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Enrollment for the fall semester is at 6,495 students, but not every student has been counted yet.

BY JOSH HUMPHRIES
The Daily Reflector

Pitt Community College is growing at an unprecedented rate.

Enrollment is already up by 10 percent over last year, and many students have not been counted yet, President Dennis Massey told the PCC Board of Trustees Tuesday at the board's meeting.

Enrollment for the fall semester is at 6,495 students, but students at East Carolina University who take classes through PCC and some high school students who take PCC classes have not been counted yet.

Massey said he expects enrollment to be up by 12 percent after everyone is counted.

He expects a final number around 7,234, up from 5,891 students in 2007.

The college has never grown that much in one year, Massey said.

Vice President of Student Development Services Donald Spell said after the meeting that the economy, gas prices and unemployment numbers are contributing to growth at PCC.

"The number one reason is the unemployment rate," Spell said. "As unemployment goes up, enrollment in community colleges go up. People who have lost their jobs come back."

Spell said that his colleagues at other community colleges in North Carolina are also attributing increases in enrollment to the unemployment rate.

The average age of students at PCC last year was 25. That number has been going down for several years, and Spell expects it to drop again. That indicates that more people are choosing to attend PCC for transfer credits before going to a four-year college, he said.

Those choices seem to be economically driven, he said.

"You can save quite a bit of money by coming here first and transferring to a four-year school," Spell said.

Spell said gas prices also contribute to the increase in students taking online classes. This semester, 7 percent of students are taking classes online only. That number is up from 5 percent last year.
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Spell said those students take classes from home to avoid driving to campus. "Anecdotally, you hear them say that they can't afford to drive to class," he said.

Many students attend community colleges to increase their skill sets to get better jobs in a tough economy or return after losing their job to try to get a better one the next time, Spell said.

The board of trustees also discussed several goals for the 2008-09 year.

The board wants to:
- Prepare members of the community for a changing workforce by considering job projections, funding challenges, competition with other providers and partnerships to position the college as the first choice for learning and training needs;
- Communicate the advantages of PCC to all of Pitt County by continuing to support strategies to promote college interests and capabilities to stakeholders, employers, alumni and the entire region;
- Move forward on facilities planning and implementation by monitoring current construction and to develop a revised comprehensive master plan in 2008-09.

The board also welcomed a new member.

Virginia Hardy, senior associate dean for academic affairs at the Brody School of Medicine at ECU, was sworn during the meeting.

Hardy, a native of Greenville, was appointed by the Pitt County Commissioners, and will serve a term until 2012.

The board also approved a request to grant an easement to the Greenville Utilities Commission on the Bowen Farm property and to reach mutually agreeable terms to sell about an acre of land to the GUC for a sewer pump station on the Davenport Farm property.

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Colleges confront shootings with training

BY ALAN SCHER ZAGIER
The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. —
 Hundreds of colleges across the nation have purchased a training program that teaches professors and students not to take campus threats lying down but to fight back with any “improvised weapon,” from a backpack to a laptop computer.

At the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, officials are looking for ways to incorporate the training as part of the school’s “Alert Carolina” program. Campus police chief Jeff McCracken said the school may offer hands-on training to students and faculty, or simply post a link on the university Web site.

Despite the relative rarity of deadly violence on campus, colleges can no longer assume that they are immune from such problems, McCracken said.

“I do think it’s important that we talk to our folks and give them some guidance on how to protect themselves and others,” he said. “It’s not something that 10 years ago we thought we’d be talking about. But unfortunately, it’s something we need to do now.”

The program — which includes a video showing a gunman opening fire in a packed classroom — urges them to be ready to respond to a shooter by taking advantage of the inherent strength in numbers.

It reflects a new response at colleges and universities where grisly memories of the campus shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University are still fresh.

“Look at your environment through the lens of survival,” said Domenick Brouillette, who administered the course at Metropolitan Community College, which serves more than 20,000 students. “Survivors prepare themselves both mentally and emotionally to do what it takes. It might involve life-threatening risk.
You may do something you never thought you were capable of doing.

Nearly 300 professors at Metropolitan Community College were shown the video as part of a training exercise before the first day of classes on this downtown campus. The training, produced by the Center for Personal Protection and Safety, a for-profit firm based in Spokane, Wash., is also available for the school’s students.

The training drills teachers and students in a “survival mindset,” said Randy Spivey, a former U.S. Department of Defense hostage negotiator who is executive director of the center. The center’s roster includes retired FBI agents and others with federal law enforcement experience.

“There are two extremes. On the one hand is paranoia, and on the other is oblivion,” he said. “We’re just trying to get people to keep this on their radar.”

The training discourages cowering in a corner or huddling together in fear, Brouillette emphasized at the Kansas City session.

Instead, Metropolitan Community College faculty members were taught to be aware of their surroundings and to think of common classroom objects — such as laptops and backpacks — as “improvised weapons.”

The program has been bought by nearly 500 colleges, which tailor the company’s safety messages — laid out in instructional videos and other training guides — to craft localized violence prevention programs. Spivey expects that by year’s end that number will have grown to about 1,000 schools.

Schools may provide the training to students as well as staff, as at Metropolitan, or limit it to instructors or security personnel.

Campus safety experts interviewed by The Associated Press said they are not aware of any similar survival training courses marketed specifically to college campuses.

“It’s a dark subject,” Brouillette said. “But we can’t say ‘It’s never going to happen again.’ It’s ‘When is it going to happen?’ And we have to be prepared to survive that.”
Holtz, ECU agree on new contract

The new deal, which still needs to be approved by the school's board of trustees, runs through the 2013 season.

BY NATHAN SUMMERS
The Daily Reflector

East Carolina football coach Skip Holtz likes to call himself merely the duck that gets to float on top of the pond, while everyone under him works.

ECU's head duck landed himself a new six-year contract Tuesday, just four days in advance of the start of Holtz's fourth season with the Pirates against Virginia Tech. As he embarks on the challenge of trying to steer the Pirates to a third bowl game in as many seasons, Holtz agreed to tentative terms on a new deal that would keep the coach in Greenville through 2013.

"We've got something rolling here. We're building something," Holtz said following Tuesday's practice. "It's

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HOLTZ

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exciting to know that this can happen for a long time.”

The university’s board of trustees must approve the contract in a closed session Sept. 25 before its details can be released at the trustees’ regular meeting the following day, according to ECU spokesman John Durham.

Since Holtz adopted an ECU program in late 2004 that went 3-20 the previous two seasons under coach John Thompson, the Pirates have gone 20-17. The 20th victory was the biggest of the Holtz era, a 41-38 triumph over Boise State at the Hawaii Bowl.

“The stability of our staff is critical,” Holtz said of his fellow coaches at ECU. “I commend (ECU director of athletics) Terry Holland for thinking outside of the box to try to do some things with our staff to keep some stability. That’s the key to success in any company, business, football program, anything.”

Holtz also lauded the current fifth-year seniors on the team, who stuck with the program in its tough times.

Large crowds have become a staple of the recent success of the program. During Holtz’s tenure, six of the program’s largest 10 home crowds have been drawn to Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium.

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LOWER THE DRINKING AGE?

21 or nothing clearly doesn’t work

BY JULIAN SERENO

Count me among those who welcome the university presidents’ call for a discussion of young adult drinking, including whether the national legal age of 21 is actually wise.

I realize there are many who are outraged that anyone would ever want to even question it. Their arguments are strong, with an impressive number of public health experts who decry the effects of alcohol and traffic experts who raise the alarm of more wrecks.

But during a week in which a UNC-Chapel Hill tennis star, underage and evidently drunk, ran over two pedestrians in downtown Chapel Hill, when an N.C. State student was spared prison by the mercy of a bereaved spouse after he pleaded guilty to killing a bicyclist late one morning while drunk from the night before, and when a UNC basketball star was sentenced to community service for underage drinking and using a car, the current system certainly doesn’t seem to be working very well.

The national drinking age of 21 became law in 1984. Before then, it was state by state, 21 in some states, 18 in others.

Too often, teens would drive from states where the drinking age was 21, such as Illinois, to a neighboring state, such as Wisconsin, where the drinking age was 18. They would buy liquor legally and get smashed, then smash their cars on the way home, killing themselves and countless others. Congress decided to withhold highway funds from any states that didn’t raise their drinking age.

It is the uniformity of age that has curtailed that specific type of drunken driving. It may or may not have made any difference if officials had made the drinking age a uniform 18 instead. But asking states to lower their drinking ages, particularly during the dawn of this conservative era, was out of the question.

The problem, of course, has to do with drinking and driving — remove cars from the equation and drinking is but one more vice, minor or major depending upon the individual in question. And young adults cannot learn how to use alcohol in a healthy, social way because it is illegal to do so. Instead, they drink furtively, as much as they can at a place where they don’t worry about getting caught, and head out drunk as skunks.

There is no dorm resident head, or parent for that matter, around to tell them when they’ve had enough. Or take away the car keys if need be.

Age 18 is the age of majority in the United States; 18-year-olds can vote, leave home (or get kicked out), marry, enlist in the armed forces. But they can’t have a beer at a baseball game or a glass of wine with dinner.

To the public health experts who warn of the danger of alcohol on the emotional development of young adults, there’s a lot more danger, and not just emotional, if you kick in a door and storm a building in Fallujah. Eighteen is old enough for that.

Julian Sereno is editor and publisher of Chatham County Line (www.chathamcountyline.org).

WASHINGTON

College officials who have signed on to the provocative proposition that the legal drinking age of 21 isn’t working say that they just want to start a debate. Perhaps when they get done with that, they can move on to whether Earth really orbits the sun. Any suggestion that the current drinking age hasn’t saved lives runs counter to the facts.

More than 100 presidents and chancellors from such top universities as Duke and Johns Hopkins say it’s time to rethink the drinking age, contending it has caused “a culture of dangerous, clandestine binge drinking.” The statement does not specifically advocate reducing the drinking age, but many who signed it say they thought legal drinking should begin at 18.

Health and safety experts have reacted with dismay, because raising the drinking age has saved many lives. In 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reviewed 49 studies published in scientific journals and concluded that alcohol-related traffic crashes involving young people increased 10 percent when the drinking age was lowered in the 1970s and decreased 16 percent when the drinking age was raised.

The retreat from a lower drinking age translates into some 900 lives saved each year among 16 to 20 year olds. Those who would argue that other factors, such as safer cars, are responsible should take a good look at numbers posted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving showing alcohol-related traffic fatalities among 16 to 20 year olds decreasing 60 percent between 1982 and 2006, while non-alcohol-related fatalities increased 34 percent.

The college presidents are right about binge drinking. Each year, some 1,700 college students die from causes related to alcohol use; there is also the toll of injuries and sexual assaults fueled by alcohol. But where is the logic of solving the underage drinking problem by lowering the age even more?

Henry Wechsler, the Harvard expert whose studies of binge drinking popularized the phrase, put it best, comparing lowering the drinking age to “pouring gasoline to put the fire out.”

Work by experts such as Wechsler, as well as the experience of college officials committed to solutions, shows that strong steps to enforce the law and change the culture can produce results. Instead of talking about lowering the drinking age (and thereby shifting the problem to high schools), colleges should be working to develop better enforcement methods, expand education and counseling, and end pricing practices that make alcohol more accessible and attractive.

Then, too, college officials can stop winking at fraternity bashes that, whether they are willing to admit it or not, add to the allure of going off to college.
Insisting ‘the defense rests, Taheri-Azar gets 26-33 years

Driving an SUV into a lunchtime crowd brought attempted-murder charges

By Jesse James DeConto
Staff Writer

Hillsborough – Mohammed Taheri-Azar never looked at his family. He asked his lawyer not to speak on his behalf. He didn’t apologize, or even make excuses.

“If his desire that the matter be handled as expeditiously as possible,” said Public Defender James Williams, who has represented the 25-year-old UNC-Chapel Hill alumni since the young man drove a rented Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo into a crowd of people on campus two years ago.

Superior Court Judge Carl Fox asked Taheri-Azar whether he was sure he didn’t want to fight for the shortest possible prison term.

“The defense rests, your honor,” Taheri-Azar said, even before the prosecution presented any evidence to support a harsh sentence.

“Do you want him to call any witnesses on your behalf?” Fox asked.

“That is correct, sir.”

“Is there any particular reason for that?” Fox asked.

“Taheri-Azar is not the type of person who would hurt a fly,” his sister pleaded. He was a really naive kid who wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Throughout Taheri-Azar’s incarceration, family members have said a former family friend persuaded him to embrace radical Islamic beliefs. His sister repeated that Tuesday, explaining why he would have tried to kill Americans as vengeance against the U.S. government for killing Muslims.

Before issuing his sentence, Fox pointed out that Harman’s life was spared by just a few inches.

“One of the things our government won’t tolerate — and after 9/11 our citizens won’t tolerate — is trying to use Americans as punching bags or targets for terrorist acts or mindless acts,” the judge said. “If you’re anything like the rest of us, there will come a point in your life when you will truly regret [what you did].

“I’m going to say anything, the time to say it is now,” Fox said.

“No, thank you, your honor,” Taheri-Azar said.

“Sorry,” whispered his aunt, who had traveled from California for the hearing. “Just say it, I’m sorry.”

Taheri-Azar did not say it, and Fox sentenced him to the longest sentence allowed for two counts of attempted first-degree murder for a person with no prior felony record: 26 years, 2 months, to 33 years in prison.

“It’s not fair,” his aunt whispered, weeping.

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A family friend, left, comforts Taheri-Azar’s mother, Lily.
Staff photo by Harry Lynch

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around the world.

“He’s — once again — not himself,” she said.

Defense efforts

In the past, Williams has argued that Taheri-Azar is mentally ill. He has attempted suicide, tried to fire his lawyer and defend himself, and screamed curses in the courtroom. The results of his latest psychiatric evaluation never became public. Williams did not mention mental illness when, against Taheri-Azar’s wishes, he presented mitigating factors to minimize the prison term.

“By the [plea] agreement itself, he’s exposed himself to at least 26 years in prison,” Williams said.

“There is no sentence this court could impose that would not be a harsh sentence.”

But Fox had listened to three witnesses, who described the psychological toll the crime had caused. They spoke of looking for large objects to duck behind in case a vehicle comes at them as they’re walking down a sidewalk, and exercising irrational caution when using a crosswalk.

“I’m never going to be 100 percent sure again,” said Susan Burgin, who was a UNC sophomore at the time.

“I look at every car driver with suspicion,” said Karen Harman, whose leg was hit by the Jeep’s tire. “Nothing will ever be the same. I no longer feel as safe in the world.”
State climbs the SAT ladder

BY T. KEUNG HUI
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH — North Carolina was the butt of jokes in 1996 for having the 48th highest SAT score in the nation, just three
states from the bottom.
But the kindergartners of 1996 grew up, and their parents got as
the class of 2008 saw an average
SAT score of 1,007, up three
points from the previous year. Now North Carolina is ranked
37th in the nation and is just 10
points below the national average — the smallest gap ever.
"The news is positive," said
state schools Superintendent
Judy Atkinson of the new SAT
results released Tuesday. "In
1998, we seemed we would never
reach the national average, but
the goal is now in sight."

Scores also were up for the
school systems in Wake, John-
ston, Orange and Chatham
Counties.

But scores dropped in
Durham and Chapel Hill-Carr-
boro. There was another catch
— the percentage of students
taking the SAT, the nation's
most frequently used college
admissions exam, dropped in
several districts, including
Durham, Wake and Johnston.
State education officials see
the latest round of SAT results as
vindication of all the empha-
sis since the 1990s to raise aca-
demic performance. North Car-
olina was last in the SAT in
1989.

North Carolina's average score has risen 31 points since
1996.

Among 21 states and the Dis-
trict of Columbia where at least
half the seniors took the SAT,

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Fewer take the test

But in Wake, Johnston and
Chatham, the percentage of
seniors taking the SAT dropped.
Wake officials were at a loss to
explain their decline.

"It could be due to the econ-
yony," said David Holdzikom,
Wake's assistant superintendent
for evaluation and research.

Beamon said participation lags
in Johnston, where less than half
the seniors took the SAT. Partici-
pation is low in part because so
many students there attend com-

munity college first instead of go-
ing directly to a four-year insti-
tution. Community colleges don't
require an SAT score.

The state's participation rate
also dropped, with 63 percent of
seniors taking the SAT, down
from 71 percent the previous year.
But a spokesman for the College
Board, which owns the SAT, said
the drop was because of a revised
enrollment projection for the
number of graduates in the state.
The rates for individual districts
are based on actual enrollment
figures and not estimates.

Participation rates also dropped
in Durham and Chapel Hill-Carr-
boro, which both saw their aver-
age scores decline.

Chapel Hill's average score fell
by six points to 1,179, still the
highest of any of the state's
115 school districts.

The state reported that
Durham's score had dropped
16 points to 967. Durham school
officials say that the figure is wrong
and that the average score is 969.

Still, the drop is the biggest
change Durham has seen in re-

SAT
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North Carolina's score ranked
ninth. The states with the best
scores usually have low particip-
ation rates; more of their seniors
take the ACT, a rival college
admissions exam.

Additionally, North Carolina
now ranks above the national
average on the ACT, based on
results released this month.

Atkinson said scores rose in
part because more students took
rigorous courses. The number of
students taking Advanced Place-
ment exams jumped 6 percent in
the past school year.

The results also were greeted
positively in much of the Triangle.

In Wake County, the average
score rose two points to 1,059.
Only four much smaller school
districts had a higher average
score in the state.

Orange County rose three
points to 1,043. Johnston County
rose seven points to 1,019.
Chatham County saw the biggest
gain, going up 31 points to 998.

Johnston officials were particu-
larly pleased that all seven high
schools passed the 1,000 mark,
said Keith Beamon, associate super-
intendent for curriculum and
instruction.

"We think we're doing a better
job of teaching math and critical
reading skills and not worrying so
much about the SAT," Beamon
said. "If we do that, the SAT will
take care of itself."
Another look at NCSU raises

BY ERIC FERREL
STAFF WRITER

Large pay raises given to 46 contract employees at N.C. State University since 2002, that were never properly approved, have been sent to the UNC system for retroactive review, Chancellor James Oblinger said Tuesday.

Those raises likely include one given this year to first lady Mary Easley, whose recent 88 percent pay increase — to $170,000 — prompted the university to examine more than 1,000 pay raises it doled out since 2002 that were both more than a 15 percent increase and totaling $10,000 or more. Raises higher than those benchmarks must receive UNC system approval first. NCSU did not seek such approval when it increased Easley's pay.

NCSU officials defended the raise, saying they had misinterpreted the system's policy, which doesn't require campuses to seek approval for new contracts. Provost Larry Nielsen said last month that Easley's raise amounted to a new job, because she was hired in 2005 for a three-year term with an $80,000 salary. Her new role, with the same job title, has expanded duties and a five-year term.

Oblinger discussed the pay raise issue for about 10 minutes Tuesday at a meeting of NCSU's Faculty Senate. He never mentioned Easley by name, and after the meeting, he would not confirm that Easley's pay raise was among those sent to the UNC system's Board of Governors, which will discuss the issue next month. But hers easily fits the criteria requiring that board's approval.

The pay raises were reviewed last week by a committee of NCSU's board of trustees, Oblinger said.

Easley's raise caught the eye of some NCSU faculty members. The Faculty Senate will discuss it next month, said Chairman Jim Martin.

"I've had many concerns about the salary issue," he said during Tuesday's meeting. "This is an issue of concern."

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Stewart taps Democratic party in House bid

By Mike Hixenbaugh
Rocky Mount Telegram

Tuesday, August 26, 2008

As the Democratic National Convention takes place more than 1,700 miles away, Randy Stewart — through donations and fundraisers — is firmly tying himself to the party ticket in his race for the N.C. House.

Stewart, who is vying with Republican Rocky Mount Councilman W.B. Bullock to replace N.C. Rep. Bill Daughtridge, R-Nash, has contributed more than $23,000 to Democratic candidates and the party since 1993, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Earlier this year, he donated $1,000 to Democrat Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

Stewart will continue his support for the party tonight when he welcomes Bev Perdue at his Rocky Mount home and leads a local effort to raise funds for her Democratic campaign to become governor.

"I think she has the experience that is necessary to be our next governor," Stewart said of Perdue. "She has vast experience in the legislature in being an effective lawmaker, and I think she has some strong administrative skills."

Stewart also said he identifies with Perdue’s pledge to restore local economies in the eastern part of the state.

It’s not uncommon for statewide candidates to join forces with the gubernatorial candidate at the top of the party ticket. However, it is far less common for North Carolina Democrats to tie themselves to the presidential nominee, East Carolina University political science professor Peter Francia said.

Although Stewart has not formally endorsed Obama, he did donate to the campaign during the primary race and has since said he was impressed with the U.S. senator from Illinois when they met at a campaign rally in Greenville.

"Typically, Democratic candidates running for state office in North Carolina have shied from being seen with the nominee on the national ticket," Francia said. "The national party tends to be considered more liberal than the North Carolina Democratic Party. So that puts some Democrats in the uncomfortable position that, if they align too closely with the nominee on the national level, the Republican Party might tag them as being too liberal as well."

Although the majority of the state’s elected officials are Democrats, North Carolina has not voted for a Democrat for president in more than three decades. That’s because “North Carolina Democrats are not the same as Democrats” from other parts of the nation, Francia said.

Perdue formally endorsed Obama during the primary but has since backed off from supporting him. She has not appeared at any of his campaign stops in the state.

"It’s really a fine line the candidates have to walk," Francia said.

It’s unclear, however, if being linked to Obama would hurt or help Stewart’s chances of winning against Bullock in November, Francia added.

"I haven’t given that stuff too much thought," Stewart said. "I’ve been busy working on my own campaign. We came out of the primary with a great deal of momentum, and we hope to keep that going."

Although he has been active in the Republican Party, Bullock has not made any political contributions, according to records. Bullock has endorsed Republican John McCain for president.