ECU welcomed several junior college transfers to fill major voids for the 2011 season.

**East Carolina return with revamped defense**

BY EDWARD G. ROBINSON III - Staff Writer

GREENVILLE—Ruffin McNeill returned to his alma mater and led East Carolina to six victories and a bowl game in his first year as head coach.

As practice opens today, the second-year coach is firmly entrenched in his "dream job" and looks to prepare the Pirates for a challenging sophomore campaign. The Pirates will be going for their sixth straight bowl appearance.

Senior quarterback Dominique Davis remains the centerpiece of the team, but the Pirates must build around him and will need to answer several questions before the season begins.

1. **Can a new 3-4 defense make a difference?**

There was nowhere to hide for defensive coordinator Brian Mitchell and his inexperienced defense last season.

As much praise as the offense received, the Pirates' defense received even more criticism. Every week, particularly late in the season, the talk focused on mishaps of a unit that would finish last overall in Conference USA in scoring and total defense.

There were reasons for the struggle, most notably a head coaching change and the loss of standout seniors.
The Pirates have moved from a 4-3 to a 3-4 base defense, one McNeill and his staff appear confident will result in more consistent defensive play.

"The 3-4 ... schematically and fundamentally, I'm not worried about it at all," McNeill said. "I was raised in the 3-4 as a player and a coach. Each one of my defensive coaches has been a part of odd and 3-4 defenses."

With such an extensive background operating in the 3-4 defense, McNeill and his staff appear more comfortable teaching this system.

Players, including seven returning defensive starters, were introduced to the new scheme during the spring and sent into summer break with homework. They were expected to study formations and practice the required fundamental footwork.

The coaching staff's task is to match their new scheme with the talents of their young players.

"There will be a juggling aspect to it," McNeill said. "We'll be able to determine more once we watch them."

2. What's next for Dominique Davis?

The junior transfer, who started his career at Boston College, surpassed all expectations last season.

He completed 393 of 609 pass attempts, setting school records for attempts, completions, yards (3,967) and touchdowns (37).

But the senior will look downfield and find there's no senior receiver Dwayne Harris to chuck high balls to when he's in trouble.

Davis proved his toughness, showed his intellect and distinguished himself as a leader. He'll be asked to do all of those things better. And he'll be asked to improve his accuracy and footwork.

He finished the season with 16 interceptions. A full season, spring and now another fall camp with offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley, all while passing in ECU's spread-the-field system, should only bolster his game.

3. How much will the Pirates miss Dwayne Harris?

A lot.

During his career, he made a serious claim to the title of ECU's all-time best wide receiver. He collected a team-best 2,288 all-purpose yards last season and finished his career with a school-record 268 receptions for 3,001 yards. Harris signed with the NFL's Dallas Cowboys.
Someone else must spread the field at inside receiver. Lance Lewis is a prime candidate.

Lewis, a 6-foot-3 senior outside receiver, caught 89 receptions for 1,116 yards last season. The Concord native, who transferred from East Mississippi Community College, set a single-season school record with 14 TDs.

While Harris received accolades and double-teams, Lewis compiled catches, particularly late in the season.

4. Who will carry the football?

The Pirates listed three running backs on their spring depth charts - sophomore Michael Dobson, redshirt freshman Alex Owah and sophomore Damonte Terry.

They also moved sophomore Torrance Hunt from wide receiver to running back.

The front runner to carry most of the plays this season is junior college transfer Reggie Bullock.

Bullock, a 5-9, 176-pound back from Arizona Western Community College, brings impressive statistics into the program.

Last season, Bullock was the leading rusher in the National Junior College Athletics Association. As a sophomore, he gained 1,830 yards in 12 games, averaging 152.2 per contest, with 20 TDs.

East Carolina could use the help after averaging 118.9 yards per game on the ground - 10th in Conference USA.

5. Are the Pirates ready for the start of the season?

ECU opens the season against South Carolina at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte. Next, they face Virginia Tech on Sept. 10, UAB on Sept. 24 and North Carolina on Oct. 1 - all at home.

A solid start, backed by the boisterous faithful at Dowdy-Ficklen, may make all the difference this season.

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Pirates move in for start of practice

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector
Friday, August 5, 2011

There are as many perspectives on college football's move-in day as there are personalities hauling televisions, sound equipment and bags of potato chips into dorms every August.

Outside of East Carolina's Aycock Residence Hall on Thursday afternoon, senior strong safety Bradley Jacobs was looking forward to the start of August camp today and looking forward to the Pirates' season opener against South Carolina on Sept. 3 in Charlotte, but most immediately he was looking forward to the end of dorm life.

“I'm looking forward to getting out already. I just got in and I'm ready to get out,” Jacobs said as he arrived at Aycock with a case of bottled water in tow. “It's better being a senior because it's your last time.”

Jacobs has much bigger things to think about than a month in the ECU dorms. The Pirates' leading returning tackler will be one of the elders on a defense that's switched from a 4-3 to a 3-4 this season, and the speedy Gamecocks will present an immediate challenge with their ability to stretch defenses.

“I'm excited, ready to get the season rolling,” said Jacobs, a Long Beach, Miss., native who made 80 tackles, six pass breakups and snared a team-high four interceptions last season. “It's camp time and everybody knows what that's about. It's going to be tough, it's going to be a grind and we're ready to get to it.”

The view is much different for sophomore Valdosta State transfer Derrick Harris.
Harris came to the dorms Thursday afternoon armed only with his experience from spring practice with the Pirates and the words and tutelage of his older brother, Dwayne, ECU's all-time leading receiver who was drafted by the Dallas Cowboys earlier this year.

As though it wasn't daunting enough to move in for his first camp with the entire team, Harris also has the undeniable shadow cast by his brother, a legend on the ECU campus.

“I'm just a little nervous, but excited about coming to camp,” Harris said. “I'm looking forward to it. I'm just trying to get out there and prove to the coaches that I need to be out there. But I don't know what to expect because it's my first camp at ECU and I don't even know who my roommate is right now. I'm waiting for him to show up.”

The Pirates will be on the field today for the first of 21 August practice sessions, and will not have a day off until Aug. 16, according to the team schedule.

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@reflector.com or 252-329-9595.
ECU season tickets sales near record
The Daily Reflector
Friday, August 5, 2011

East Carolina's football season ticket sales are approaching another record-breaking campaign as 22,750 packages have been purchased. The mark is less than 700 behind last year's program-best 23,436 tickets.

A limited number of $150 Economy Plan Plus packages remain for seating in sections 214, 215, 219 and 220. This discounted price will only be available until Aug. 19, or until the allotment is exhausted.

To guarantee tickets to the Pirates' home opener against Virginia Tech on Sept. 10, or the clash with in-state rival North Carolina on Oct. 1, Purple or Gold Three-Game Packs will also need to be purchased by Aug. 19. These tickets are for seats in sections 214 and 220, and are currently available for $120, which is a $20 discount.

The Purple package includes admission to the Virginia Tech contest while the Gold option offers a ticket to the North Carolina game. With both packs, fans can choose to see two Conference USA contests.

Tickets to watch the Pirates battle the Hokies and Tar Heels are $60 each while the cost for league tilts against UAB, Tulane, Southern Miss and UCF are $40. For children 12 and under, admission to a C-USA contest is $25.

This is the fifth consecutive year East Carolina has sold 20,000 or more season tickets. ECU set new school records during the 2010 season in total attendance (297,987) and average attendance (49,665), besting the previous marks of 292,191 (2009) and 42,016 (2008).

In addition to topping Conference USA in average attendance for the third straight season, ECU was second nationally among all Bowl Championship Series non-automatic qualifiers in 2010, trailing only BYU (61,381). The Pirates' 99.33 capacity percentage also ranked 24th among all 120 FBS programs.

—ECU Media Relations
Kieran Shanahan of Shanahan Law Group, PLLC joins East Carolina University Board of Trustees

RALEIGH, N.C. – Kieran J. Shanahan, founder of Raleigh-based Shanahan Law Group, PLLC, was sworn in as a member of the East Carolina University (ECU) Board of Trustees on Thursday, July 21. Shanahan graduated with honors from ECU in 1979 with a Bachelor of Science in Business.

“When I graduated from East Carolina University in 1979, I never contemplated that I would one day be contributing to my alma mater in this way,” says Shanahan. “I am a proud Pirate, and the opportunity to support East Carolina University by serving on the Board of Trustees is both an honor and a privilege. The amazing things that this university and its people are doing is one of the best-kept secrets in North Carolina, and I look forward to serving as an ambassador for this fine institution.”

Shanahan Law Group is a boutique law firm in Raleigh, N.C. that offers a full range of business and litigation services. The firm’s practice areas include complex business litigation, business formation, banking, trusts and estates, agribusiness, employment law, white collar criminal defense, commercial real estate and government affairs. For more information, call (919) 856-9494 or visit http://www.shanahanlawgroup.com.
MARK DOLEJS / Drew Davis was 125-for-229 with 16 touchdown passes and seven interceptions before being injured last season.

**Thorpe: Davis' offer to son another misstep at UNC**

BY KEN TYSIAC - Staff Writer

UNC-CH Chancellor Holden Thorp said Thursday he was disappointed that former football coach Butch Davis offered son Drew Davis a football scholarship without consulting with Thorp or athletic director Dick Baddour.

With all the controversy surrounding the Tar Heels football program, Thorp said, it would have been better for Butch Davis to talk with Thorp and Baddour before offering Drew a scholarship.

Thorpe also reiterated previous comments that there was no one reason for Davis' firing on July 27, but rather a "collection of problems" as UNC faces NCAA allegations of nine major violations involving cases of academic misconduct and improper benefits received by football players.

Thorp and other university officials are scheduled to attend an Oct. 28 hearing with the NCAA's Committee on Infractions to address the violations.
"I found out about that (scholarship offer) a couple months ago when I saw it online," Thorp said during a telephone interview, "and yes, I was disappointed that neither the athletic director nor I knew about that."

Thorp offered no other details on how he learned of the scholarship offer.

"I'm disappointed Chancellor Thorp has chosen to mention our son publicly as a part of his explanation for the decision to terminate my job," Davis said in a statement. His son Drew is a 6-foot-3, 195-pound senior quarterback at East Chapel Hill High.

Before suffering an injury to his non-throwing arm last season, Drew Davis was 125-for-229 passing with 16 touchdown passes and seven interceptions in six games.

A coach offering an athletic scholarship to a son or daughter is not against university policy, a UNC spokesman said.

However, Thorp said UNC's football team remains under a lot of scrutiny and needs everybody to pull together to make sure things work best for the program. The NCAA's Notice of Allegations arrived June 21.

Three of the alleged major violations cited by the NCAA were tied to former university tutor Jennifer Wiley, whom Butch Davis employed as a tutor for Drew while she was working for the university. She also worked for Davis after UNC let her go for being "too close" to some players.

It also was revealed in June, in records released after a court ruling in a lawsuit filed by The News & Observer, The Charlotte Observer and other media outlets, that fewer than 12 players had amassed 395 parking tickets with fines totaling $13,125.

Then in July, UNC officials learned they had failed to detect plagiarism in a term paper written by defensive lineman Michael McAdoo, who has been ruled permanently ineligible by the NCAA.

Butch Davis was to be paid an average of $2.2 million a year under the contract extension he signed after the 2007 season. A full scholarship for an in-state student for the 2011-12 school year is worth $16,879.

"Drew is a good kid and I feel bad for him in all this," Thorp said, "and for all I know, we would love to have him on the football team. But with everything going on, it would be good for the athletic director and the coach to talk about that and probably for all three of us to talk."

Baddour, who announced July 28 he is stepping down to allow a new athletic director to search for Davis' replacement, declined to comment for
this story, saying he is looking ahead to helping interim head coach Everett Withers get preseason camp off to a good start.

East Chapel Hill High coach Bill Renner - whose son Bryn is the starting quarterback at UNC - said he wasn't aware of the Tar Heels' scholarship offer to Drew Davis. He said Davis is a talented athlete who doesn't have other scholarship offers. Renner said other programs are waiting to see senior year tape on Davis before making a decision on him.

Davis is rated a two-star prospect by scout.com, an online recruiting site. Three of the four quarterbacks Butch Davis signed for the Tar Heels were three- or four-star prospects; A.J. Blue was a two-star prospect.

**Athletic scholarship's worth**

For the 2011-12, academic year, a full athletic scholarship at UNC is worth $16,879 for in-state students and $36,704 for out-of-state students.
Other Opinion

Point of View: The faculty backs Thorp

BY JAN BOXILL AND JIM KETCH

CHAPEL HILL—UNC-Chapel Hill is going through a very challenging time. For the past year, the football program has been under investigation by the NCAA, and that investigation has struck at the core of what the faculty holds most dear: academic integrity.

Last week, Chancellor Holden Thorp made the difficult decision to release head football coach Butch Davis. In consultation with the Faculty Executive Committee and the Chancellor's Advisory Committee, we support Thorp and agree with his decision.

The chancellor has said that the timing of his decision is awkward and unsettling. But it was the right decision for him to make. Protecting the integrity of our university and our well-deserved reputation for academic excellence necessitated action. Too many indicators pointed to another year of distractions that would have kept our chancellor from addressing more pressing issues affecting our campus, faculty, students and staff, as well as the people of North Carolina.

We appreciate that Thorp did not rush to judgment; that he allowed time for information to be gathered and carefully examined. While the administration and athletics program must await the outcome of the October meeting with the NCAA, the faculty is ready to engage actively in reviewing the Honor Code and the Honor Court. We have always held academic integrity as a priority, and we will use recent events to consider improvements in already strong academic integrity policies and systems.

We also must recommit ourselves to emphasizing academic honesty when students arrive at Carolina and again in every one of our classes. Academic integrity and the ethics of scholarship speak directly to the mission of our university. We must be sure that faculty and students have the resources and support to understand and uphold the Honor Code.

Carolina is one of this country's premier research institutions and a destination for students seeking the best education that America has to offer. In our laboratories, classrooms and libraries, we offer our students the
opportunity to study with the brightest and the best. But during this past year, the issues surrounding the investigation of our football program have eclipsed our ability to focus attention on core mission values during one of the most challenging economic periods the state and UNC have ever endured.

We are grateful that Thorp exemplifies and represents the core values of our mission so profoundly. He was an undergraduate student at Carolina. He is a distinguished chemist who became chair of his department and, ultimately, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Few have come to the position he now holds with deeper and more significant preparation. He has his and our priorities right, and his faculty know that.

The decisions that he made last week were complex and carried with them serious implications for everyone affiliated with this campus. But he gathered the facts, considered the information, avoided a rush to judgment and ultimately selected a path that he truly felt was necessary for this university to become healthy once again.

We support the chancellor and his decision. He determined that the academic integrity of the university was being compromised and took decisive action to provide us the opportunity to refocus our energies on our core mission beliefs. The faculty supports these actions and pledges to join Thorp as we work together to restore public confidence in our athletics department and this great university.

*Jan Boxill is chair of the UNC-Chapel Hill Faculty, and James Ketch is chair of the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee. Boxill is director of the Parr Center for Ethics and a senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy; Ketch is professor of music.*
UNC student faces charges in Honor Court break-in

BY NICOLE KYLE - Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL—The student charged with stealing confidential records of 31 students from the UNC-Chapel Hill Honor Court appeared Thursday in Orange County District Court.

Garrett Haywood, 22, of Chapel Hill is charged with felony breaking and entering, misdemeanor larceny and misdemeanor possession of stolen goods. He appeared before Chief District Court Judge Joe Buckner.

Haywood waived his right to a court-appointed attorney and is scheduled to return to court Aug. 15.

Attorneys Mark Bibbs and Dustin Pittman of Wilson will represent Haywood. They declined to comment.

Haywood was taken into custody Wednesday at a traffic stop in Chapel Hill, UNC-CH police spokesman Randy Young said. He was brought before the Orange County magistrate, who set bail at $2,500 secured. Haywood made bail and did not go to jail.

At 8 a.m. Monday, UNC-CH officials discovered that the student judicial system office in Student and Academic Services Building North had been broken into overnight.

The student judicial system office houses the university's Honor Court, which recently disciplined football player Michael McAdoo for receiving impermissible help on a paper last year.

UNC-CH officials say the break-in appears unrelated to the university football scandal.

"We have not found any evidence that leads us to believe that this is connected to the investigation with athletics," Young said.

Young said he could not discuss the case further because the investigation is continuing.

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UNCG may seek grants to offset cuts

By Jonnelle Davis

GREENSBORO — UNCG trustee David Sprinkle on Thursday suggested the university form a group focused on ways to get more money for the campus.

The suggestion came after Sprinkle and other trustees learned the full impact of a $26 million reduction in the university’s state appropriation during a meeting at the Alumni House.

Trustees Chairman Randall Kaplan agreed, appointing Sprinkle the chairman of what he called an informal task force to brainstorm alternate funding sources for the university, such as grants from large foundations.

“The time I spent thinking about this was the time just before I opened my mouth,” Sprinkle said about his idea during a break in the meeting.

Sprinkle said he’s hopeful the UNC system governing board will respond to the needs of its campuses, but said it will probably take a while. In the meantime, he wants to determine whether there are other ways of bringing money to the campus.

“There’s all kinds of grant money that we probably have never pursued, and ... state-supported universities have not done the same job of trying to raise money or looking at alternatives that many of the private schools had to do.”

Trustees got their first look Thursday at just what $26 million fewer state dollars means: the elimination of 235 full-time faculty and staff positions and 975 course sections. About 90 of the jobs were filled and required layoffs.

The university had planned to eliminate more course sections but restored some fall semester sections in anticipation of money from a tuition increase approved earlier this year.

But Provost David Perrin said the loss of 975 sections — or 40,000 classroom seats — is still significant.
“These are very difficult times, as you can see,” Perrin told the board. “Our strategy has been to do everything we can to get through the fall semester courses and sections.”

The academic and student affairs and research divisions suffered the most in the cuts, with teachers and career services counselors among those who lost jobs.

Instructors will be teaching larger classes, and students will have to wait longer to see a counselor for job advice.

“What (criteria) do you use to make these god-awful decisions?” board member Carolyn Ferree asked Perrin.

Perrin said cutting tenured and tenure-track faculty was not an option. The primary factor in making faculty cuts was determining the critical courses that the university needs to offer, he said.

UNCG has made nearly $80 million in permanent and temporary cuts over the past five years. That doesn’t include the $4.5 million loss this year of its iSchool, a program UNCG operated that let high school students earn college credits.

The university also lost about $1.5 million in enrollment funding because of a drop in its freshman numbers. UNCG has raised its minimum admissions standards.

The university needed to “stop the slide” in the SAT scores of its incoming freshmen, Perrin said, but that has had a negative impact on enrollment funding.

Standards were raised in part because UNCG officials were concerned about the decline in incoming students’ SAT scores, Perrin said.

Sprinkle said his group will research options for more money, and possibly offer some suggestions to the full board by the next meeting.

“Many of us are on other boards, and so we’ve got other contacts that we can pursue,” he said.

Contact Jonnelle Davis at 373-7080 or jonnelle.davis@news-record.com
A gun scare at Virginia Tech

By Mark Giannotto and Michael E. Ruane

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Once again, police rushed to the campus of Virginia Tech. Again, the words man with a gun raced across the university. And again, students and workers locked doors and turned off lights.

But a day-long search Thursday failed to locate the tall figure in the blue-and-white vertically striped shirt whom three summer campers thought they saw with a pistol, and by late afternoon their report remained unconfirmed.

A five-hour campus lockdown was lifted shortly after 2:30 p.m.

Still, this was Virginia Tech, where in 2007 a deranged student armed with two handguns killed 32 people and himself, and such reports resonate as perhaps nowhere else.

“We’re in Blacksburg,” said Alex Watt, 19, a sophomore from Springfield, who was on campus Thursday. “And because of the history, it makes it scarier.”
The initial report came about 9 a.m., when three 14-year-old girls attending an academic summer camp said they saw a 6-foot-tall white man, in gray shorts and sandals, walking quickly with what looked like a handgun concealed by a cloth.

Text and e-mail alerts went out quickly across the university, which was populated by only a few thousand summer school students, athletes, and researchers and other employees. Staff members went through buildings to spread the alert.


The university also asked anyone with information to call a campus police tip line at 540-231-6411.

Police flooded the campus, and a composite drawing of a boyish-looking man with spiky, light-colored hair was generated. By midday, officials had canceled all summer school classes for the day and had asked that people stay away from campus.

But four hours after the initial sighting, police had not found a gunman. Police said no other witnesses came forward to say they had seen him.

Campus Police Chief Wendell Flinchum said in an afternoon statement: “We have interviewed several persons similar in description to that provided by witnesses this morning. None of those subjects are the person described.”

Police had questioned the three campers further and deemed their information credible, Flinchum said. “The officers interviewed them, and the information they gave was very detailed,” he said. “The description of what they saw, the officers believed them, and so we deemed it credible at that point.”

The teenagers were attending a camp sponsored by Higher Achievement, a District-based academic organization serving middle school students from underserved areas.

“Higher Achievement can confirm that our scholars were on campus during the situation at Virginia Tech and that three of our scholars reported seeing the suspect,” the organization said in an e-mailed statement.

The three girls were on their way to get food at Dietrick Hall when they spotted the possible gunman, officials said. The campers told a teacher, who informed school security, the statement said.
Officials said the alerts went out about 30 minutes after the first report.

Larry Hincker, a university spokesman, said: “We really need to communicate first and investigate later, and that’s what we did.”

Virginia Tech revamped its alert system after the 2007 shootings. A university official said Thursday that more than 48,000 students and campus personnel received a text message alert and that an e-mail alert was sent to every student and school employee.

“We’re in a new era,” Hincker said. “Obviously the campus went through something terrible four years ago, and the choice facing us, and particularly the police departments, is when you get a report, what are you going to do with the report, regardless of what the veracity may be or the ultimate conclusion might be.”

Ruane reported from Washington. Staff writer Justin Jouvenal contributed to this report.
Incoming freshman Meghan Pensyl and her mom, Jan Pensyl, from Mount Bethel, Pa., check the orientation schedule at George Washington University.
Evelyn Hockstein / For The Washington Post

**Education Review: Surviving freshman year**

By Jenna Johnson

Erin Sullivan had two weeks until her move from Connecticut to the District for her first year at Catholic University. Like most freshmen, she was jittery about the transition: Would she get along with her roommate and make friends? Could she be as heavily involved as she was in high school? Would she ever decide on a major? Could she handle life in the city after growing up in a suburb?

Then, Sullivan’s parents asked her and her two younger brothers to sit down for a family discussion.

“They were like, ‘We are getting divorced,’ ” Sullivan said. “They just told us, and no one wanted to talk from there.”

Sullivan ran upstairs in tears, lay on her bed and tried to figure out what it all meant. She was already worried about college, and now this.

She suddenly had a whole new set of unknowns: What if her brothers couldn’t deal with this without her? What if she had to transfer to a school closer to home? What if her parents fought in front of her roommate? And where would she live during breaks?

The questions ran through her mind as she packed and rode the train to Washington with her mother. Her father drove separately.
The first day was easier than she thought it would be, and her parents got along so well that her new neighbors assumed they were happily married.

The first few weeks also went smoothly. Sullivan made the cut for an a cappella group and volunteered in the community with fellow freshmen. All of the girls on her floor would routinely hang out.

“It’s the honeymoon phase,” she said. “Everyone loves each other. Everyone loves everyone on the floor.”

Then, the summer camp feel began to wear off. Obligations and homework began to pile up, and Sullivan realized her roommate would never become her best friend. She kept getting pulled into drama at home.

“I felt guilty being away,” she said. “My brothers would say: ‘It’s so unfair you’re away at school.’ I told them: ‘Believe me, I’m dealing with it here.’”

Although her new friends likely weren’t able to tell, Sullivan didn’t feel like herself. She ate pizza for too many meals and didn’t have energy for the gym. She cried a lot.

Then, she returned home at Thanksgiving. She walked into the house and burst into tears.

“I didn’t want to be home. I wanted to be back at school,” she said. “It just felt so weird. My family was so different. It was like two different families.”

* * *

The members of the incoming Class of 2015 have been lectured on the value of a college degree for most of their lives. But getting that degree has never been more expensive, especially at a time when some families are dealing with unemployment, cut wages and other financial hardships. Record numbers of freshmen are arriving on campus already stressed out, and campus resources are stretched thinner by demand.

After enduring the college application process, some students then feel pressured to succeed at everything: making friends, earning high grades, keeping scholarships, getting internships, leading clubs and posting happy photos on Facebook. They want the “perfect” college experience that leads to a dream career, even in a bad job market.

“I was just so worried that I would fail and screw up my whole life,” said Danielle Piroutek, 19, a rising sophomore at Catholic University from rural South Dakota who struggled with intense homesickness her first year. “People at home were asking about me, how I was doing. I didn’t want to let them down.”

The rigor of college classes can be daunting, but often the most challenging problems students face in their first year are social or emotional. If students are
happy and comfortable in their new environment, studies show, they are more likely to do well in class.

Most students deal with at least one major disappointment or setback their first semester: rejection by a student organization, a failed test or marked-up term paper, heartbreak, fights with friends or homesickness.

In 2010, more than 10 percent of students at more than 300 four-year institutions sought some sort of counseling, according to a survey of counseling center directors. These students are seeking help with issues including depression, sexual identity, eating disorders, sexual assault, anxiety, and drinking or drug dependency.

“We’re seeing students reaching out,” said John Dages, director of the George Washington University counseling center, which has seen at least a 20 percent increase in traffic in the past couple years. “Even if it’s a minor issue, I’m glad they’re reaching out.”

Many students work through these problems during a handful of appointments with a counselor, but some face issues that need long-term treatment. Not getting help increases the chance a student will take time off from school, transfer elsewhere or drop out.

The stakes are high. Making it through the first-year of college dramatically increases a student’s chances of graduating. Nationally, less than 60 percent of first-time students who start college graduate within six years, a statistic college presidents, education advocates and even President Obama are working to change.

In the past few years, many colleges have ramped up their freshmen orientation or created programs aimed at helping students through the ups and downs of their first year. A recurring message: Freshman year is difficult for everyone. You are not alone.

“They need to have these issues normalized. They need to realize that everyone is going through this,” said Jonathan Mattanah, a psychology professor at Towson University who studies freshmen adjustment issues. “If you can keep students hooked into the community and more socially connected, they will do better.”

* * *

As a high school student in Montgomery County, Staci Armezzani had a high-powered group of friends whose parents pushed them to succeed. She fought to prove herself and break the stereotype of being the ditzy cheerleader.

Her parents were proud when she did her best, even if that didn’t mean perfect grades. “But that wasn’t good enough for me,” she said.

Armezzani’s top pick for a college was the University of Maryland, College Park, which rejected her. She got into Penn State, where her dad had almost gone when
he was her age. Her football-loving relatives were equally excited, and she received piles of Penn State gear for graduation.

“All of the people around me, who meant the most to me, were all excited about Penn State,” she said.

It wasn’t until Armezzani moved to campus on a Friday afternoon in August 2008 that she realized Penn State was not where she wanted to be. The campus was massive, and far from her family and boyfriend, who still had one year of high school left.

Her roommate spoke limited English, and Armezzani spent her first night crying and talking to her parents on the phone.

A residence hall staffer encouraged Armezzani to wait until classes started on Monday. But concerned that she wouldn’t be able to get her tuition back if she waited, Armezzani told her parents on Saturday morning that she had booked a Greyhound ticket.

This quick change of plans upset her parents — and her younger sister, who was attending a birthday party that day. They worried she was making this decision for her boyfriend and not for herself. They had a long discussion.

“That’s when the truth started to come out, that I had put a lot more pressure on myself than they ever had,” she said.

Armezzani took “Penn State” off her Facebook profile and enrolled in classes at Montgomery College. She told a few friends that she had moved home, and their response was usually, “Why?”

After a year of community college classes, Armezzani transferred to Maryland. It was her original dream school. And yet she was miserable.

Like many freshmen, Armezzani was in search of a better college fit. But each time a student transfers, he or she becomes a new student on a strange campus. And without the camaraderie of a freshman class, it’s easy to again feel disconnected.

“For better or for worse, transfer students are not like freshmen, in that they are wide and varied” in their needs, said Britt Reynolds, a director of undergraduate admissions at Maryland. “Freshmen are much more alike.”

Transfer students have often already had a freshman experience elsewhere, he said, or they are nontraditional students who don’t want their orientation to include a sleepover in the dorms.

As a first-year transfer student, Armezzani hadn’t bonded with the rest of her class in dorms and learning communities the year before. She lived in an apartment near campus and didn’t have many friends other than her boyfriend, who had just started at Maryland. She thought about rushing a sorority, but found the Greek
system overwhelming. She didn’t want to drink or party, but that kept her from doing anything social. She went home nearly every weekend.

Unlike at community college, her classes were held in huge lecture halls where the professors didn’t know names and students sat in cliques.

“Transfer students aren’t any different than freshmen,” she said. “Out of every different group of students that Maryland has, transfer students are the ones who go unnoticed, who are most likely to fall through the cracks.”

(Although Armezzani believes that Maryland could do more, admissions officials say they already have many programs in place to help transfer students. There’s a program that lets students take a class on campus before formally enrolling, plus pre-transfer advising, an intense one-day orientation and ongoing events.)

Armezzani contemplated dropping out. But her mother, who didn’t finish college, urged her to stick with it and reminded her of the opportunities a degree would open.

Armezzani requested an academic counselor to help build her confidence in difficult classes and decided to get involved with at least one activity during her second semester. She picked student government, which was looking for students to help with communications, her major at the time.

As she started to build friendships with her fellow student leaders, she began to feel less like an outsider. Then, right before spring finals, she broke up with her boyfriend. It sent her into a tailspin. Her mom booked her an appointment with a therapist.

“It wasn’t because I was depressed or because I was suicidal. It was because I had no one else to talk to,” Armezzani said.

Her second year at Maryland, Armezzani lived at home and commuted to campus. But she finally had friendships, a leadership position in student government and reasons to stay in College Park until 2 a.m.

She got involved with peer education classes for transfer students, where the most frequent question is how to get involved. During the summer, she coaches a community swim team and urges parents to not send their children too far from home unless they are truly ready.

“At 18, they might not be ready to go away,” she said. “If I hadn’t had that year at home, I probably would have fallen into the swamp of ‘maybe college isn’t for me.’”

One night this summer, Armezzani told a group of friends about her first two years of college. She’s at a point where she can joke about her 24 hours at Penn State.

“One of my friends said, ‘I would have had no idea that personality existed in this Staci that I now know,’ ” said Armezzani, who is now 21 and plans to graduate
with her class in May with a criminal justice degree. “I never thought three years ago that this is where I would be or that I would be so happy.”

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In a darkened auditorium at George Washington University late on a June night, a party rages as the refrain of a Lil’ Jon song blares: “Shots shots shots shots shots! Everybody!”

“What’s gotten into Justin?” a student wonders aloud as the drunken host staggers around, tries feeling up a woman he used to date and pressures his roommate to pop an Adderall.

It’s all a skit, written and performed by students to show incoming freshmen situations that will likely come up.

By the end, the roommate’s heart raced from the Adderall, an intoxicated character had his stomach pumped, another faced legal charges for using a fake ID, students were busted for smoking pot in the dorms, and Justin had cemented a reputation as “that guy” who parties too much.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” a character says. “You just have to learn from it.”

On most campuses, freshman orientation has become a standard requirement and a carefully choreographed production that can last days. It’s often just the kickoff to a year of programming for students and their parents.

There are summer programs aimed at helping students build friendships and independence before school starts. Virginia Tech takes some incoming students to a nearby 4-H camp for three days of canoeing, hiking and talking about what’s to come that fall. American University invites some freshmen to move to campus a week early to do service work around the city.

Living and learning communities have boomed in popularity, as schools group students in dorms according to their academic interests or backgrounds. Usually these students take at least one class together and attend campus events as a group, linking students’ academic lives to their social lives.

Some schools extend orientation through the first semester with a required one-credit course that teaches study skills, shares access to resources and answers questions.

Sometimes, that education happens outside of the classroom. At the University of Richmond, a group of deans takes a pile of pizzas to the freshmen residence halls on some Friday nights early in the semester to answer a variety of questions, including how to get football tickets.

At GWU, each first-year student is assigned a “Guide to Personal Success,” a faculty member or upperclassman who is available to answer questions, listen to problems or meet up for lunch.
“We’re trying to make a big school feel small,” said Dean of Students Peter Konwerski.

At GWU’s freshman orientation, the skit about the perils of drinking ends with the message “make good decisions.” There are skits about roommate conflicts, sexual assault, safe sex and the diversity of race, political affiliations and sexual orientation.

One of the final skits is about depression. A student stands before the audience and says: “Everything in my life is going wrong, and I can’t figure out why.”

The student lacks motivation, sleeps a lot and is suddenly antisocial. She is frustrated that her dad just lost his job and quickly gets mad at her roommates.

“I just feel like no one understands what I’m going through,” she says, before agreeing to seek help. Her friends and family collect pieces of a shattered heart and patch it together.

* * *

When Erin Sullivan returned to Catholic after Thanksgiving break, she finally took the advice of a friend and called the campus counseling center. Rather than just talking to friends during her worst days, she realized it might help to talk with someone during the okay days, too. She wanted to get back to her old self.

“I just realized this isn’t who I want to be,” Sullivan said.

Once a week, she met with a counselor who mostly listened but also offered advice: Realize you are not the one who has to deal with this. Don’t let this define your college years. Your parents sent you here to learn, not to worry about them. Focus on your relationship with your dad and your relationship with your mom, not their relationship.

“It was like having a conversation with my parents or my friends, but there weren’t any opinions,” said Sullivan, 19, who is headed into her junior year. “It was just nice to have someone to talk to.” And it helped her get back to her usual self.

Toward the end of Sullivan’s freshman year, she applied to be a residence hall assistant. This school year, she oversaw a floor of freshmen girls, mitigated roommate flare-ups and told students not to be ashamed to book a counseling appointment.

Her parents’ divorce was recently finalized, and, as she mentored students only a year younger than herself, Sullivan reflected on her own challenges.

“When they would sit in my room,” she said, “I would be giving them this advice, and I would think, ‘Wow, I should take this advice.’ ”

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University of Colorado graduates this past spring. Pell grants, which are used for college, got a funding boost.

College Grants Spared From Spending Cuts
AUGUST 4, 2011
By LAURA MECKLER

One federal program emerged with more money in the deficit-reduction deal signed into law this week: Pell grants, which help low-income students pay for college.

The White House and its allies cited the increase when they urged Democrats to vote for the broader legislation, which was almost all about cutting government spending.

The final deal "protects Pell grants from deep near-term cuts," Sen. Kent Conrad (D., N.D.) said Monday on the Senate floor. "I think most of us understand how important Pell grants are to providing opportunities to young, talented people all across America to improve themselves through higher education."

It was a rare bright spot for a White House that pushed unsuccessfully for a variety of other provisions, including raising taxes on certain corporations and wealthy individuals, extending a payroll-tax cut, extending unemployment benefits and spending new money on infrastructure in hopes of stimulating the economy.

The deal to raise the government's $14.29 trillion borrowing limit reduces federal spending by $917 billion over 10 years. It also creates a special congressional committee to shrink the government's budget deficit by an additional $1.5 trillion.

The $17 billion increase in Pell-grant spending came at a price, with negotiators paying for it by killing federal subsidies for graduate-student loans. President Barack Obama had suggested that tradeoff in his budget, and other negotiators adopted it.

Under the eliminated program, lower- and middle-income graduate-school students didn't have to pay interest on their loans while they were still in school.
Killing the subsidy will affect about 1.5 million students, said Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education, a Washington-based advocacy group that represents university executives.

More than nine million students currently have Pell grants. Cutting the graduate-school subsidies for 10 years provided only enough money to maintain Pell grants for undergraduates for two more years, through the 2013-2014 school year.

Before the deal, Pell funding had been set to drop in the 2012-2013 school year. That would have reversed a boost Mr. Obama had won in 2009 as part of the economic-stimulus program. It increased the maximum Pell grant by $819 per student, per year to $5,550, and it was renewed as part of an education plank of the health-care overhaul.

Mr. Obama views enhanced Pell funding as one of his signature achievements, and the administration pushed hard for it early on in the deficit-reduction negotiations.

The increase in Pell funding—and cut in the graduate-school subsidies—also was included in an earlier version of the bill House Speaker John Boehner put forth, angering some House conservatives who wondered why they were increasing spending for something when the bill was supposed to be about cutting.

"Some of the conservatives were thinking, 'Man does this do what we think it does?' " said Rep. Trent Franks (R., Ariz.). "There was some consternation there."

The topic was raised at a meeting of Republican House members during discussion of the bill. Mr. Franks said he opposes expansion of Pell grants because, in his view, they encourage colleges to raise their prices.

A Boehner spokesman said the provision was included because the bill was written to be a compromise. Still, the legislation won no Democratic votes when it passed the House, and it immediately died in the Senate.

But why Pell grants and not some other Democratic priority? Mr. Obama rarely, if ever, made a public pitch for this funding during the recent debt negotiations, whereas he talked about other spending programs and tax cuts repeatedly.

Officials in both parties explained that Pell grants fall under discretionary spending—the type that Congress must approve each year and that was facing a hard cap as part of the final measure. So unlike other administration proposals in other areas of the budget, any changes in Pell funding would have to be done here.

In addition, officials had to act by October to lock the Pell funding in place for next school year. Other issues on the White House priority list are expected to be debated again by the new congressional committee.