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East Carolina’s vice provost for student affairs resigns

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, July 30, 2009

East Carolina University Provost Marilyn Sheerer announced this week that Kemal Atkins, vice provost of student affairs, has resigned.

Atkins has served as vice provost since February 2008 at ECU. His duties will fall to Sheerer until an interim vice provost is named, Sheerer announced in a letter addressed to the university community.

"As we continue to prepare for the opening of the fall semester in just over three weeks, I want you to know that I will be directly overseeing activities, personnel and operations in student affairs until a new vice provost is appointed," Sheerer wrote.

ECU spokesman John Durham said Atkins will not continue to work for the university.

Before he joined ECU, Atkins was the assistant vice president of academic and student affairs for the University of North Carolina General Administration.

Student affairs encompasses non-academic areas including housing and dining, recreation services, career services, the student center, the volunteer center and the student health and counseling centers.

Twelve departments with 500 staff members report to the vice provost for student affairs at ECU.

"The success of our students, both in and out of the classroom, is the primary mission of East Carolina University, and this is a good time for me to work closely with the managers and supervisors in student affairs," Sheerer wrote. "I look forward to becoming more involved with the individuals and activities in these operations."

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Top-heavy campuses

The timing wasn’t very good.

As legislators in Raleigh pondered a $1 billion tax hike, a consultant in Chapel Hill told university officials that their campus was bloated with administrative expense.

Still, UNC-Chapel Hill officials should be given credit for undertaking a study that likely wouldn’t yield flattering results. If other UNC system schools conducted similar studies, their findings might not be so different.

This study, funded by a private, anonymous donor, found that administrative expenses on a per-student basis are growing faster than academic expenses.

The report determined that the school has up to 10 layers of management in some areas with 50 percent of supervisors overseeing no more than three employees.

It also has more than 100 academic centers, many with their own finance, human resources and information technology staffs.

It wasn’t surprising that the report concluded that some of these layers could be eliminated, and some functions within academic centers and departments merged.

UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp points to the increasing research taking place on the campus as another factor in rising administrative costs.

Even so, anyone working on any of these campuses is well aware that the number of honchos seems to be rising while the numbers of people responsible for doing the work in the trenches isn’t.

(A disclaimer: Before she retired a few years ago, my mother was one of those people working at a UNC system school. In fact, her job entailed putting together budgets and overseeing finances for a department at UNC-Chapel Hill.)

The study, while providing a lot of information about management levels, really lacks a solid breakdown of who is doing what — teaching, research and administration — and how those numbers have changed over time.

The taxpayers who provide about a quarter of the operating budgets for these schools, along with the parents whose tuition payments fund the other third, deserve to have that information as well.

Thorp has acknowledged that layoffs will probably be a part of the solution at UNC-Chapel Hill and that the review is coming at a time when public confidence in the way that public universities are being managed is strained.

That statement in itself is a strong indication that Thorp recognizes that not all recent developments on his campus have been for the better.

Campuses stacked with increasing numbers of highly paid administrators aren’t just a bad deal for taxpayers.

The trend alienates teaching faculty and the middle managers who make universities run.

Let’s hope that UNC-Chapel Hill’s solution doesn’t involve dumping more middle managers and protecting the folks in the cushy offices.

Let’s also hope that other UNC system schools undertake similar reviews.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
Technological brotherhood

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, July 30, 2009

Conference USA football enjoyed technological brotherhood Thursday afternoon.

Instead of facing reporters in a table-to-table interaction at one of the league’s home cities for its annual media day, the cost-effective C-USA had its media stay home this year.

At East Carolina, head coach Skip Holtz sat in a Joyner Library conference room next to senior defensive end C.J. Wilson, facing members of his own team’s media. But across the vast reaches of C-USA, the ECU contingent was just one image of 11 spread across a flat screen television.

While Holtz and ECU had the first turn in the rotation, in the 10 other frames microphones and tables stood unattended in front of banners for each of the other member schools. Coaches and selected players from schools next on the list routinely filled their own seats as the process moved along.

There was static, some feedback and a little delay here and there, but there was little disputing the fact Holtz’s team earned its top spot in the rotation of teams.

Entering his fifth season with the Pirates, Holtz’s team is the one which will start the season with the C-USA championship trophy on its campus. Led by Wilson, the C-USA Preseason Defensive Player of the Year, the prognosis is the Pirates have a shot at becoming the first team to repeat as C-USA champions.

Perhaps the greatest asset on the team, according to Holtz, is being no stranger to the spotlight.

"It’s flattering, and it’s kind of exciting to talk about it now, but unfortunately we’ve got to line up and put the ball on the tee and back it up," said Holtz, 29-22 with ECU. "We played most of the season last year with a target on our chest with the way we started. I’m sure every game we went into the coaches were saying they beat West Virginia and they beat Virginia Tech and they’ve got a lot of talent. So we played a lot of last year with those same types of expectations."

After stunning the Hokies and Mountaineers in consecutive weeks to open the season, the Pirates capped a memorable campaign with another upset over Tulsa to win the C-USA title.

That puts the spotlight on the Pirates before the season begins.

"Going into this, I think we’re more prepared for (being called favorites in C-USA) than we’ve ever been since I’ve been here when I look at the number of juniors and seniors and the experience we have coming back on this football team," Holtz said. "It’s going to be a challenge. Nobody has ever repeated here in Conference USA, so there are going to be some obstacles we’re going to have to overcome."

In 2006, the Pirates lost at Rice on the final day of the season to fall shy of winning the East Division. In 2007, a late season loss to last-place Marshall on the road spelled doom for their title hopes. But last season, consecutive overtime wins over UCF and Marshall helped to propel ECU to the division title.

The team’s win total has steadily risen since Holtz’s arrival for the 2005 season — from five that season to seven in 2006, eight in 2007 and nine in 2008.

"I’m really proud of what this team accomplished because of all the young guys that had to step in and the adversity they went through and what they overcame to win the conference championship," said Holtz, whose defense created a flurry of turnovers at Tulsa to lay the groundwork for ECU’s title game win.

Now Holtz will employ a team full of seniors and underclassmen with starting experience to take on another daunting schedule.

After opening with Appalachian State Sept. 5, the Pirates will stare down West Virginia and North Carolina on
the road before five consecutive conference games. Wedged into the middle of the slate is a home date with the Hokies on Nov. 5.

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Budget deal raises income tax

Increases of 2%, 3% for wealthiest

BY MARK JOHNSON, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Legislative leaders on Thursday moved within reach of a deal on a tardy state budget, partly by increasing the income tax for North Carolina's highest-paid residents.

The plan, however, still lacks Gov. Beverly Perdue's approval and faces a handful of potential defections among House Democrats.

Legislative leaders hope to vote on the full budget next week. That would be more than a month after the new fiscal year began July 1.

Democratic leaders in the House and Senate settled on a plan that would tack a 3 percent surcharge on the income tax liability of North Carolinians who report income of more than $250,000 a year. Taxpayers who report between $100,000 and $250,000 would get hit with a 2 percent surcharge. Those levels are based on the taxable income of married couples filing jointly.

The surcharge in previous budget proposals was limited to 2 percent, but would have applied to all taxpayers. That plan fell apart after Perdue, in a veiled veto threat, said she would not support a budget that raised the income tax on "working families."

Other components remain the same as a deal that fell apart last week, including: a 1-cent increase in the state sales tax, a tax on digital downloads and online purchases, and tax increases on beer, wine and cigarettes.

House and Senate tax writers said their leaders had agreed, but Perdue wasn't yet on board.

"The governor did have some heartburn," said Sen. David Hoyle, a Gaston County Democrat and co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

Perdue has two concerns, according to legislators. She was uncomfortable because the 2 percent surcharge, while affecting couples who make more than $100,000, would reach down to single taxpayers whose taxable income is more than $60,000.

State Rep. Paul Luebke, a Durham Democrat who is co-chairman of the House Finance Committee, said 87 percent of North Carolina taxpayers would not see their income taxes increase under the proposal.

Legislative leaders said Perdue also wants to make sure education is funded at the level she wants. She previously has called for no reduction in per-pupil spending.

"Lawmakers know I will not sign a budget that cuts education to the bone and unfairly taxes our working families," Perdue said in a statement late Thursday.

The other potential bump in the budget's path could come from a dozen Democrats in the House who gathered Thursday afternoon after word of the tax deal filtered down. Those
lawnmakers represent districts with breweries, wineries, cigarette manufacturers and tobacco farmers, and are concerned about proposed increases in alcohol and tobacco taxes.

"It's jobs to us," said Rep. Nelson Cole, a Reidsville Democrat whose district includes a Miller brewery. The current budget plan is "cutting the jugular vein" of the tobacco industry, he said.

North Carolina, unlike the federal government, is required to balance its budget. Democrats, who have a controlling majority in the legislature, have been trying to fill a budget gap through a combination of spending cuts and tax and fee increases.

Democrats say the deficit is $4.5 billion or more, the amount they say it would take to fund state programs and services at recent levels. Republicans argue that the real number is a quarter of that if Democrats would include about $1.3 billion in federal stimulus money and measure revenue against last year's spending, which was already cut.

Staff writers Sarah Ovaska and Benjamin Niolet contributed to this report.

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Pope Foundation gives $700,000 to NCSU

STAFF WRITER JAY PRICE

RALEIGH - N.C. State University has received a $700,000 grant extension from a Raleigh-based foundation that has been controversial in local academic circles because of its conservative views.

The five-year grant from the John W. Pope Foundation will support teaching and research on issues relating to public policy, politics, economics and law, and will continue support of the student group Society for Politics, Economics and the Law.

Faculty at NCSU and UNC-Chapel Hill have spoken against taking money from the foundation, which, among other things, has supported a center that has often been critical of the state's public universities.

In 2004, some UNC-CH faculty objected to a foundation proposal to give at least $500,000 a year for five years to create a western culture studies program. That initiative was abandoned, but the foundation later donated $2.3 million to UNC-CH, much of which was used to create an investment fund to raise the salaries of assistant football coaches, though $300,000 from that gift created new study-abroad and summer programs for undergrads studying western cultures.

At NCSU, the new grant extension will continue the funding for the university's "Economic, Legal and Political Foundations of Free Societies" project, which includes a lecture series, undergraduate courses and research grants for students and faculty. It will add funding for visiting scholars and for materials and administrative support.

The grant money was awarded jointly to the Department of Economics in the College of Management and the School of Public and International Affairs' Department of Political Science in the university's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

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