was spared such foul intent as it crafted another recession-plagued state budget. But it heeded the counsel offered by the ambition-plagued nobleman: If it's an unpleasant task, better to go ahead and get it over with.

The budget thus was wrapped up and delivered for Gov. Beverly Perdue's signature on Wednesday, right on time for the July 1 fiscal New Year's. Routine? Not hardly. North Carolinians can doubly appreciate this exercise in legislative punctuality, given past fiascos during which weeks have gone by in painful stalemate.

This year there was no tax package to ease the sting of spending cuts and complicate matters politically. Legislators facing an $800 million revenue shortfall, an economy in the tank and election campaigns in the fall were in full butcher mode. But that's not to say they didn't face the familiar dilemmas about priorities. Where would their knives slice most deeply?

On the whole, there was a consensus in the Democratic-controlled legislature that the blow to education should be cushioned. That reflects the sensible judgment that North Carolina's best hope for escaping the economic doldrums lies in strong preparation of its young people and ample retraining opportunities for workers displaced by layoffs.

The UNC system had been braced for a budgetary cold shower that, under the state House's version of the budget, could have meant $175 million in cuts. The figure agreed to by House and Senate negotiators was $70 million, enabling the system to pay for anticipated enrollment growth, maintain need-based scholarships and operate new buildings.

Community colleges, a vital economic cog, were allocated enough money to grow by 15 percent. That could mean the difference between work and idleness for many residents who look to these local colleges for new job options. And in the K-12 arena, the state lottery will be tapped for an additional $121 million to fund teaching positions that were in jeopardy. That's a good investment even if broadband taxes would have been a better revenue source.

While lawmakers and Perdue can take satisfaction in not having had to cripple the state's education programs, the new budget in some other areas incorporates spending cuts that will make it harder for state agencies to carry out their missions and impose real hardship on residents who look to state government to provide a safety net.

A glaring example: Among $371 million whacked from the Department of Health and Human Services is some $50 million for in-home care under Medicaid, whose clients are low-income or disabled. The cut will put a halt to those services for 18,000 people, or 57 percent of those now receiving help. Officials say the neediest will be protected, but there are bound to be instances where folks who could have made worthwhile use of these services will have to do without.

Republicans, agitating as usual for tax cuts, also belittled the spending cutbacks as insufficient to address another large shortfall looming next year. There's hardly any question that the same set of challenges will have to be revisited. But Democratic leaders for now have achieved a balance that can fairly be described as acceptable under the circumstances. It was a nasty job, and there was no lingering.
Private-pay psychotherapy works
Friday, July 2, 2010

The North Carolina State Health Plan for teachers and state employees has recently announced that it has opted out of parity for mental health treatment. It is truly unfortunate that mental illness is not treated by the insurance industry with the same care or respect as physical illness. But we may take this opportunity to recall that psychotherapy has not always been about mental illness. There have historically been and continue today to be many forms of psychotherapeutic treatment that target much more broadly defined goals, such as “feeling better.” Research has repeatedly found that psychotherapy can help increase well being and enhance social functioning. Those who wish to engage in psychotherapy but do not have a mental illness have in the last several years been at a disadvantage. It was difficult to find practitioners who would charge less that the full fee paid by managed care. Fortunately there are a growing number of psychotherapists, nationwide and in Pitt County, who have opted out of working with managed care. The number of therapists who are offering private-pay psychotherapy — often at a fee only slightly higher than the Blue Cross/Blue Shield co-pay — is growing rapidly.

Today there is greater choice in types of therapy, goals for therapy and ways to pay for it. If you feel you may benefit from psychotherapy, here are a few research findings: First, therapy works. People get better as a result of psychotherapeutic intervention. The type of therapy — cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, family therapy, etc. — matters little in its effectiveness. What matters most, according to studies, is if you feel that your therapist understands and likes you, and if you like him or her. Now you can also look for an affordable therapist who does not require that you have a diagnosis in order to help you.

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Hybrid M.B.A.s Offer Flexible Option

Brand-Name Schools Attract Students With Programs That Mix Online Instruction With Limited On-Campus Time

By DIANA MIDDLETON

M.B.A. programs that mix online instruction with limited on-campus time are becoming a popular option for prospective business school students who want to attend brand-name schools without giving up their jobs, relocating or trekking to campus for classes several nights a week.

These hybrid programs are also a boon to schools, particularly as the schools look to boost revenue at a time when the recession has left endowments flagging and alumni donations are hard to come by. The programs are also less expensive for schools to run partly because students in the programs use fewer campus services and resources.

After the initial investment in a hybrid—which can be several hundred thousand dollars to $1 million and up—costs to keep the programs going are relatively low, says Dan LeClair, vice president and chief knowledge officer at the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, the largest of three main business school accreditation bodies.

Professors and schools do the bulk of the work or preparation upfront but contribute less face time as time goes on.

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Programs Push for More Interaction
Faculty Take Course for Teaching on Web

When Sarah Fisher, a Johnson & Johnson employee, decided a few years ago to get an M.B.A. to enhance her chances of landing an overseas assignment, she looked for a program that was flexible—so she could keep working—but had enough prestige to get her promoted.

She found such a program in Babson College’s Fast Track M.B.A., a seven-year-old part-time program that blends a limited amount of on-campus time with a heavy online component, including live streaming video lectures.

The Babson program, along with other hybrid M.B.A.s offered at a number of well-known schools, costs students roughly as much as a traditional full-time program and uses the same professors as the full-time M.B.A program. These programs even include group project work—a hallmark of many M.B.A. programs—which is done virtually via conference call or Skype.

"At first, I was reluctant," says Ms. Fisher, as she worried that an M.B.A. achieved mostly online would have diminished value, even within her own company. But she enrolled in the program anyway in 2008 and the gamble paid off: In June, she shifted to brand management abroad for the company.
There are, however, notable differences between hybrids and traditional campus M.B.A. programs. For one, hybrid programs often have less stringent admission standards—Babson College doesn't require the GMAT, for example—though there are some exceptions. These programs also tend to cut out elective courses, which can be valuable to career-changers. And students who want to take advantage of the school's offerings find they have less access to faculty or campus resources, like career services, because they're not regularly on campus.

Despite the potential drawbacks, the programs continue to grow in scope and size. Schools have reported that applications are up significantly in the past year. Duke University's Cross Continent M.B.A., which is delivered 60% online, for example, saw a 50% increase in applications over last year for the class beginning in August.

Still, for students hoping to network with their peers or get the career guidance typical M.B.A. students receive, hybrid programs might disappoint. Since upward of 70% of class time is online for most programs, there is little face time with faculty and fewer opportunities for personal interaction between other students, something many b-school graduates say is the most valuable part of an M.B.A.

Scott Cronin, a Babson Fast Track grad and accounts supervisor at Fidelity Investments, says the program leveled the career playing field for him, and he saw classmates make successful career changes. But there was still lack of face time with fellow classmates, who are together all the time during a full-time program, he added.

Andy Policano, dean of the University of California at Irvine's Paul Merage School of Business, says that lack of togetherness is one reason more business schools haven't launched hybrids.

"There just isn't enough team building or interpretation of emotional quotients," he says. That's particularly true for those with scientific or engineering backgrounds who often need to learn soft skills that in-person interaction teaches, he says.

Duke and other schools that offer these combo programs, like Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business in Pittsburgh and Babson College of Massachusetts, insist that despite the obvious differences, the option provides the same training as a typical M.B.A. program while expanding the schools' reach.

Bill Boulding, deputy dean at Duke, says the school's hybrid program appeals to internationally based professionals who don't want to relocate to rural North Carolina for two years but want a Duke education.

"We don't have the same advantage as some of our peers who are located in a major metropolitan area," says Mr. Boulding, adding that the school aims "to court the students who are aiming at international assignments with their companies."

Marketing for hybrid programs is also being expanded at most schools that offer them, chiefly through building relationships with corporate human resource managers.

That effort is just as much about luring students as it is about proving that hybrid M.B.A. programs are as good as campus programs. Currently, how hiring managers feel about hybrid programs varies from company to company.

Since students of these combo programs typically don't participate in campus recruiting, most won't go head-to-head for jobs with their two-year counterparts and end up able to simply list their degree on a resume without indicating that it was achieved in a hybrid program.

Brett Good, district president of Robert Half International, a staffing firm, says many corporate hiring managers still have misgivings about the integrity of programs that rely heavily on Web-based technology.
Still, Mr. Good says that view has softened somewhat as those offering jobs become more comfortable with technology.

John Williams, a 2005 grad of Duke's Cross Continent M.B.A. program, says he was able to command a higher salary and position at a technology-market-research firm after completing the program.

"For most employers, they said it was a good school, it sounds like a good program, and that's good enough for them," he says.

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