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The constant: Students share common goals at ECU

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The semester started a little later, on Oct. 5, for the first class of students admitted to East Carolina Teachers Training School in 1909. Far fewer buildings marked the Greenville campus, and there was no tuition for students who pledged to teach following graduation.

The hundred years hence have brought tremendous change to what would become East Carolina University, the thriving institution that began its fall semester this week. Yet, for the thousands of bright young minds who arrive each year, a link to the past comes through the pursuit of academic development and a commitment to service, the constant over East Carolina's first century.

It is hard to imagine a Greenville without East Carolina at its heart. Not so 100 years ago, when the first 174 men and women came to this tobacco town in search of an education. It was only two years prior, in 1907, that the teachers college had been established by an act of the General Assembly. The future of East Carolina was made only of theories, hopes and dreams.

Choosing Greenville as the site for the new school would prove to be a landmark moment in the life of this community. In time, the school expanded its curriculum, attained university status and, after a long and difficult battle, established a medical school. It now stands as the state's third largest public university in North Carolina, and it expects to serve 28,000 students this year.

In many ways, those students are similar to those who arrived a century ago. There are the cosmetic differences of dress and speech, of course. Students' transportation and recreation are also a world away from those who formed that first class in 1909.

Yet, they come to Greenville with the same goals: to attain an excellent education, to develop as mature and responsible adults and, always, to serve the world around them. The school's motto Servire — to serve — stands as a lasting challenge to each incoming class as it is carried away from the campus by every graduate of East Carolina.

Two years ago, East Carolina began its centennial celebration, marking the date its charter won legislative approval. Those festivities will come to a close in a matter of weeks.

That may draw a curtain on a period spent marveling at the differences between then and now, but should highlight the one constant throughout. The young men and women who come to East Carolina seeking an education leave with experiences that change their lives, and promise to change the world.

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Fewer students take SAT

Economic trouble may be to blame

BY T. KEUNG HUI, SADIA LATIFI AND SARAH NAGEM, Staff Writers

You can add fewer public school students taking the SAT college admission exam to the list of problems being attributed to one of the worst economic periods since the Great Depression.

New figures released Tuesday show that 2,678 fewer North Carolina public school students took the SAT in 2009 than the year before. Wake County school officials think they know why -- more seniors planning to go to community college, the military or straight to work.

"The economy has been a killer," said David Holdzkom, Wake's assistant superintendent for evaluation and research.

Overall, the average combined math-and-reading score for North Carolina students who graduated this year was 1,006, one point down from last year, according to the College Board, the nonprofit group that administers the SAT. The national average also fell a point to 1,016 -- 10 points above North Carolina's score.

North Carolina is tied, in the latest results, for the 37th highest average SAT score in the nation. The state's average score has risen 30 points since 1996, when North Carolina had the 48th highest score.

Among the 21 states and the District of Columbia where at least half the seniors took the SAT, North Carolina's score ranked ninth.

Triangle school officials are questioning why fewer seniors took the SAT. Students who only take the SAT as juniors have the results counted in their senior year.

"We were surprised, and we'll be asking schools," said Diane Villwock, executive director of testing and program evaluation for Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools.

Keith Beamon, Johnston County's chief academic officer, said he has asked principals to look into the drop. Only 41.7 percent of Johnston County's seniors took the SAT compared to a statewide average of 63 percent.

Nearly 80 percent of Wake seniors took the exam in 2007 compared with 67.1 percent this year, according to the state report. That caused Wake school officials to conduct a survey of students to find out why fewer of them are taking the SAT. The answer: Seniors aiming for places that don't require an SAT, be it a community college or the military.

School officials say it's also possible more students could be taking the ACT, a rival college entrance exam, instead of the SAT. But 293 more North Carolina students took the ACT than the year before.

"With the economy the way it is, I do think young people stay closer to home the first couple of years," said Larry Strickland, chairman of the Johnston County school board.

Results in the Triangle

As for the students who took the exam, the results were mixed.
The state reported that Wake County's average score rose 14 points to 1,073, tied for third-highest in the state among the 115 school districts. Wake school officials say their records indicate that the score was higher at 1,074.

"We take great pride in what our teachers, parents and principals have done," Holdzkom said. Chapel Hill-Carrboro's average score remained unchanged at 1,179, the highest of any district in the state.

"How can you not be pleased with that?" Villwock said. "That always makes you feel good."

School leaders in Durham, Orange and Johnston counties downplayed concerns about scores dropping in their districts.

Terri Mozingo, Durham's chief academic officer, said she's not worried because scores also dropped nationwide. The state reported that Durham's average score dropped two points from 967 to 965, but district officials say it was a four-point drop because their score the previous year was 969.

Denise Morton, Orange County's chief academic officer, focused on how the district outperformed the state average. The district's average score dropped four points to 1,039.

Beamon called Johnston County's three-point drop to 1,016 a "blip." Strickland was also not too disappointed.

"I think it's basically every graduating class has a different makeup," he said. "I was just pleased to see we were consistent and matched the national average and exceeded the state average."

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How schools did

Go to www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/sat/2009 to see school-by-school results of the SAT exams.

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Start of school year revs up flu concerns

BY SADIA LATIFI, T. KEUNG HUI AND SARAH NAGEM, Staff Writers

As thousands of Triangle students crowded into classrooms Tuesday, North Carolina's top public health official warned that the start of traditional-calendar schools could lead to a revived H1N1 flu outbreak that could hit as early as next week.

But Dr. Jeffrey Engel, state health director, was also quick to say parents shouldn't panic because the current strain of the novel flu virus is mild. Still, now that the school year is in full swing, the potential for the virus to spread could rise -- especially in the absence of an H1N1 vaccine and with state budget cuts causing classroom sizes to bulge.

"When young people ... get together indoors, you know that you're going to have conditions that are ripe for transmission," Engel said.
Dr. David Weber, an epidemiologist at UNC-Chapel Hill, agreed that the start of the traditional school year could trigger a September outbreak.

"But it's just a guess," he said. "Nobody knows what's going to happen."

However, school districts do have a reason to be cautious. One year-round elementary school in the Alamance-Burlington school system closed for several days this month when more than a quarter of students were out sick with the H1N1 virus.

The H1N1 vaccine is behind schedule but is expected to reach more than half the U.S. population. Its initial October release will target at-risk populations, including younger schoolchildren, who are known to be vibrant carriers of germs and viruses.

While waiting for the H1N1 vaccine, Wake, Durham and Orange counties are encouraging families to get free seasonal influenza shots at their individual schools, courtesy of federal stimulus funds to county health departments.

Getting the regular seasonal influenza shot won't prevent a child from getting the H1N1 strain. But school officials hope that getting the shot will prevent schools from getting slammed by both types of flu at the same time.

"The idea is that if kids are healthy and are trying to bolster their immunity to seasonal influenza, hopefully they will be healthier to be able to withstand other types of influenza," said Stephanie Willis, the district health coordinator for Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools.

It's not a bad idea, Weber said.

"Once you've damaged your lungs, you're gonna be more vulnerable to other viruses and bacterial infections," he said. "Children ought to get the seasonal flu vaccination so they don't get two strains."

School officials also want to administer regular flu shots now to cut down on the expected logjam once the H1N1 vaccine arrives. The H1N1 vaccine will likely have multiple shots, which means students waiting in lines more than once.

The Orange County health department is planning to offer seasonal flu vaccinations for third-through eighth-graders in Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County schools.

Other counties are also taking advantage of the federal money.

Wake County, the state's largest school district, and Durham Public Schools also will administer voluntary, in-school seasonal flu vaccines. Parents will receive notices about the vaccination schedule in September.

Counties had the option of grabbing the federal money through the N.C. Division of Public Health, which required the dollars to be focused on school-aged children. Johnston County did not ask for the money because its health department did not have enough nurses to administer the in-school vaccines, according to county Health Director Marilyn Pearson.

School districts are otherwise taking a wait-and-see attitude. Officials said they are following the lead of health departments on how to prevent H1N1 cases: telling parents to keep sick children at home, making sure hands are washed often and having custodians disinfect surfaces more frequently.

They're also downplaying talk of school closures.

"We're following CDC guidelines, and we are not even thinking about school closures," Chapel Hill-Carrboro's Willis said.

Most districts said they'd consider closing schools if H1N1 cases soar -- but each school outbreak will be looked at individually.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines advise teachers to seat students farther apart in class. That'll be a challenge this year since budget cuts have forced schools to increase
class sizes.

The other concern is what to do if large numbers of teachers are out sick.

Johnston County Schools spokeswoman Terri Sessoms said if lots of teachers get sick, the school district will depend on a steady flow of substitute teachers and volunteers.

"We are constantly adding to our list," she said. "Any time you're dealing with the unknown, it's best not to be overconfident."

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Paying for vaccine

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made federal stimulus money available for states to give out free vaccines, including regular seasonal flu shots. The N.C. Department of Public Health made money available to counties on an optional basis but required them to focus vaccinations on children.

• Wake County received $296,341 for free flu shots.
• Orange County received $44,228 for county and Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools.
• Durham received $18,575.
• Johnston County did not opt to receive the extra money.

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• Go to the CDC's information page on swine flu

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Student's shooting may be on video

A police car at the scene of the UNC fraternity president's death had a camera.

BY JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - All those desperate to know why a police officer fatally shot UNC-Chapel Hill fraternity president Courtland Smith early Sunday -- Smith's parents, fraternity brothers, friends and others -- may eventually learn the truth from an unblinking witness: a video camera.

An Archdale police cruiser involved in the incident on Interstate 85 had a camera, and police and the Randolph County District Attorney's Office are treating the recording as evidence.

Archdale police declined to release the video recording, citing the ongoing investigation into Smith's death. Chief Assistant District Attorney Andrew Gregson said he was getting a court order to bar its release after a News & Observer reporter requested a copy Tuesday morning, but he said he was acting out of an abundance of caution because he believed the recording is technically protected as evidence, much like a murder weapon.

Accounts from Smith's parents and from police records indicate that the 21-year-old junior biology major left the Delta Kappa Epsilon House on Columbia Street in the early morning near the end of one of the fraternity's biggest parties of the year and drove west for reasons that are not clear.

According to a news release from the Archdale Police Department, the two officers were responding to a 911 call from a distraught motorist who requested police assistance and said he was suicidal. They stopped Smith about 4:54 a.m., and police officer Jeremy Paul Flinchum, 29, shot him after "a confrontation."
Beyond that, the facts are trickling out slowly as a State Bureau of Investigation review of the shooting continued Tuesday. SBI investigations are routine in police shootings.

Gregson got a court order Monday to protect the audio recording that Guilford County emergency dispatchers recorded of Smith's call, citing the ongoing investigation.

Archdale police said Monday that under standard policy Flinchum had been placed on administrative leave. On Tuesday, Capt. C.M. Denny confirmed that a second officer on the scene, who hasn't been publicly named, also was put on leave under department policy. The second officer wasn't involved in the shooting, he said.

The N.C. Police Benevolent Association sent two attorneys Monday to represent the officers. Executive director John Midgette said that was a standard benefit for members involved in a shooting and didn't mean they had done anything wrong.

"I would caution against any rush to judgment, because obviously there is a lot more to this situation than what is out there right now," he said. "We're talking about highly trained police officers who were called into an extremely volatile situation."

The SBI and Archdale police have released no information about why Smith would have been upset or why he decided to drive west at such an early hour.

It was the weekend before classes start, a major party weekend, and two of Smith's fraternity brothers at the DKE house called police at 3:30 a.m. to report an apparently unrelated theft there. They told the investigating officer that there had been "a couple of hundred" people partying there, Chapel Hill Assistant Police Chief Chris Blue said.

The two men reported that during a party, someone had slipped into their rooms and stolen a computer, a video game player and other items worth $1,845, and then apparently left via a fire escape, Blue said.

In a telephone interview Monday from the family's home in Houston, Smith's mother, Susan, didn't mention a party but said that some of his friends said they had seen him at the fraternity about 2 a.m. and that he seemed fine.

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Football 'time out' irks some at UNC

Workers leave early on game day

BY ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - On Oct. 22, UNC-Chapel Hill workers will be sent home two hours early to make room for a big football crowd on campus.

But workers will have to make up the time, and that isn't sitting well with some.

"There are a lot of hourly people here on campus that have kids, or [elderly] parents, or second jobs," said Richard Silc, business officer with the Odum Institute for Social Science Research. "To me, they're making this big decision based on an ESPN payment, and the consideration for the worker bee is secondary."

About 11,500 employees will leave work at 3 p.m. Five hours later, the Tar Heels will take on Florida State in the first weekday game held on the UNC-CH campus.

Kenan Stadium holds 60,000 people. For years, UNC-CH shied away from hosting a Thursday night game because of the potential disruption to the campus. Officials relented this year in part because it will be held during fall break. The prime time national broadcast brings with it an avalanche of free publicity to the football program and the school.

Must make up time

State policy dictates that employees make up time they don't work, said Brenda Malone, vice chancellor for human resources. Employees can use vacation time or start a work day earlier, stay late or work through lunch during the other four work days that week, Malone said.

As head of UNC-CH's Employee Forum, a worker advocacy group, Tommy Griffin has gotten an earful.

"I know a lot of employees are upset about those two hours," he said. "But [the game] is something good for campus that will bring a lot of revenue, so I'm not too upset about it."

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