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Science cafe helps make research accessible

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, August 11, 2009

A scientist walks into a bar and starts talking about stem cells.

Don't wait for a punch line. It's true.

Dozens of people filled an upstairs room at Ham's Restaurant and Brew House on Monday night to hear what the professor had to say. Some drove in from out of town for the two-hour talk. And nobody got extra credit for attending.

That's because "Stem Cells: Divide and Conquer" was not presented as a speech in a classroom. It was part of science cafe.

The science cafe, sponsored by Go-Science, Sigma Xi and the North Carolina Biotechnology Center, is designed to bring scientists to the table with the average Joe — maybe over a cup of joe — to talk about the latest research and what it means.

"It's a very different radical concept about making science accessible to the everyday person," said Roger Conner, executive director of GO-Science, a nonprofit organization established to bring informal science education programs to the public. "They're not going down and sitting in a lecture hall with a desk in front of them. You can have a beer or an appetizer and interact with a scientist in an informal environment."

So, just how many people want to go downtown and hang out with self-professed "science geeks" like Dr. Barbara Muller-Borer, an assistant professor of medicine in the Department of Cardiovascular Science at ECU Brody School of Medicine? Apparently, quite a few. More than 50 people showed up for the talk, the third science cafe held since the events were launched in Greenville in April.

Since then, the science cafe has become so popular that organizers may have to find a larger meeting place. Conner thinks the concept has caught on for reasons other than the fact that science cafe offers free drink tickets to the first 25 people to register online.

"We've had parents come with their little kids," he said. "We've had teenagers come. We've had professionals in our community who aren't necessarily in the science field."

"It's accessible, it's fun, and it's interesting." Conner said. "We're offering a unique experience that you really can't get anywhere else in eastern North Carolina."

Science cafe events may be new to Greenville, but they are not entirely new. Similar events in the Raleigh area have been known to attract hundreds. Discussion groups have popped up across the United States, from a coffeehouse in Houston to an Irish pub in Somerville, Mass., and internationally from Athens to Warsaw.

The origin of the science cafe, much like the cafés themselves, is a topic of discussion. Some sources trace science cafes to England's Cafe Scientifique, a public science movement that began about a decade ago. Others say the idea is steeped in France's Café Philosophique philosophy discussion groups, which started in the early 1990s. Still others would argue that the idea of discussing ideas in the public square is a centuries-old concept.
Regardless of its origin, today’s science cafe most closely follows the Cafe Scientifique model in which a speaker begins with a short talk to introduce the topic and the remainder of the time is devoted to discussion questions and answers.

Thomasyne Jefferson, who has attended two of the three local science cafe events, said even after two hours, some people stay after the event to keep asking questions and talking with the scientist.

As an employee of the N.C. Biotechnology Center, Jefferson has plenty of chances to rub elbows with scientists. But since she does not have a science background, highly technical presentations don't exactly light her Bunsen burner. But in June, Jefferson attended a science cafe event where Dr. Wayne Cascio talked about how air pollution can affect the heart and the blood vessels.

"I love biology and nature," said Jefferson, a senior administrative assistant for the center's eastern regional office. "I was able to follow along, and they kept it interesting.

"It's not geared toward scientists who have the background and the knowledge," she said. "It's everyday people."

For scientists, that can be a challenge. Muller-Borer said she spent more time preparing to go public with a 10-minute talk than she might spend on a much longer presentation for her peers.

"I talk to a lot of clinicians, so bringing it to the level of the general public ... for me it is a good exercise," she said. "I also run it by my husband, who's not a scientist, and I run it by my children."

Muller-Borer, who is helping to select future topics and presenters for the science cafe, even asked a few of her colleagues to be in the audience Monday to help answer questions on stem cells, which can be a complex and controversial topic.

Cascio, vice chairman of the Department of Cardiovascular Sciences in the Brody School of Medicine, remembers being asked particularly insightful questions from his science cafe audience.

"A couple of times I may have said to the audience, 'I honestly didn't put this person in the audience to ask that question because it's really to the point,'" he said, laughing.

Still, Cascio was not surprised. He has seen similar interest and understanding from general audiences before. He believes the popularity of the science cafe events testifies to the fact that people are hungry for scientific knowledge.

"Scientists haven't gotten out and talked to people," Cascio said. "I think this is a great way to start. It's just a good way to start a dialogue about the importance of science."
Different view: Education takes a hit in state budget

Wednesday, August 12, 2009

When the Legislature finished its work on Tuesday and adjourned after seven months in Raleigh, House Speaker Joe Hackney said the session would be remembered for saving public education. That followed last week’s comments by Gov. Beverly Perdue who, after signing the budget in private, claimed it protected education.

The view is far less heroic from this vantage point, where it appears lawmakers pushed the tough decisions aside in favor of expediency. While there are education bright spots, they are far too few to warrant state leaders patting themselves on the back.

East Carolina University officials were no doubt pleased last week when the $19 billion spending plan won approval. The University of North Carolina system lost only 6 percent in funding, less than expected, and two key capital projects were included. East Carolina received $3 million for the dental school, keeping that project on schedule, and $2 million for indigent care funding, a university priority.

On the other hand, public schools face huge cuts, with lawmakers giving local administrators the responsibility of identifying $225 million in savings. That could mean the loss of teaching positions in some schools, and certainly means larger class sizes in most. Perdue may have turned back a previous budget agreement by objecting to larger class sizes in all grades, but the governor accepted a deal in which only grades K-3 are protected.

For all the good done with the university system, most students will pay a higher tuition for an education that, according to the state Constitution, should be as free from expense as possible. The Legislature voted to charge out-of-state athletes with in-state tuition rates and the university system will continue a practice of paying administrators full salaries when they return to the classroom. Those provisions represent millions in potential savings.

This was, without question, a tremendously challenging budget year. No area of state government was immune to the squeeze of a $4.5 billion revenue shortfall, and the budget includes cuts to areas like mental health and corrections.

But instead of exploring innovative avenues, including the type of comprehensive tax reform proposed in the N.C. Senate, lawmakers chose to tread the existing ones. They raised the sales tax, among others, a regressive tax that disproportionately harms the type of working families state leaders purport to protect.

North Carolina’s motto is Esse Quam Videri. Maybe when the back-slapping stops, lawmakers can try remembering its meaning, “To Be Rather Than To Seem.”
E. Carolina, Houston favorites in Conference USA

The Associated Press

Tuesday, August 11, 2009

As usual, there’s three or four teams that look as if they have a legitimate shot to win the conference championship this season, and a few more with reasons to dream big.

East Carolina coach Skip Holtz knows it’s not even safe to pick his Pirates to repeat.

“When you look at the last four years we haven’t had a back-to-back conference winner,” Holtz said.

East Carolina and Houston, both teams with talented, experienced quarterbacks, head into the season as the C-USA favorites. The Cougars are led by Case Keenum, who threw for 5,020 yards and 44 touchdowns last season. The Pirates get Patrick Pinkney back for a sixth year because of injury.

“That’s a nice little Christmas present for us,” Holtz said.

It was Pinkney who led the Pirates to an attention-grabbing start last season. East Carolina jumped into the rankings after consecutive wins over Virginia Tech and West Virginia and a 3-0 start. After faltering midseason, the Pirates rallied and beat Tulsa in the conference title game, finishing 9-5.

Holtz doesn’t see a clear path to return to the championship. Southern Mississippi and Memphis stand in the way in the East.

Memphis has stocked up on transfers to make a push.

After finishing with five consecutive wins, Southern Miss expects to pick right back up with three of the league’s most dynamic offensive players — running back Damion Fletcher, wide receiver DeAndre Brown and quarterback Austin Davis.

The West race featured the nation’s No. 1 and 2 offenses — Tulsa and Houston — last season. With Keenum leading the way, Houston will likely be up there again. The Cougars averaged 562 yards per game last season.

Tulsa, 11-3 last year, will be trying to replace one of the nation’s top quarterbacks for the second year in a row. David Johnson passed for 4,059 yards and 46 touchdowns after taking over for Paul Smith. Coach Todd Graham is expecting similar production from Johnson’s successor — early leader G.J. Kinne is competing with two others for the job. He won’t be making many changes.

“If we do, we’re not very smart,” Graham said. “We’ve been the No. 1 offense in the nation the last two years.”

A capsule look at the teams in predicted order of finish:

EAST


Notes: Tough nonconference schedule includes West Virginia, North Carolina and Virginia Tech. ... A shoulder injury and multiple surgeries two seasons ago qualified Pinkney for a sixth season. He started 13 games last year, passing for 2,675 yards and 13 touchdowns. ... Wilson had 10.5 sacks and 18.5 tackles for loss last year.

Notes: Fletcher tries to become ninth RB to rush for 1,000 yards in each of his four seasons after troubled offseason. ... Golden Eagles aiming for 16th straight winning season. Only Florida State, Florida and Virginia Tech have more. ... Davis set a school record with at least 200 yards passing in nine games.


Notes: Several transfers from programs such as Miami, Auburn and Wisconsin could have significant playing time. ... Conference newcomer of the year Steele rushed for 1,223 yards and running game should be bolstered by addition of transfer Lance Smith. ... 6-foot-8 Carlos Singleton needs 1 more TD catch to set school career record with 20.

CENTRAL FLORIDA — Key players: QBs Rob Calabrese and Joe Weatherford, LB Lawrence Young, DT Bruce Miller. Returning starters: offense 10, defense 6.

Notes: Good news-bad news — UCF returns 10 players on an offense that was last in the nation. ... Calabrese completed 39 percent of passes for 664 yards, seven TDs as freshmen last year. ... Four starters lost to injury during last season — LBs Cory Hogue and Jordan Richards and WRs A.J. Guyton and Rocky Ross — return.

MARSHALL — Key players: TE Cody Slate, DE Albert McClellan, LB Mario Harvey. Returning starters: offense 8, defense 8.

Notes: QB Brian Anderson appears to be starter going into season. ... Marshall expects a dominant defense with seven of top 10 tacklers back. ... Slate has 2,012 career yards receiving and 19 TDs. ... Herd is 115-17 — an FBS-leading .871 winning percentage — at Joan C. Edwards Stadium.


Notes: Blazers have won total of six games last two seasons. ... Webb one of three QBs to pass for 2,000 yards and rush for 1,000 last season. Accounted for 21 of 29 UAB scores.

WEST


Notes: Conference offensive player of the year Keenum threw for more than 300 yards 12 times last season. ... Cougars must replace conference defensive player of the year, OLB Phillip Hunt. ... Beall ran for 1,247 yards.


Notes: Tulsa has played for the championship in three of its four years as a league member. ... Hurricane led the nation with 569.9 yards per game and was second with 47.2 points per game. ... Tulsa set school record with 11 wins, second straight 10-win season.


Notes: Vittatoe has thrown for more than 6,300 yards and 58 TDs in two seasons with just 16 INTs. ... The 23 combined TDs of Moturi and Adams are the most of any returning receiving duo. ... Mike Price has been right for the Miners, who have scored more than 40 points in 17 games and more than 30 in 38 games in the 60 they've played since he became coach.


Notes: Rice won 10 games last season and won first bowl game since 1954, but must replace 97 percent of its
passing yards and 94 percent of its rushing yards. ... Also in the mix at QB are Alabama transfer Nick Fanuzzi and Ryan Lewis.


Notes: The Mustangs are coming off second straight 1-11 season. ... Mitchell was one of 13 freshmen on two-deep depth chart last season. ... SMU had 29 TD passes, 3,275 yards passing — both school records.


Notes: Anderson returns from knee injury, one of 17 players to suffer season-ending injury. He rushed for 864 yards in seven games last season. ... Coach Bob Toledo adds new defensive coordinator Steve Stanard after 10-loss season.

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Legislators call an end to long, grinding session

They're gone.

The state Senate adjourned at 1:06 p.m. Tuesday after completing a lightning-round six-minute session that was convened for the sole purpose of adjourning for the year.

Six senators were present for the occasion.

The state House followed suit at 1:30 p.m., albeit with more members present; the House had a full session Monday night.

House Speaker Joe Hackney said the legislative session will be remembered for protecting public education during a 20 percent drop in revenue.

"In the context of a severe recession, I feel like we have saved public education and its core mission," he said during a news conference after gaveling the House to a close after seven months. "We did it without pay cuts, without furloughs and, I think, fairly."

Hackney, an Orange County Democrat, said he doesn't expect legislators will have to return for a special session if revenues worsen, saying Gov. Beverly Perdue has shown she can manage the budget when revenues dip.

He also voiced skepticism that a Senate proposal to overhaul the tax system would be ready for lawmakers to take up in the fall.

If that's true, the legislature won't be back until May 12, 2010.
Johnny White's core body temperature is measured by Adam Sumrall, using a hand-held device. White and other players ingested a pill Tuesday morning that monitors their core body temperature for a study of what brings on concussions.

Robert Willett, Staff Photos by Robert Willett

Heat shows on Greg Little's face. Measuring players' temperature 'allows us to monitor as coaches, "How long to we want to do that particular type of drill?"' coach Butch Davis said.

Robert Willett, Staff Photo by Robert Willett

Julianne Toler, who is studying human movement science, checks Kennedy Tinsley.

Robert Willett, Staff photo by robert Willett

UNC gauges players' body heat

BY ROBBI PICKERAL, Staff Writer
CHAPEL HILL - At first, it was hard for University of North Carolina football player Kendric Burney to swallow.

They handed him a pill containing a battery, thermometer and radio transmitter and told him it would lodge in his intestine, where it would stick around for one to two days to measure his core body heat.

"I'm not going to lie. The thought of putting that in my stomach was just plain weird," the junior cornerback said.

But by gulping down the vitamin-size CorTemp capsule Tuesday morning, Burney and 17 other Tar Heel football players began sweating out data that will be used later this season to help determine whether higher body temperatures increase the possibility of concussions. UNC's coaches also plan to use the data to better regulate drills during practice and during games in heat that often reaches the high 90s through the early stretch of fall games.

"That allows us to monitor as coaches, 'How long to we want to do that particular type of drill?'' coach Butch Davis said. "What's appropriate for a receiver might not be appropriate for an offensive lineman. So I think it's brilliant."

The CorTemp pill -- a white, silicone-coated capsule big enough "that it feels like you're swallowing a gummy bear," according to offensive lineman Alan Pelc -- was originally developed by NASA to measure astronauts' body temperature in space. But over the last six years, scores of football teams -- including those at Duke, Virginia Tech, Texas, the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, Minnesota Vikings and Philadelphia Eagles -- have used the $40-per-pop doses to better learn how to beat the heat on the field.

It works like this: Players ingest the pills about five hours before practice; the removal of an attached magnet activates the battery. A device that looks like a remote control, held within six inches of the player, records the temperature via radio transmitter. (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit is normal, around 104 degrees is the danger zone).

What's left of the pill is expelled within 24 to 48 hours; with most of it dissolved.

"Of course you can't feel it inside you once you swallow it, I guess it's like food," said running back Shaun Draughn. "The only way I really remember it was there is when people were reaching around me with that little thing, trying to get the reading."

How it helps coaches

The information gathered Tuesday can be used immediately to adjust the length of drills and water breaks, as needed. A broader, Gatorade-funded study, which still needs to be approved by UNC's Institutional Review Board, could supplement information gathered by other teams using the pill. For six years, Kevin Guskiewicz, chair of UNC's department of exercise and sports science, has inserted sensors in players' helmets to research how much G-force it takes in different impact locations for a player to sustain a concussion.

But symptoms of concussions, such as dizziness, headaches, nausea and blurred vision, overlap with heat-related illnesses, such as heat exhaustion or heat stroke. And there's long been a theory that dehydration could make concussions more likely, Guskiewicz said.

"Occasionally, during a two-a-day practice, we'll have a player come in complaining with symptoms, and we can't tell if he's dehydrated or if it's a concussion," Guskiewicz said. "When we don't know for sure ... we go back to the data from the helmet system, and if there's no registered impact of greater than 50 or 60 Gs, it's unlikely that it's a concussion.

"Now, we'll also be able to look at the data from the thermometer pill, and see how hot he got. And we'll also be able to compare the G-forces to the temperature, and try to correlate whether they get higher when the body temperature is hotter."
It could make for an important educational tool for coaches all over the country; according to National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injuries at UNC, there were 10 brain-related football fatalities (all high school players) nationwide over the last two seasons.

To that end, Tar Heel players of different weights and positions plan to ingest the pills one more time during training camp, and twice more during this season.

Burney said he thinks the research is important, so he’s willing to continue participating, even if it taxes his esophagus.

"They told me it was going to be the size of an Advil," he said of the pill, laughing. "But it was huge."

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N.C. expedition seeks WWII wrecks

It seeks information on a murky chapter in U.S. history, with hopes of preserving the ships.

By Steve Lyttle
slyttle@charlotteobserver.com
Posted: Sunday, Aug. 09, 2009

The British armed trawler HMT Bedfordshire was looking for a German submarine near Ocracoke Island on May 11, 1942. But the submarine found the Bedfordshire first and sank the ship with one of two torpedoes it fired.

All 37 crew members died on the British ship, which had been sent to the United States in World War II's early days to protect against the devastating German U-boat activity off the Carolinas. Some of their bodies washed ashore in the following days on Ocracoke Island and are buried in a British cemetery there.

Last week, a crew of scientists from NOAA, East Carolina University, the state of North Carolina and several other organizations launched a 21-day expedition to study the wreckage of the Bedfordshire and other ships sunk during World War II. The area off North Carolina is known as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” because there have been so many shipwrecks along the N.C. coast.

David Alberg, the expedition leader and superintendent of the USS Monitor National Marine Sanctuary, said the expedition is designed to "help us better understand and document this often-lost chapter of America's maritime history."

He said scientists want to study the condition of the wrecks as a step toward preserving them.

Alberg described the wrecks as "time capsules from one of the darkest times in the nation's history."

The expedition is among two being conducted in N.C. waters by NOAA. Last week, scientists began studying marine life near the wreckage of the Civil War ironclad Monitor, which sank off the Outer Banks in a severe storm on Dec. 31, 1862.

During the first phase of the World War II expedition, scientists aboard the NOAA research
vessel Nancy Foster plan to use advanced scanning equipment to look for previously undiscovered World War II shipwrecks. College students and staff from North Carolina will operate a remote-operated vehicle to take high-definition images of the wrecks.

NOAA officials consulted with the German and British governments before making plans on where to look for the wrecks.

The second phase will send divers down to the wreckage of the Bedfordshire, which was rediscovered in 1980 off Beaufort, N.C. NOAA officials said the shipwreck site is considered a war grave and will not be disturbed during the expedition.

One interesting sidelight of the Bedfordshire story: It took three days before authorities realized the ship had been sunk. The bodies of two crew members washed ashore on Ocracoke Island on May 14, 1942.

But it was a year later before British officials knew for sure that the ship had been torpedoed. The U-558 was sunk in 1943, and its captain, Gunther Krech, was captured. Krech told British officials the story of the Bedfordshire's sinking.

Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer & Earn Miles.
August 10, 2009

Arts Programs in Academia Are Forced to Nip Here, Adjust There

By PATRICIA COHEN

If you are looking for a sign of how strapped the University of California, Los Angeles, is for cash, consider that its arts and architecture school may resort to holding a bake sale to raise money. California’s severe financial crisis has left its higher-education system — which serves nearly a fifth of the nation’s college students — in particularly bad straits. But tens of thousands of students at public and private colleges and universities around the country will find arts programs, courses and teachers missing — victims of piercing budget cuts — when they descend on campuses this month and next.

At Washington State University the department of theater arts and dance has been eliminated. At Florida State University the undergraduate program in art education and two graduate theater programs are being phased out. The University of Arizona is cutting three-quarters of its funds, more than $500,000, for visiting classical music, dance and theater performers. Wesleyan University’s Center for the Arts, which supports four departments — dance, music, theater and visual arts — is losing 14 percent of its $1.2 million budget over the next two years. The Louisiana State University Museum of Art, one of the largest university-affiliated collections in the South, saw 20 percent of its state financing disappear. Other private and state institutions warn of larger classes, trimmed offerings, higher tuition and fewer services, faculty and visitors.

The arts are of course not the only victims of the recent economic meltdown. Large reductions in budgets have stung pretty much every corner of academia, from philosophy to Chinese, from gymnastics to geology.

The University of California, for example, is raising student fees by 9 percent, reducing freshman enrollment by 6 percent and cutting at least $300 million across its 10 campuses. There are no nationwide statistics to reveal whether one discipline is suffering more cuts than others. But administrators at more than a dozen state and private campuses who were interviewed say that the way that arts programs are structured and operated may amplify the effect of reductions.

Since tenured faculty are generally insulated from layoffs, budget cuts fall on part-time and visiting staff, Christopher Waterman, dean of the School of the Arts and Architecture at U.C.L.A., explained. For teachers, “we want artists who are in the thick of their careers,” he said. The result is that a large proportion of the school’s instructors are not permanent members of the faculty. Every department across the board has been ordered to cut 5 percent — on top of a 10 percent cut last year — but that relatively small reduction could mean the elimination of a third of the art department’s staff, Mr. Waterman said. (Final decisions on specific cuts have not been made.)

Crowded classes may not be as harmful in lecture courses, but in creative and performing studios, increasing
class size is not always an option, he added. “You can’t teach painting to 40 students or give that many students voice lessons in opera or jazz.”

Several other college arts administrators around the country also said programs that serve the surrounding community as well as the students — like museums and performing arts centers — are especially vulnerable.

In California figuring out which programs and positions will survive will take a few more weeks. In the meantime the School of the Arts and Architecture, like other sections of U.C.L.A., has been told it should search for more ways to raise money itself. “We’re looking at more summer classes for high school seniors and bake sales,” Mr. Waterman said.

Elsewhere on the campus the Film & Television Archive is paring back its foreign-film program “because we cannot afford shipping any more of those prints from foreign countries,” said Jan-Christopher Horak, the archives director. A smaller staff in the film studies center could translate into less academic research, he added. As public universities watch state legislators slice away their funds, private colleges have seen their endowments shrink. Both are having to rely more on private donations at the same time that the recession has left individual contributors less able to give.

Figuring out what or who faces the budgetary guillotine has been a harrowing process no matter how it was done. Few go quietly.

Officials at Washington State University held a dozen public forums, testified before state lawmakers, appeared before the student council, the Faculty Senate and the Board of Regents; they responded to thousands of electronic messages and spoke with every single student, legislator, faculty and staff member, alumnus and community member who requested a meeting before deciding where $54 million and 360 jobs over the next two years would come from. One result: Sports management got a reprieve; that program and major will continue, while theater arts and dance will be phased out.

Arizona State University’s four campuses lost 500 jobs, closed 48 programs and imposed 10-to-15-day furloughs this spring. The schools of music, theater, film and design were all incorporated into the existing art and architecture center. Virgil Renzulli, the university’s media spokesman, said that officials focused on slashing administrative costs to maintain the same number of courses and tenured faculty.

In Flagstaff, Northern Arizona University spread the $21.3 million in cuts across departments. “The only program that we eliminated was a B.A. in theater education,” said Tom Bauer, assistant director of public affairs. “It only had 15 students, and they will be allowed to finish.” He added that the university is still waiting to hear from the governor’s office how much federal stimulus money might be directed its way.

Like California, Louisiana has had a tough year, although the doomsday cuts that some administrators were forecasting have not come to pass. Laurence Kaptain, dean of the College of Music and Dramatic Arts at Louisiana State University, said, “We tried to save people and cut things in our operations.” The college, which took a 3 percent cut this year on top of a 10 percent reduction last year, is holding back on upgrading computers and production technology, spending less on costumes, scenery and special effects as well as travel and conferences. “It’s making us more dependent on private funds,” he said.

Over at Louisiana State’s College of Art & Design the dean, David Cronrath, said a 4 percent cut ate up the
positions of three full-time tenure-track faculty members, eight adjunct faculty and two staff members. He hopes to offer the same number of courses by increasing the faculty members' loads and by relying more on graduate-student teaching assistants and part-time faculty, he said. But he, like others around the country, expects more cuts despite federal stimulus money.

For some institutions many tough decisions are yet to come. Cornell University, for example, recently approved long-term capital projects, including a $20 million extension to its art museum and a $55 million building for the College of Architecture, Art and Planning, said Simeon Moss, a university spokesman. But the university is also undertaking a top-to-bottom evaluation in the face of a projected operating deficit of approximately $150 million within five years.

Although some arts advocates, faculty and students have complained that their subjects are saddled with a disproportionate share of the cuts, Sally E. McRorie, the dean of visual arts, theater and dance at Florida State University, said that did not happen in her case.

"Florida State has a long history of dedication and investment in the arts," she said. "Our cuts have not been greater than anybody else's." She said the university made a decision to use federal stimulus money "to keep people employed" but noted that after next year, when "those funds are gone, I'm not sure if we'll be able to maintain those positions."
In Study, Most Graduates’ Debt Load Is Manageable

By TAMAR LEWIN

About a third of all students who earned bachelor’s degrees in 2007-8 graduated with no debt at all, about the same share as in the 2003-4 academic year, according to a policy brief released Tuesday by the College Board.

“People think students are drowning in debt, and there is a small proportion of students that borrow an exorbitant amount, but most students graduate with a manageable debt load,” said Sandy Baum, an author of the brief.

For bachelor’s degree recipients who did borrow, the median loan debt was $19,999, up 5 percent from $18,973 four years earlier. The data, the latest available, come from the federal Department of Education’s National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which is conducted every four years.

About 6 percent of those who completed a degree or certificate — and 10 percent of those who received a bachelor’s degree — borrowed more than $40,000, the brief said.

Over all, for all kinds of degrees and settings, the median student loan debt of borrowers in 2007-8 was $15,123, up 11 percent from $13,663 in 2003-4. But debt levels rose far more sharply for students in for-profit colleges, and for students earning certificates and two-year degrees.

For example, students who received certificates in a for-profit program carried a median debt load of $9,744 in 2007-8, compared with 2003-4, a 30 percent increase. And bachelor’s degree recipients in for-profit institutions had a median debt load of $32,653, up 23 percent from $26,562 four years earlier.

For-profit colleges, which have grown rapidly over the last decade, acquire much of their revenue from federal aid. According to the authors of the policy brief, the for-profit colleges had about 7 percent of the nation’s undergraduates in 2006, but received about 19 percent of the federal Pell grants.

For those earning bachelor’s degrees in public or private colleges, borrowing did not increase much. At private four-year colleges, the median loan debt for bachelor’s degree recipients was $22,375 in 2007-8, up 5 percent from $21,238 four years earlier.

Typically, the report said, those earning certificates or associate degrees accumulate about half as much debt as those earning four-year degrees.

With the recession, the authors said, student borrowing may be quite different in the next study.

“Of course, everybody is struggling much more,” Ms. Baum said. “And private student loans are less available, now that a number of banks that were making those loans are no longer making them, or no longer in business.”

Over all, 41 percent of the students who completed a degree or certificate in the 2007-8 academic year — and 34
percent of those who received bachelor's degrees — graduated with no debt.

According to the brief, 50 percent of all full-time students took out a federal loan in 2007-8, and 19 percent took out private loans, with many of them borrowing through both routes. Full-time students who borrowed received an average $7,809 from private sources and $5,432 in federal student loans.

“It’s important for students to remember the difference between federal and private borrowing,” said Patricia Steele, the other author of the brief. “Private borrowing gives you no protection, no forbearance, no income-based repayment.”