August 16, 2008

Priced Out of Weight Loss Camp

By STEPHANIE SAUL

Tiffany King has made progress. When the 5-foot-tall 12-year-old arrived at Camp Pocono Trails in June, she weighed 354 pounds. By Sunday’s weigh-in at the weight loss camp, she had lost 37 pounds. She hopes to get down to 304 by the time camp ends next week. Whether she does or not, Tiffany is already one of the lucky few.

Her family could not have afforded camp if Tiffany had not won a scholarship essay contest.

There are nine million overweight or obese children in the United States. And although the prevalence of childhood obesity has tripled since 1980, there are few comprehensive or affordable programs to treat them. Summer weight loss camps are usually profit-making and can cost more than $1,000 a week. Most insurance does not cover that cost.

For Dr. Walter J. Pories, a well-known gastric bypass surgeon, the dearth of government and insurance financing for such comprehensive weight-loss programs is “the single most frustrating problem in dealing with childhood obesity.”

Christina Benson, Tiffany’s mother, knows all too well that insurance coverage is spotty. She works for a health insurance program in Durham, N.C. “I work in the health care industry and I think it is really a disgrace, a disadvantage to our members, that we cannot offer this kind of program under reimbursement,” Ms. Benson, a widow since Tiffany’s father died, said.

Several national groups are pressing for government financing or insurance reimbursement for more intensive weight loss treatment for children, including weight loss camps. In the meantime, many children mostly have to follow Tiffany’s lead. She submitted a personal essay that was well written, sad and compelling. “If I could get on my knees and beg for this campership, I would, because I want to feel good about my life,” she wrote. “Sometimes, if I’m walking down the street, I can hear people talking about me and staring at me.”

She compared herself to a “plump caterpillar” waiting to break free of its cocoon. (Read her entire essay at nytimes.com/business.)

As she prepares to enter the seventh grade, Tiffany King’s weight has placed her at high risk of developing the...
Type 2 diabetes that runs in her family, which would make her part of an epidemic of overweight and Type 2 diabetes that is reaching into ever younger age groups.

Camp Pocono Trails is part of a chain of three New Image Camps whose other sites are in Florida and California. Pocono Trails received 173 entries to its essay contest this year — for 10 slots. (Tiffany is spending eight weeks at Pocono Trails, a session that normally costs nearly $8,000.)

Another chain of weight loss camps, Wellspring, received more than 200 applications for 35 subsidized or free stays at one of its nine camps.

Wellspring, which runs a total of two schools and nine camps in America, England and Australia, says it is seeking corporate sponsors to help provide more scholarships. Wellspring also recently helped start one of the advocacy groups pushing for insurance coverage of programs like weight loss camps, Childhood Obesity Treatment in Action.

As things now stand, depending on the insurance company, some medical and psychological components of weight loss treatments are covered, and parents can sometimes take tax deductions for fees to programs, depending on their tax situation.

At Wellspring, approximately one in three campers has received insurance reimbursement for about one-fourth of the cost — the portion that includes cognitive behavioral therapy, which is sometimes covered by mental health plans.

There are about two dozen around the country, most of them run as for-profit operations. They typically emphasize exercise and controlled meal portions while serving balanced diets. Camp directors report that children generally lose weight during their stays at camp.

The big challenge comes later, when children resume their normal routines and confront the smorgasbord that is America — food in their own kitchens and at friends' homes, fast-food restaurants and school cafeterias.

Dr. Pories, who also heads the Metabolic Institute at East Carolina University, found that children lost an average of about 8 percent of their body weight in a program he studied over three years; but two-thirds regained all or part of their weight.

Even Dr. Pories, who has been involved in promoting weight loss camp scholarships for underprivileged children in eastern North Carolina, says, “A two-thirds failure rate is not acceptable.”

Some camps advertise better long-term results.
Critics of the camp contests worry that however well meaning, the essay competitions have drawbacks. The essays, in which children bare deeply embarrassing moments and personal problems, become the property of the camp or sponsors. Winners are sometimes encouraged to make themselves available for media interviews that generate publicity.

Tiffany King, for example, has already been featured in a television news segment broadcast by a station near Camp Pocono Trails in northeast Pennsylvania.

“There is an awful lot of exploitation, voyeurism that can go with this stuff,” said Dr. David Collier, director of a pediatric weight management center at East Carolina University, which is in Greenville, N.C.

Dr. Charles J. Homer, the chief executive of the National Initiative for Children’s Healthcare Quality, a nonprofit organization in Cambridge, Mass., said the country’s challenge was to make programs that were available to large numbers of children, continued year-round and involved their parents.

“Many of the more effective treatment programs involve the entire family,” Dr. Homer said, “not just the kids.”

A few critics have said that publicity, including an MTV documentary called “Fat Camp” that featured Camp Pocono Trails, runs the risk of making a spectacle of obese children.

Tony Sparber, the owner and director of Camp Pocono Trails, said that he welcomed publicity because he had faith in his program, and that many of the children were eager to be interviewed by the media.

“Most of the kids we deal with these days are very excited about being on TV and the newspapers and representing the camp,” he said. “They are very proud of themselves for the weight they have lost and the strides they have made.”

The Camp Pocono Trails essay contest does not require that winners be financially needy — judging is based primarily on the quality of the essay — but Mr. Sparber acknowledged that many of the children could not otherwise afford to attend.

“I get a phone call every day from people in need,” he said. “It’s heartbreaking.”

As camp neared its close, Tiffany King said she worried about the challenges she would face when she returned to her normal environment. “I wish I could take the camp with me,” she said.
Millions of miles separate professor from competition

Emmett Floyd, a professor in ECU's College of Education, logged close to 1,000 miles during a four-month study coordinated by the College of Health and Human Performance for a state agency.

BY ECU NEWS BUREAU
Special to The Daily Reflector

On the map in his mind, Emmett Floyd is walking these days on Interstate 40 somewhere between Memphis, Tenn., and Little Rock, Ark. That's more than 934 miles from Greenville.

In reality, he's walking the track at the Student Recreation Center at East Carolina University, where he is a professor of educational leadership in the College of Education.

For four months, Floyd has been one of 125 participants in a study coordinated by ECU's College of Health and Human Performance to find ways to integrate physical activity into their lives. The study was funded by a $100,000 grant from the North Carolina State Health Plan.

During the four months of the study (March 1-June 26), Floyd walked more than 1.5 million steps — or 655 miles. Since the end of June, he has continued to walk; to date, he has logged more than 2.04 million steps, which translate into 934 miles and more than any other study participant.

For his accomplishment, he will keep the university's "Blue Cross-Blue Shield Million Step March" walking stick until someone else reaches 1 million steps. The walking stick was presented to the university in late May by the insurer to recognize the university's commitment to a healthy work force.

"It has become a life-changing event for me," Floyd said. He has lost 14 pounds and 3 inches in his waist since beginning the study. His total cholesterol is down 30 points.

The aim of the grant is not just about getting employees to become more active, said Mike McCammon, an ECU professor of exercise science who oversaw the study. The bottom-line component, from an insurer's perspective, is to promote the idea that an active lifestyle now will help prevent chronic health issues — and large medical bills — later.

At this rate, Floyd is going...
ECU

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to need another pair of walking shoes soon. He's on his third pair since the study.

Professor writes book on body images


He will hold his first of four book signings in North Carolina at 7 p.m. Thursday at Barnes & Noble Booksellers.

In eight chapters, Bailey offers a range of personal observations, case studies, assessments, timelines and online discussions that detail the rising influence of black body types in mainstream media and other industries.

"The book is about people's struggle in finding their particular preference for body image and recognizing their body images, body types and standard of beauty are greatly influencing today's fashion, advertising, fitness, television, movie, and political industries," Bailey said.

Fundraising initiatives recognized nationally

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education has recognized ECU's fundraising efforts with a 2008 CASE-Wealth Engine Award.

ECU received an Overall Improvement award based on judges' analysis of three years worth of fundraising data.

"This CASE-Wealth Engine award is a wonderful recognition of the team of staff, faculty, alumni, volunteers and donors we have at East Carolina University," Vice Chancellor for University Advancement Mickey Dowdy said. "It is a clear indication of how much people believe in ECU, its students, and its impact on Eastern North Carolina."

To determine winners, CASE judges looked for growth in the following factors: total support, overall breadth in program areas and in individual program areas, alumni donors and other individual donors, impact of the 12 largest gifts on total support and total support in relation to the alumni base.

Other schools recognized in the Overall Improvement category were Clemson University, Michigan State University, the University of California at Irvine, the University of Florida, the University of Maine, the University of Texas at Austin and West Virginia University.

CASE is an association of alumni relations, communications and marketing, and fundraising professionals at universities, colleges and independent institutions around the world.

Biology professor has research featured

Research by an ECU biologist into the sneaky eating habits of an Indonesian fish will be highlighted in an upcoming edition of the science journal Nature.

Jeffrey McKinnon, the new chairman of the biology department at ECU, collaborated with a former student on the study, "Sneaky egg-eating in Teleostherina sarasinorum, an endemic fish from Sulawesi."

The researchers say they saw the male fish, which are documented egg cannibals, court female fish of a different species and then attempt to eat the eggs that were released.

The study originally appeared in the August edition of the Journal of Fish Biology.

A summary will appear in the international journal this month.
Winning in every situation

Parents, students and educators celebrate positive effects of two summer youth programs based in west Greenville

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector

On Roosevelt Avenue this week, two young men engaged each other in a gunfight, a challenge of death that left one wounded and made both subjects of a police investigation.
A day later and a block away on Ward Street, two youngsters engaged each other in a game of chess, a challenge of the mind that exhilarated both and made them the subjects of praise and adulation among their parents and peers.

The gunfight was part of life in west Greenville, one of four similar episodes in the area that week. The chess championship was part of the life that some city and Pitt County citizens would like to see replace the gunfighting.

It was a featured part of a wrap-up celebration for the Summer Significance Academy and its partner Youth Apprenticeship program for teens offered through the Lucille Gorham Intergenerational Center.

The programs, which together served about 30 Pitt County children this summer, are a collaborative outreach effort of East Carolina University, Pitt Community College, Pitt County Schools and the city of Greenville.

The goal of Summer Significance is to engage and enhance academic and life skills of children about to enter middle school, a critical formative and educational crossroads, said Shelia Latham, a third grade teacher at Sadie Saulter Elementary School and lead teacher for the summer program.

"Our goal was to make the kids know they are important to us; that they are intelligent and capable of learning throughout their lives," Latham said.

Against the backdrop of some serious social challenges, Latham explained how the Summer Significance Academy and its adult supporters are vital to their children's success.

"At the Intergenerational Center, children learn that there are resources and people to which they can turn when they have these trials, people they can surely depend on, year after year," Latham said.

Parents who watched their children's progress through the program said they were pleased with the differences they observed. Michelle Joyner said she believes the program will improve her 11-year-old daughter Talexis' approach to decision-making at Farmville Middle School and at home.

"It's like she grew up while she was here. She is much more goal-oriented and attentive, and gets along with her friends much better now," Joyner said.

Talexis talked about how she approaches challenges with a more positive attitude now.

"I think 'win-win' in every situation," she said.

Joyner recommended more parents get their kids involved in Summer Significance and other programs at the IGC.

"It's a great idea. Parents will see their child advance right in front of
PROGRAMS
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them. They will see the results,” she said.

Among the program’s noticeable benefits are the positive emotional connections established among the children and between them and their adult mentors, Latham said.

“There was a bonding that took place here, and I think they will be friends and a tower of strength for each other. It’s an example of a community banding together for the sake of the children,” she said.

Despite those achievements, the program fell short of its enrollment goals, said Deborah Moody and Dr. Lessie Bass, who operate the center for ECU.

“We had space for almost 50 students, but enrolled only 30. We need to reach more families and parents to let them know the center is here for them with all of these terrific programs like Summer Significance and others for people of all ages,” they said.

In addition to the close academic tutoring and school preparation classes, activities like chess, martial arts and personal skills instruction engage the children in challenges that help them grow as individuals and members of a community, Moody said.

One of the highlights of the program was the “Challenge Course” offered by ECU’s Campus Recreation and Wellness Department.

Each Friday through the summer, Cornelia Cox, brought groups of middle school youngsters to the Blount Recreation Center on Charles Boulevard to participate in a variety of specialized exercises developed for their age group.

Cox sees important benefits to the physical challenges the children handle there.

“They develop a sense of responsibility, commitment and self-esteem with these challenge exercises ad all the courses they take together at the academy. They will be far better prepared with a solid foundation for the critical years of middle school,” Cox said.

On the playing fields, they learned team building and communication skills under the leadership of Eric Gardner, a leadership and team training specialist.

“They’re in a community here, among friends and counselors. It’s part of ECU’s mission of community outreach. We believe we have to be a part of Greenville and Pitt County if we are to all be successful.

One leg of the challenge course offers youngsters an opportunity to test their self-confidence by climbing a 50-foot tower while tethered to a rope.

Markevion Barrett, 11, a sixth-grader at Wellcome Middle School was the first to make it all the way to the top.

“I felt very good about it,” he said. “Even though I was scared that I would fall, I had a lot of confidence.”

Barrett heard the cheers from his teammates at the bottom and knew what that was all about.

“I had a lot of courage,” he said.

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Illegal aliens may fear to seek care

Doctors worry about public health

BY KRISTIN COLLINS
STAFF WRITER

Doctors around the state say a growing fervor over illegal immigration may scare illegal immigrants away from seeking health care and create a public health threat.

A recent case in Alamance County — in which medical records may have been used to help prosecute a library worker who was in the country illegally — has prompted many to speak out about what they see as an unprecedented breach of trust between doctor and patient.

"Whether you're legal or illegal, it's always been assumed that your medical information is private and can't be used against you," said Dr. Christopher Snyder III of Concord, president of the N.C. Academy of Family Physicians. "The doctor-patient relationship is sacred, and I'm not sure that has really been challenged until now. We're in uncharted territory."

Snyder was among several doctors who said that if patients become afraid to seek care, infectious diseases could spread, infant mortality could rise, and emergency costs could increase.

Immigrants have high rates of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, once a scourge that killed thousands, and often do not have health insurance. Public health clinics, along with some private ones, provide basic care that doctors say is key to maintaining the health of the broader community, offering prenatal care, immunizations and screening, and treatment for contagious diseases.

Pam Silberman, president of the N.C. Institute of Medicine, which studies health care issues, said it is not in the public interest to build more obstacles to immigrant health care.

"If they cough on somebody and they have tuberculosis," Silberman said, "that doesn't stop with them."

Strict federal laws prohibit the release of medical records in

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most cases. But records can be released on the order of a judge, which is what happened in the case of the library worker.

Alamance County Health Director Barry Bass said that during a recent State Bureau of Investigation inquiry into his health department, a judge ordered him to release the records of about five patients, one of whom was library worker Marzavi Angel Martinez. Martinez, who had been brought to North Carolina by her parents when she was a toddler, now faces federal felony charges for using the Social Security number of a dead person.

New trend feared

Chris Hoke, a lawyer with the state Division of Public Health, said judges frequently order the release of medical records in criminal and civil cases, but he said he does not know of any previous cases where public health records were used to help prosecute people for being in the country illegally.

Some doctors worry that it could become a trend.

There is growing sentiment among anti-illegal immigration groups that taxpayer-funded health care constitutes a public benefit that illegal immigrants should not receive, even though federal law requires that public health care be provided regardless of immigration status.

"Why are we giving away free health care?" asked Ron Woodard, an anti-illegal immigration activist from Cary. "If people have enough money to send home, which is what many of them are doing, then they've got money to pay some of their medical bills."

Woodard said he still favors providing emergency care and public health care for children. Otherwise, he said, all services should be denied — including immunizations — and the money used for the care of legal residents.

Alamance is among several counties across the country that have adopted that philosophy and have begun asking whether they should provide health services to illegal immigrants. Beaufort County, in Eastern North Carolina, has considered cutting some public health programs that are used by illegal immigrants, such as prenatal care for poor women.

Those efforts haven't gone far because most public health programs receive state and federal funding and must be provided under state law.

Lynette Tolson, director of the N.C. Association of Local Health Directors, said no public health departments in North Carolina have cut off care based on immigration status. But she said some health directors feel under siege.

"The doors are open at local health departments," Tolson said. "But health directors have to defend the essential public health services practically every day."

HEALTH CARE ACCESS

Health advocates note that access to health care is not only important to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, it also keeps health care costs down.

A Pew Hispanic Center study released last week shows that Hispanics are less likely than whites and other minorities to have a regular health care provider.

"When people don't get the information or treatment that would allow them to manage illnesses at an early stage or avoid a disease altogether, the costs of health care escalate and the burden of expensive late-stage medicine often falls to publicly funded health services," the report concluded. "An important strategy to reduce chronic illness, and the costs associated with it, is through prevention via regular monitoring and educational initiatives."

Among findings:

- 73 percent of Latino adults report having a usual place where they seek medical help or advice, while 27 percent have no usual health care provider. As in the general population, males, the young and the less educated are less likely to have a usual health care provider.
- 30 percent of Latinos born outside of the United States lack a usual place for health care, compared with 22 percent of U.S.-born Latinos.
- 32 percent of Latinos who mainly speak Spanish lack a regular health care provider, compared with 22 percent of Latinos who mainly speak English.
- 49 percent of Latinos who have lived in the United States for less than five years lack a usual health care provider, compared with 21 percent of those who have lived in the United States for 15 years or more.

Challenge foreseen

Peter Morris, medical director for Wake County Human Services, said he now fears that he could be forced to turn over patients' medical records for use in immigration cases. And he said he is concerned that public pressure eventually will push Wake County to question the services it provides to illegal immigrants.

He said that if public outrage is strong enough, federal and state laws requiring care for illegal immigrants might be challenged.

If that happens, Morris said, years of work to build trust in the state's growing Hispanic population could be destroyed.

"Any person who lives in our community presents a potential public health risk," Morris said. "To scare them away could mean that a public health risk goes undetected until it has affected more of us than it should have."

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Annual event lets fans mingle with ECU football squad

The Daily Reflector

East Carolina University football fans were treated to a double dose of preseason interaction with the team Saturday.

First, head coach opened the team's second scrimmage of August camp to the public during the afternoon.

Then, the Pirates' players and coaches returned to the field inside Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium for the annual Meet the Pirates night.

Members of the team were positioned at long tables on the playing field to allow fans to meet them and seek autographs.

Check out a slideshow from the Meet the Pirates event at reflector.com

The event has become a regular precursor to the start of the football season.

The Pirates, who finished 8-5 last year and upset Boise State at the Hawaii Bowl, kick off the 2008 season Aug. 30 against Virginia Tech in Charlotte. The first game in Greenville is slated for the following weekend, when ECU welcomes West Virginia.
Med school welcomes students

Seventy-six future doctors receive white coats

BY TOM MARINE
The Daily Reflector

The Brody School of Medicine officially welcomed its largest class on Friday at the eighth annual white coat ceremony.

Seventy-six members of the class of 2012 filled the auditorium in the Brody Medical Sciences Building to receive their white coats — a symbolic, nonverbal communication to express and reaffirm a fundamental belief in a system that society observes, according to the convocation pamphlet.

Each medical student also received a pin from the Arnold P. Gold Foundation and a book from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"This white coat is a symbol of our confidence in you," said Dr. David Collier, assistant professor of pediatrics and director of the ECU Pediatric Healthy Weight Research and Treatment Center.

Collier, the keynote speaker of the ceremony, compared the journey through medical school and residency to the thousand-mile journey described by Confucius, the social philosopher.

"It all starts with a single step," he said, "but you are well on your way."

Collier read the opening sentence of the medical student pledge to the incoming class: "I publicly acknowledge and accept the privileges and responsibilities given to me today as a physician in training."

He then asked students to look at what these responsibilities entail, such as always putting a patient's interest first, being respectful and respecting all the members of their medical team.

"This is the beginning," Collier said. "With privilege comes responsibility."

All incoming students are listed as North Carolina residents, and 13 are alumni of East Carolina University. Nearly 60 percent of graduates from the medical school continue to practice medicine in the state, more than any other medical school in North Carolina.

Mary Windham, an in
coming medical student and ECU graduate, said she is interested women's health care but also hopes to continue working with free medical care.

"The first thing I noticed was how everybody talks about how this is a family," said Windham, who was born in Greenville and graduated from Farmville Central High school. "Everyone is excited to be here. I'm most excited to be with really great people."

Although he was unable to attend the ceremony, Dr. Paul R.G. Cunningham, the new dean of the medical school and senior associate vice chancellor for medical affairs, sent a letter to each student.

"The 'cloak' that you don today should not rob you of your own unique identity," Cunningham says in the letter. "Instead, let it serve to reinforce who you are.

"You are crossing a threshold and will soon be able to witness modern medical miracles, intimately and firsthand. And one day, you will influence new discoveries and cures and make a positive impact on the health of our communities."

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Darts & Laurels

Back to work

Laurels — To the start of classes at Pitt Community College, where classrooms were filled on Friday following Thursday’s registration. At the college’s annual convocation, President Dennis Massey said the student population has grown 7 percent since last year, further evidence that investment in new buildings is more than justified. PCC continues to serve a vital role in this community. Best of luck for another successful semester.

Moving in

Laurels — To the arrival of nearly 27,000 students to East Carolina University this weekend. The annual move-in dates are a landmark for this community that summer is coming to an end and fall is around the corner. Expect plenty of tearful farewells as parents leave their young ones to residence halls, and plenty of traffic congestion around the college this weekend as well. Those without a need to drive there can help by steering clear.
Blue Cross hit with class action

Policyholders say they shouldn't have to pay higher rates after they max out their benefits.

BY DAVID RANII
STAFF WRITER

The state's largest health insurer wrongfully allowed policyholders to be charged higher rates for medical services after they received their maximum benefits, according to a lawsuit that recently won class action status.

The Aug. 5 court ruling in the nearly 3-year-old suit paves the way for thousands of policyholders to seek claims against Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, say attorneys who filed the action.

"We're very pleased on behalf of the policyholders involved," said Raleigh lawyer Donald Beskind of Twigg, Beskind, Strickland & Rabenau. "It's an important first step to getting them the recovery they deserve."

The lawsuit accuses Blue Cross of breach of contract, breach of good faith, and unfair and deceptive trade practices, and it seeks triple damages. Blue Cross denies the allegations.

At issue is the amount policyholders are charged for services provided by in-network providers after the policyholders have received the maximum amount of benefits covered by their insurance policies. In-network providers are those that have a contract with Blue Cross to provide health care at a discounted rate. That discount can be as high as 50 percent, Beskind said.

The named plaintiff in the case is Macy M. Hamm, a Wake County resident whose now-5-year-old son, who suffers from cerebral palsy, is covered under her Blue Advantage health insurance plan.

After reaching the maximum physical therapy and speech therapy benefits from in-network providers, Hamm was charged higher amounts for services than Blue Cross paid when it was footing the bill, according to the lawsuit.

Hamm could not be reached for comment.

Blue Cross spokesman Lew Borman said the company doesn't comment on pending litigation.

The lawsuit contends Blue Cross promises in its contract that if policyholders obtain services from an in-network provider, they will never pay more than the discounted rate.

"I feel like Blue Cross Blue Shield broke their promise to me when I was charged... [higher] amounts," Hamm testified at a deposition.

Beskind and co-counsel J. Martin Futrell, of Philadelphia's Martin & Anerbach, said they have no beef with the in-network providers themselves, because the amounts they charge are consistent.

But Blue Cross pays a discounted rate that may not be available to policyholders once they reach the maximum amount of services covered by their policy and begin paying 100 percent out

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of their own pocket. That can occur when, for example, the policyholder exceeds the maximum benefits for the period of time covered by the policy.

"It is Blue Cross ... that processes the bills between members and their preferred provider," even after the policyholders have reached their maximum benefits, Putrell said.

Potential class members are policyholders covered since November 2002 by "preferred provider organization," or PPO, plans purchased individually or obtained through a nonbusiness employer, such as a government or nonprofit agency. Class members also must have exceeded their maximum benefits and must have subsequently been charged higher rates by in-network providers.

As a result of the court’s ruling, policyholders who meet these requirements will be notified by mail.

The state Department of Insurance isn’t aware of any consumer complaints related to the issues raised in the lawsuit, said spokeswoman Kristin Milam.

The suit doesn’t specify how much extra Hamm was charged, and her attorneys declined to provide details. But Putrell said the losses suffered by individual class members probably aren’t huge. He estimates they range from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, which is why a class action lawsuit was necessary.

Many of Blue Cross’ filings have been sealed from the public by court order. But in documents that are available, Blue Cross argued the suit has no merit because, among other things, providers — not Blue Cross — charge policyholders for health care services. The insurer also argued Hamm isn’t a party to the contracts between Blue Cross and providers.

Special Superior Court Judge John R. Jolly Jr. noted in his order that Blue Cross contends its policies only pertain to “covered services,” and that services provided after the maximum number of visits allowed are no longer covered.

The judge also noted that Blue Cross acknowledged it allowed policyholders to pay higher rates after they reached the maximum number of visits, but not after they reached the maximum amount of dollars, covered by their policies. The plaintiff argues that nothing in Blue Cross’ contract distinguishes between the two types of maximums.

The next step in the case is a hearing on the plaintiff’s motion for a summary judgment ruling on whether Blue Cross is permitted, under its contracts, to allow in-network providers to charge higher rates after policyholders receive their maximum benefits. That hearing has not yet been scheduled.

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NCCU drops dorm designer

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — N.C. Central University has dumped a design firm that just two months ago it planned to hire for a large residence hall project.

NCCU trustees acquiesced to the wishes of university staffs Friday and replaced the firm chosen in June, Millennium 3 Design Group, with Lord, Aeck & Sargent, the Atlanta firm that put together NCCU’s master plan.

But in doing so, some trustees questioned whether the university’s facilities staff had properly vetted the Millennium group in the first place. In June, trustees selected Millennium for the $30 million renovation and expansion of Chidley Residence Hall, in part because Millennium had built other dorms on campus, most notably Ruffin Residence Hall on Fayetteville Street.

On Friday, facilities chief Zach Abegunrin said questions arose in recent weeks about work the company has done at other university system campuses. He also said work Millennium did several years ago in building Ruffin and Eagleson residence halls had raised some questions, but he did not elaborate on those other than to say the company didn’t score well on assessments that previous NCCU officials had done when the construction was complete.

“It’s a good thing we caught these issues before we entered into a contract,” Trustee George Miller said, addressing Abegunrin over the phone during a teleconference. “[But] I have to express my extreme concern that we didn’t do our due diligence. You said we had issues with work they did on our campus. We should have known about that.”

Millennium officials could not be reached Friday afternoon.

Chidley Hall long ago fell into disrepair and was closed a couple of years ago, and university planners expected to tear it down and build anew. But students and alumni spoke up on the big brick building’s behalf; now, the university plans to spend $30 million to fix it up.

Chidley is actually two buildings, a main dormitory building and an annex added later. The main building will be renovated; the annex will be demolished and a new dorm built in its place featuring suite-style living popular with today’s college students.

With 1,000 or more students on a waiting list for campus bed spaces, NCCU desperately needs new residence halls. The Chidley project, expected to be complete by the fall of 2010, would provide 714 beds.

Abegunrin said the change in designer won’t affect either the project’s schedule or budget.

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Internal auditor's post filled at NCCU

Hiring is expected to stabilize office

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — N.C. Central University finally has an internal auditor.

The university on Friday filled a job that has been vacant for years with the hiring of Najla Shareef, who most recently was a senior internal auditor at Alliance One International in Morrisville. She will start Monday, and her hiring is expected to help stabilize an office that university officials say has long been understaffed and led by an interim director.

Chancellor Charlie Nelms said Friday that Shareef's role won't be to police the university as much as it will be to help workers follow guidelines.

"It's not just to correct things, it's to prevent things," he said.

NCCU has had a string of embarrassing audit findings of late, including the discovery that some workers were using NCCU software to illegally download pornography and other media. But Nelms pointed out that auditors on campus discovered the malfeasance and properly reported it.

"We've had good people, but we haven't had a full-time director," he said.

Discussion after that and other discoveries, however, did illustrate a low staffing level within the audit office, where until Shareef's hiring just two of six positions were filled. Nelms said he expects other new hires in the office as well but isn't sure yet how many or when those new employees will be hired.

Shareef will be paid $80,000 annually, a university spokeswoman said. She was formerly the senior internal auditor at the Sara Lee Corp. She is a graduate of N.C. A&T State University and has a master's degree in business administration from Webster University.

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Opportunity lost

The State Board of Community Colleges has missed a chance to take a stand for educational opportunity.

Profiles in Courage moment it wasn’t. Bowing to widespread sentiment against illegal immigrants, the State Board of Community Colleges has voted to bar such immigrants from a community college education.

In some other states, young people in similar situations, most of whom came to this country as children and have since graduated from high school, are able to attend community colleges — even at low in-state tuition rates.

Not here, at least for now. Not even at out-of-state rates. In North Carolina, some young people’s educational aspirations are now officially frowned upon.

Leading the charge for yesterday’s vote by the community college board was board member Beverly Perdue, the Democratic candidate for governor. Lt. Gov. Perdue successfully proposed banning illegal immigrants from community colleges while a consultant studies the situation.

However, Perdue apparently favors a permanent ban. She reasons that since illegal immigrants can’t work here legally, they shouldn’t be educated here, either. (By that logic, they shouldn’t be allowed to enter first grade — but the U.S. Supreme Court wisely holds that youngsters have the right to an education.)

Since the days of segregation, has a Democratic candidate for governor in North Carolina ever advocated cutting off educational opportunities for an entire group of young people? Or, for that matter, a Republican candidate — since GOP nominee Pat McCrory is fully as anti-illegal immigrant as Perdue.

Both major-party candidates are either pandering to — or scared of — the “What Part of ‘Illegal’ Don’t You Understand?” folks, or else they’re active members of the kick ’em out brigade. In contrast, Governor Easley and Martin Lancaster, the previous community college leader, have made bold defenses of educational opportunity and its advantages for the state.

This week’s move to close the doors to illegal immigrants may or may not be final, pending the consultant’s study, but for now a ban is what it is. It’s a disconcerting stance for a board that oversees a 300,000-student system dedicated to offering opportunity. The board could and should have reversed a shortsighted policy switch made in May. At that time, the state Attorney General’s Office advised Scott Ralls, the system’s new president, that admitting illegal immigrants might be against the law. Until then, individual campuses had formulated their own policies. A system-wide ban was put in place.

(Very few illegal immigrants — the number is in the low hundreds — were in the system anyway, largely because of the $7,000-plus tuition charges they face.)

Now, with a new finding by the Attorney General’s Office that no law bars enrollment of these young people, the board could have done the right thing. Or, at the least, it could have decided to reopen the college doors pending a study.

Instead it opted for exclusion. Some North Carolina high school graduates, through no fault of their own, will by conscious state policy be denied any chance to better themselves through a community college education.

That’s just wrong.
Ban on illegal immigrants stands

The state community colleges board votes to keep policy — for now.

BY LYNN BONNER
STAFF WRITER

The state's community colleges will keep their doors closed to illegal immigrants, a decision steeped in a divisive election-year political debate.

The State Board of Community Colleges voted Friday to back a motion by Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, the Democratic candidate for governor, to keep its ban on admitting illegal immigrants in place while a study is conducted on how other states deal with the issue.

Perdue wants a permanent ban and pushed to keep illegal immigrants from enrolling while "the long-term policy is being examined." Of the more than 300,000 students enrolled in community colleges in 2006-2007, 112 were illegal immigrants.

The vote, with 11 of the 16 board members participating in favor of keeping the ban, appeared to reverse the direction in which the board was heading just a day before.

During a Thursday meeting, most board members appeared to be interested in lifting the ban the system imposed in May on illegal immigrants in degree programs. The state Attorney General's Office had advised the system that admitting illegal immigrants might violate federal law. But a recent letter from the federal government said it is up to each state to decide whether illegal immigrants can attend colleges.

A lawyer for the community college system said Thursday that the basis for the Attorney General's memo to the colleges directing them not to admit undocumented students "no longer held water." Stuart Fountain, a board member from Asheboro, told the board this week that temporarily allowing legal immigrants "is the legal position we have to take."

But that was not the direction board members, who said they had been under pressure from both sides of the debate, took when they voted Friday.

"I've never encountered such a divisive issue as this one," Fountain said Friday.

Illegal immigration has become a contentious political issue in North Carolina. The state Senate's Republican leader, Phil Berger of Eden, asked the community college board to keep the ban in place, and U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick, a Charlotte Republican, plans to introduce a bill to withhold federal funding from colleges and universities that knowingly admit illegal immigrants.

Myrick applauded the board's decision Friday, saying in a statement that "common sense and rule of law have prevailed."

N.C. Policy Watch, a Raleigh-based public policy group, denounced the decision on its blog: "Score another victory of the know-nothings and nativists."

Illegal immigration — and Perdue's position on community college enrollment — has already been an issue in the governor's race.

Pat McCrory, Perdue's Republican opponent, tried in May to connect Perdue to a position she did not hold, saying that she supported allowing illegal immigrants to attend community college.

Perdue participated in the board meeting Friday by telephone. She could not be reached for comment Friday afternoon.

But board members who voted to keep the ban while they waited for study results said they didn't do it for political reasons. The community college system has changed its policy four times since 2001, and board members said keeping the ban will maintain some stability.

"We just don't want to flip-flop again," said Linwood Powell of Fayetteville, the board's vice chairman.

Letter's opposite effect

Tom Houlihan, a board member from Oxford, said many members weren't sure what to do. But he said political considerations were "never a factor."

"It was really trying to figure out, trying to solve this problem once and for all," he said.

Houlihan said a July 31 letter from the Latin American Coalition in Charlotte that asked system President R. Scott Ralls to reinstate policies to admit all students regardless of immigration status swayed him and other board members to support keeping the ban.

In her letter, coalition chief executive officer Angeles Ortega-Moore said a decision Friday would come too late for students to enroll in fall classes.

Since it is already too late for this semester, Houlihan said, the board has time to seek help in developing a permanent policy.

Jenn George, the coalition's associate director, said she was dismayed that board members used Ortega-Moore's letter as justification to continue to deny people an education.

"It stinks," she said. "Immigration is such a polarizing and divisive issue for people. We have allowed this issue to overtake the fundamental belief in education for everybody."

Ralls on Thursday had suggested that the board could craft a policy in keeping with the system's "open door" philosophy that addressed concerns about admitting illegal immigrants.

In taking its action, though, board members seemed to disregard Ralls' suggestions.

"Ultimately," Ralls said Friday, "what I think doesn't matter."

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Oversight at NCCU was not an effort to circumvent approval process

Regarding recent stories about an N.C. Central University satellite campus operating at an Atlanta area church despite lack of proper approval by the University of North Carolina system:
The programs offered at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church presented an opportunity for the university to expand its partnership with a distinguished graduate of the university, Bishop Eddie Long, who serves as a member of the NCCU Board of Trustees. It was customary that the dean and the provost would ensure that the program was vetted through the proper channels.

My understanding is that the program was approved by the NCCU Faculty Senate. Whatever the circumstances, it was a grave oversight, and I accept full responsibility for this mishap. It was ultimately my responsibility to ensure that procedures were followed.

I want to make it clear that there was no effort under way at the time to circumvent the approval process. In keeping with best practices in academia, I hope that the campus will find a way to help the students earn their degrees.

These students and potential students at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church provided NCCU with an opportunity to expand its reach by offering degrees in disciplines where jobs were available in the area. We saw a need in the community and tried to fill it by offering the program.

Bishop Long is a very supportive member of the NCCU Board of Trustees and had a history of supporting higher education for members of his church and for members of the larger community. His son, Edward, is a graduate of Florida A&M University. He has been so proud of the education his son received at FAMU that he has agreed to serve on the FAMU Foundation Board. This is his way of giving back.

What happened regarding this program is unfortunate because I have always tried to operate with integrity. I believe that through the strong leadership of NCCU Chancellor Charlie Nelms and UNC System President Erskine Bowles, they will do the right thing and find a way to ensure that these students are able to earn their degrees while protecting the integrity of the University of North Carolina.

James H. Ammons
President, Florida A&M University
Tallahassee

The length limit was waived to permit a fuller response. The writer formerly served as chancellor at NCCU.
History repeats itself — sort of

BY MATT DEES
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL — OK, so Hinton James didn't have Wendy's, Gatorade or Power Bars.

And, sure, UNC-Chapel Hill's first student couldn't have conceived of anything like an automobile — much less ridden in one — when he trekked from Pender County to Chapel Hill in 1795.

Cut the guys who spent 13 days retracing his steps a little slack if they didn't do it to the letter.

Their Carolina-blue spirit more than made up for any historical indiscretions, as evidenced by the warm reception they received Friday when they showed up sweaty, blistered and happy to take a drink from the Old Well.

"We really love the place," said Bryan Jones, a 2006 graduate of the university who was joined by fellow alumnus Nicholas Beckett on the walk from the Atlantic Ocean to the Old Well.

"We wanted to give something back and leave something behind, create a legacy we could tell our grandchildren we started," Jones said. "It eventually dawned on us that we could revive the oldest thing Carolina has."

Jones and Beckett, a 2005 graduate, actually started a solid 40 miles farther east than James did. They left from Wrightsville Beach on Aug. 2. James left from near what is now Burgaw.

Jones was quick to point that out that they did take three rides from kind strangers, though they made a point not to solicit them.

They said the toughest part was at the beginning. Turns out that from Wilmington to Clinton, there isn't much in the way of oases.

"You might as well be in Nevada," Jones, 24, said.

On Day 2, Beckett said, the two were out of water and starting to fear they might be in trouble.

Then a guardian angel showed up in the form of Wayne the Tow-Truck Driver.

He recognized the pair from TV, so he brought Gatorade and allowed them a break in his air-conditioned cab.

"That was bigger than we thought," Beckett, 26, said. "Looking back, we were in a heap of trouble."

"So if your car breaks down in Wilmington," Jones chimed in, "call Wayne."

Jones and Beckett were joined later in the trip by alumnus Whitney Reeds and Jones' younger brother, Eric.

Jones said he'd like to make the trip a tradition. But he might have to make it on his own.

"I'll write a check," Beckett said.

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WHO WAS HINTON JAMES?

Hinton James was the first student to arrive for classes at the University of North Carolina, which also makes him the first person in the United States to attend a public university.

He walked, or so legend has it, from his home in what is now Pender County and arrived Jan. 12, 1795.

James graduated in 1798 and became a successful engineer.

RETRACING HINTON JAMES' JOURNEY

Two UNC-Chapel Hill alumni followed in the footsteps of Hinton James, who walked from Pender County to Chapel Hill in 1795 to become UNC's first student.
Statins Might Reverse ED in Some Men

In animal study, effect on those with metabolic syndrome was seen within days

Posted August 15, 2008

By Alan Mozes

*HealthDay Reporter*

FRIDAY, Aug. 15 (HealthDay News) -- Statins might quickly help reverse erectile dysfunction among men who have metabolic syndrome, new animal research suggests.

A threat to cardiovascular health, metabolic syndrome is also known to raise the risk for erectile dysfunction (ED). The current finding indicates that statins may reduce levels of a specific protein that contributes to ED.

"Each condition of metabolic syndrome phenomenon -- high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and obesity -- independently raises the risk for erectile dysfunction just on their own," explained study author Christopher J. Wingard, an associate professor of physiology with the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. "And so, when all are present in combination as part of this syndrome, you have a situation where you don't even need to be as diabetic or hypertensive as you might otherwise have to be to experience erectile dysfunction. And that fact has been raising concern among clinicians."

"So, we followed up on case reports and anecdotal evidence that statins being used to lower cholesterol over a six- to eight-week period among patients with metabolic syndrome seemed to also quickly improve erections -- even before cholesterol levels go down," Wingard added. "And in an animal model, we found this to be the case."

Wingard and his colleagues presented their findings recently at the American Urological Association Research Conference, in Linthicum, Md.

The effort to evaluate the possibility of using statins to treat ED focused on 16- to