THE DAILY CLIPS

September 19, 2011

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Two new trustees were appointed this week for East Carolina University, bringing the Board of Trustees to its full 13 members.

Edwin Clark of Greenville and Robert “Bobby” Owens of Manteo were appointed by Gov. Beverly Perdue to fill two remaining seats, the governor’s office announced on Wednesday.

Of the four seats opened by expiring terms in the spring, two were filled in July by the University of North Carolina Board of Governors, which elected medical administrator Deborah Davis of Virginia and attorney Kieran Shanahan of Raleigh, both ECU alumni. Both Clark and Owens said they were “very excited” to join the other new trustees at the next week’s meeting on Friday.

“Our family business has been very involved and we’re very passionate about East Carolina University and eastern North Carolina,” said Clark, executive vice president of Wilco-Hess.

An ECU alumnus, Clark graduated with a business degree in 1979.

“My reason for wanting to be a trustee is my love of ECU and watching it grow,” said Owens, chairman of the board for the Outer Banks Hospital. He also is a past board member of University Health Systems, which oversees the Outer Banks Hospital and Pitt County Memorial Hospital as well as several other medical facilities.

“ECU is fortunate to have such excellent and accomplished appointees,” Chancellor Steve Ballard said. “Mr. Owens has provided long service to the hospital board and fully understands the challenges of the east. Mr. Clark has been positively involved with ECU for many years and will help us advance our partnerships in the community and with the business community.”

Clark started Trade Oil Company with his father-in-law Walter Williams in 1984, building the company to more than 100 gas and convenience stations under the name Trade Mart before merging with Wilco-Hess in 2005.

He also is a licensed general contractor and real estate broker.
Now retired from the family restaurant business, Owens has served on numerous governing bodies.

Such bodies include work on the state utilities commission and the Dare County Commissioners for more than 20 years, 13 of which he served as chairman. After serving in the Coast Guard, Owens came to ECU under the GI Bill. However, he did not finish, a fact he readily acknowledges.

“I did not graduate, but I love it just the same,” Owens said, adding he recognizes the importance of a college degree.

The trustees seated in July elected member Bob Lucas as chairman and Carol Mabe as vice chairwoman.

Outgoing board members were David Brody, David Redwine, Robert Greczyn and William Bodenhamer.

The ECU Board of Trustees consists of four members that are appointed by the governor and eight others elected by the UNC system Board of Governors. Terms are four years. The student body president is an ex-officio voting member for his or her year in office.

Contact Jackie Drake at jdrake@reflector.com or 252-329-9567.
Local talent to perform on TV
By Lynsey Horn
The Daily Reflector
Monday, September 19, 2011

Tonight’s premiere of an NBC singing competition will feature a local talent. Christie Dashiell grew up in eastern North Carolina and is the daughter of Carroll V. Dashiell Jr., director of jazz studies at East Carolina University.

She is a 2011 graduate of Howard University and is headed straight to television with her college a cappella group, Afro-Blue. The group is one of 16 from across the country that will be competing on the NBC’s “The Sing-Off” for the grand prize of $200,000 and a Sony Music recording contract.

Carroll Dashiell said his daughter has been involved in music much of her life, as well as her three siblings who are pursuing degrees and careers in music and performance. “She is gifted, but it is also due to a lot of work,” he said. “Her mother and I are very proud.”

Christie’s undergraduate degree is in jazz studies. After “The Sing-Off,” she will be attending the Manhattan School of Music with a scholarship.

According to the Howard University website, Afro-Blue is a musical ensemble with 10 members who are all music majors. The group has won two awards from DownBeat Magazine and performed in several notable locations including the Smithsonian Institute and the Library of Congress. The group’s biography on NBC.com calls Afro-Blue “a fun-loving jazz/pop a cappella ensemble” and says the group has “plenty of soul, and all 10 members meld together quite nicely.”

The group started as a class in 2002, and the current members of the group have been singing together since 2009.

The third season of The Sing-Off premieres at 8 tonight. The show will be two hours long each week and is hosted by multi-platinum recording artist Nick Lachey.

Groups will perform for three celebrity judges: singer/songwriter Sara Bareilles, Ben Folds of the alternative rock group Ben Folds Five, and Shawn Stockman of the R&B group Boyz II Men.

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Letter: Red Cross volunteers thanked
Saturday, September 17, 2011

Thank you to all the wonderful volunteers of the American Red Cross. Because of your dedication and tireless efforts over the past weeks, the Red Cross was able to provide shelter and food to countless families.

To the shelter managers who worked shifts of more than 24 hours to give comfort to thousands; the ERV drivers who delivered hot meals, water and supplies over the 2,000 square miles of Pitt County and beyond, day in and day out; the office volunteers and case workers who answered thousands of phone calls for two weeks straight; the ECU students and community volunteers who worked telethons, slept in shelters and rode on ERVs delivering supplies; and to the small handful who have volunteered over 21 straight days, 10 and 12 hours per day, doing whatever needed to be done, we can’t do it without any of you and can never express how thankful we are for all that you do.

To our partner agencies like the Salvation Army and Baptist Men, thank you for allowing us to work alongside you to help our neighbors in need, fulfilling a common mission.

Thank you to the citizens, media outlets, and businesses of eastern North Carolina and Pitt County for your support in allowing the Red Cross to respond to our neighbors in times of need.
We will always be humbled by your amazing response.

SUMMER WOODARD
Executive Director
Pitt County American Red Cross
A village in Guatemala now has safe drinking water thanks to a class gift from May graduates of the East Carolina University College of Nursing.

Kaitlyn Whitlock of Raleigh, president of the spring 2011 class, said the well, which was expected to take up to one year to build, was completed in three months. ECU is recognized with a plaque at the well site. Whitlock hopes to commemorate the class gift in the College of Nursing, too.

Students raised $5,000 to pay for the well through Living Water International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing clean drinking water to those in need.

According to a report from the organization, the community had been dependent on an unprotected hand-dug well, and some of its 150 residents suffered from cholera and dysentery. The new 35-meter well will provide safe drinking water for residents who make a living by farming, ranching or teaching at a nearby school. During the well’s construction, community members helped by donating materials, making lunch or providing overnight security.

“Seeing pictures of the grateful faces of those affected by this project was priceless,” Whitlock said. “I’m so glad our class was able to do something that will be so meaningful for the health and well-being of an entire community.

Each year, ECU seniors get to decide where to focus their class gift. This year, the students chose an international effort for the first time. The gift was presented during convocation.

The effort extended beyond class members, as staff, faculty and family members gave, too. Students raised money in a variety of ways including selling Valentine’s Day care packages for parents to send to their nursing students.
For several years, Dr. Kim Larson, assistant professor of nursing, has led summer study abroad classes to Guatemala where students have seen needs up close by working in health clinics, schools and nutrition centers in the Mayan community. This year, Larson and nine undergraduate nursing students, two psychology, two biology and four public health graduate students worked in Guatemala from May 22 to June 10.

“Students always say ’I wish I could do more.’ Now I can say, ‘You have,’ ” Larson said. “The well will bring safe drinking water to hundreds of families, especially young children who are the most vulnerable to adverse consequences of unsafe water and inadequate hygiene related to an insufficient water source. The students know that the well will do more for the health of the community than dozens of nursing students helping out at the nutrition center. They see that as a real community service.”

Since 2001, Living Water International reports it has completed approximately 150 water projects in Guatemala.

**Forum on student learning assessment**
Grades don’t tell the whole story.

That fundamental principle, said top academic officials at East Carolina University, is driving a push to improve how faculty and staff assess student learning.

Effective assessment of student learning goes hand-in-hand with demonstrating accountability to a diverse audience deeply invested in how well the university meets student-learning outcomes, said David Weismiller, associate provost for Institutional Planning, Assessment and Research. He said the university is accountable to students, parents and faculty as well as the federal government, which contributes billions of dollars toward higher education.

Accountability also plays a role in whether the university receives reaffirmation of accreditation from SACS, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. ECU’s next SACS reaffirmation visit is scheduled for 2013.

While reaffirmation of accreditation is critical, Weismiller said he expects faculty and staff at ECU will “set the bar higher for student success on our own, not just to meet external standards.”

“We should do this because we care, not because somebody’s coming to visit,” he said.

Setting the bar higher is at the center of an upcoming conversation on student-learning assessment — ECU Assessment Day, scheduled for 9 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Friday at the East Carolina Heart Institute. Assessment Day features, among others, Belle Wheelan, president of the SACS Commission on College.

Wheelan is the first African American and the first woman to serve as SACS president. Her 30-year career includes roles in faculty, student services and campus administration.
as provost and college president. She holds a doctoral degree in educational administration from the University of Texas at Austin, a master’s in developmental education psychology from Louisiana State University and a bachelor’s degree from Trinity University in Texas.

Wheelan also will speak on assessment and accreditation at a meeting of the ECU Board of Trustees that day.

ECU Provost Marilyn Sheerer said that assessment “has always been a critical part of the academic environment. With today’s emphasis on accountability in the academy and the ever-increasing demand for use of assessment results in improving the learning environment, the Assessment Day event is one of utmost importance to us all.”

The university is striving toward what Weismiller terms a “mature assessment system,” which moves beyond acquisition of data. “Mature assessment is when we have the conversation about what the data means, what has been successful and how we take this information forward and use it to inform program decisions,” he said.

ECU has been focusing a concerted effort on assessment since about 2007, Weismiller said. Meetings with faculty identified a desire to continue the conversation, which led to development of the Assessment Day forum.

The forum will include presentations by assessment leaders on a national and university level, as well as examination of best practices at ECU through poster presentations and peer discussion. Faculty and staff can learn from experts and from each other, sharing best practices and gathering ideas from what has worked in other ECU units.

“Everything we do at East Carolina University should be about student success,” Weismiller said.

An A-minus or B-plus cannot adequately express student success. The grade does not show how well a student has learned to apply critical thinking, collaborate within a group or succeed in a leadership role. For that reason, assessment of student learning at East Carolina University extends well beyond a letter grade, Weismiller said. It is an ongoing process in which faculty and staff consider best practices on how to obtain, evaluate and incorporate student-learning data into decisions that improve student learning, he said.

Sheerer said that the focus of Assessment Day “will be on sharing — on understanding how we use data and are making changes in response to the evidence relative to student learning and learning outcomes.

**Literary Homecoming begins Friday**

ECU will honor the region’s literary traditions Friday and Saturday with the eighth annual Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, presented by Joyner Library and the North Carolina Literary Review. The event will offer workshops and panel presentations.
This year’s theme, “Rewriting Nature: Impacting Change in the Environment,” will focus on “human encounters with the environment as well as the effect that nature has on us, including our personal responses to and philosophical interpretations of nature,” according to Literary Homecoming organizers.

The Literary Homecoming will kick off Friday with the presentation of the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration to Bland Simpson, a professor in the creative writing program at UNC-Chapel Hill, for his significant influence upon the literature of North Carolina, his contribution to musical theatre, and his unfailing support of the coastal region of the state. The presentation to Simpson will include tributes by Jerry Leath Mills and music by Don Dixon and Marti Jones.

Award-winning author Ron Rash will deliver the keynote address at 3:15 p.m. Saturday. Author of “One Foot in Eden,” “Saints at the River” and “Serena,” his fiction and poetry are centered on the Appalachian region where his family has lived since the mid-18th century.

“As NCLR celebrates publishing our 20th issue, we are excited to partner with the Literary Homecoming and bring North Carolina writers from our issues’ pages to ECU,” said Margaret D. Bauer, Rives chairwoman of Southern Literature and editor of the North Carolina Literary Review.

Other presenters include Zelda Lockhart of Hillsborough, author of “Fifth Born” and “Cold Running Creek” and Saturday lunch speaker; David Gessner, a UNC-Wilmington English faculty member and editor of the national literary journal Ecotone; and poet and recipient of the North Carolina Award for literature Gerald Barrax, a retired creative writing professor at NCSU.

All events, except for Saturday’s luncheon — which costs $15 — are free and open to the public. For more information, visit the homecoming online at www.ecu.edu/lithomecoming, call 328-6514, or email lithomecoming@ecu.edu.

Upcoming event:
- Tuesday: Roundtable discussion of safety in nanoscience, “An Ounce of Prevention: Developing Safe Nanomaterials for Commercial Use,” 5-8 p.m., East Carolina Heart Institute. For more information or to register, visit http://roundtableseptember.eventbrite.com/.
Midwives achieve respect in medical field
By KJ Williams
The Daily Reflector
Sunday, September 18, 2011

Midwives say they "catch" the baby. It's the mother who delivers.

“We don’t like to say we deliver because that dis-empowers the woman,” said Becky Bagley, director of the nurse-midwifery program at East Carolina University’s College of Nursing.

Once relegated to history books after doctors began using anesthesia, moving births out of the home and into the hospital, midwives reappeared in the 1960s.

“Women started to say, ‘Wait a minute. I don’t want to be strapped down to have my baby. I don’t even want to go to the hospital,’” Bagley said.

These women demanded the option of more natural techniques.
The popularity of the Lamaze method developed in the 1950s by Dr. Fernand Lamaze also spurred interest.

“Women were wanting to do the more natural thing, and midwives certainly helped with that,” Bagley said. “It’s a more personalized care generally. It tends to be more family centered and it’s just because we have more time.”

Today’s nurse-midwives have achieved more respect in the medical field, several midwives in Greenville said, as perceptions have changed.
The master’s of science program at ECU is the only one offered in North Carolina and one of about 40 nationally. It started in 1991 and became an online program in 2003. Students attend orientation sessions in person each semester and training includes working at clinical sites.

A nursing degree is required. If the student isn’t already a labor-and-delivery nurse, independent study becomes a component. The program works to recruit North Carolinians in an effort to “home grow” its midwives, Bagley said. Nurse-midwives aren’t just present during births; they do gynecology exams and offer a continuum of care, including primary care.

“The really cool thing about us is we work with women from adolescence through post-menopause,” Bagley said. “This care is just very different. Midwives means with women.”

Midwives spend as much time as possible with a woman while she’s in labor, sometimes attending more than one birth simultaneously, she added. “The idea is you’re going to be there. You may be rubbing her back. You may be helping her breathe. You may be supporting the father of the baby.”

Bagley said no measures are taken to hurry the birth along unless there’s a medical reason. There are natural ways to ease the birth. The woman may sit upright on a birthing ball while rotating her hips. “The gravity helps the baby get in the right position,” Bagley said. “And they’re moving their hips which helps the baby negotiate the twists and turns to get though the pelvis.”

If the woman is more comfortable and the birth is easier, it may delay or eliminate her need for medication, she added. “The worst thing to do is lay in bed.” It’s part of the midwife’s creed to refrain from interventions. Mom is in charge. There’s no judgment about her choices.

For example, epidurals — lower body anesthesia injections — are given whenever they’re requested. Doctors are always available, too.

Grace Puerto of Grimesland had midwives from Greenville OB-GYN for two births at Pitt County Memorial Hospital. “It’s more of a natural approach that a woman needs to be guided through as opposed to treated for,” she said. “It uses science and medicine as a backup when things go wrong and not as a plan for care.”

**Mentoring future doctors**

At ECU, nurse-midwives introduce medical students at the Brody School of Medicine to natural techniques and the midwife method with the patient’s permission. Monica Newby, a certified nurse-midwife, said she and the other two midwives provide the full scope of gynecology services at Brody’s clinical practices ECU Women’s Physicians and the OB-GYN clinic in the Brody Outpatient Center. They are not on 24-hour call, however.
“But our primary goal as faculty is education,” Newby said, including having residents observe the midwives during births at PCMH, the teaching hospital for Brody. “They see the midwifery model in practice. The residents have learned to understand and be respectful of different pathways of managing labor.”

For example, she said, unless it’s medically necessary, intravenous fluids don’t have to be a routine. The same could be said for electronic fetal monitors, which keep women “tethered to the bed” when they need to move around to help the birth along, she said.

“I’m encouraging women to assume the position that works for her at birth,” Newby said. “We’re trying to make sure the baby enters the world safely and there doesn’t have to be a cookie-cutter way of doing that. There can be many avenues as long as it stays safe.”

Rachel Hanford of Greenville said Newby was her midwife.

“I wanted it to be treated like the normal healthy process that it was, which is how midwives look at birth,” said Hanford, a newborn nursery nurse at PCMH, who is studying to become a midwife at Frontier Nursing University. In her early labor, she said Newby, who agreed to take her as a private patient, came to her home where they used natural techniques from sitting in the bathtub to the birthing ball before going to PCMH.

“I had a lot of faith in my midwife because of the relationship we had built,” Hanford said. “I felt important. I was surrounded by people who cared about me, including my midwife. It gave me strength. It let me know I could do what I was doing.”

Bagley worked in private practice at Greenville OB-GYN before she joined the midwifery program. Along with the other faculty, she continues to attend births twice a month at PCMH.

Private-practice midwives
Greenville OB-GYN offers the only full-scope midwifery program in the city, where one of three midwives is always on call to attend births. Pitt County Health Department has midwives who see patients, but they don’t attend births.

Carolyn Green, a midwife since 2004, graduated from the ECU program. She works at Greenville OB-GYN.

Like other midwives interviewed, she emphasized that the woman in labor calls the shots, including requests for epidurals. Natural pain relief methods also are an option. Movement is encouraged, from leaning over the bed, to sitting on a shower chair or birthing ball.
“If a patient is motivated and that’s what they want to do,” Green said. “We’ve seen women do an awesome job at it. We’re there to support them and help them as is the labor-and-delivery nurse.”

Green assisted at the birth of Denise Walsh’s two daughters. During labor, soothing music was played and Walsh got massages and sat on the birthing ball.

“I actually went natural with both children,” the Greenville mother said. “I really depended on the support of the midwives. The pain is a natural pain, it’s not your body telling you something’s wrong, so for me that helped me get through that difficult time,” she said.

Allison O’Neal of Washington, N.C., another of Green’s patients, said the midwife approach worked for her. “I just really enjoyed the holistic approach and the care that I received during that time.”

ECU’s Bagley, who continues to attend births, said she encourages the mother and the family to be involved with the process.

“I sometimes even help her deliver her own baby by putting her hands on the baby and bringing it up to her tummy. It’s beautiful when they do that.”

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Midwifery: Putting skills into action
By K.j. Williams
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Sunday, September 18, 2011

The class of midwifery students blows up pink balloons with a pingpong ball nestled inside.

Then, they start pressing down on it, simulating contractions, trying to expel that ball. The balloon is the uterus. The ball is the baby.
One student’s balloon bursts. “OK. My baby’s coming. Call the doctor. I mean, call the midwife,” jokes Ifeoma Ilo of Fayetteville.

This hands-on class has large doses of demonstrations for the nurses, who are enrolled in a master’s program to become nurse-midwives at East Carolina University’s College of Nursing.

Guest speaker Ann Tumblin of Apex likes to use visuals. She also likes plenty of participation. Tumblin is a Lamaze trainer, and a doula, a woman who provides support for a woman during labor.

During the August orientation class, the students also wore signs labeled with the names of the various hormones that activate during labor. They pass along a string as each hormone goes into action to the person labeled with the next hormone to get into gear.

They’re spinning a hormonal web. Tumblin tells them that without medication, the woman’s body will produce endorphins, nature’s narcotic, to ease labor. “It puts her into La-La Land,” she said.
To name a few in nonmedical terms: There are hormones that tell her to “wake-up and push.” A “mothering” hormone for milk. A “love” hormone that bonds her to her baby. During labor, Tumblin said the midwives should help the woman move so her baby will move, too. If she rocks on her hands and knees, the baby’s head will rotate. If the woman has intravenous fluids, midwives can try the “passive pelvic rock.”

Tumblin had different students either lie on a table or on the floor as she demonstrated techniques and massages.

Janet Intini, 51, a labor-and-delivery nurse at Nash Health Care in Rocky Mount, said she’ll graduate in May. “I’ve wanted to do this probably for 25 years but I waited to raise my kids.”

A nurse-midwife career appeals to Intini because she said she wants to “support them through the whole childbearing experience, especially when it’s natural.” She already uses some of the techniques at work.

Bethany Smith, 25, a labor-and-delivery nurse in Charleston, S.C., will graduate from ECU next year. She loves her job, and studying midwifery was an extension of that. “I wanted to be responsible for my patients,” she said. “I wanted to develop a deeper relationship with my patients.”

Smith said midwives can help lower the statistics for maternal and infant mortality. “We fill a void. I feel that we are the guardians of normal, low-risk pregnancy and delivery. And we are able to help women avoid a lot of complications.”

Melissa Hatter, 26, also graduates in 2012. A labor-and-delivery nurse in Alabama, she said people often aren’t aware that midwives are available. “In some cases, people don’t even know they’re legal.”

Midwives could improve women’s health, a real need in Alabama, which has among the worst maternal outcomes in the country, Hatter said. “Midwives are better equipped to handle education.”
Dr. Jana Pressler

**Pressler to direct grad programs in ECU’s College of Nursing**
Monday, September 19, 2011
WorkWeek

Dr. Jana Pressler has joined the East Carolina University College of Nursing as associate dean for graduate programs.

Pressler she will provide leadership for the master’s and doctoral nursing programs. Her responsibilities include planning, development, implementation and evaluation of the graduate programs.

Pressler comes to ECU from the University of Oklahoma, where she was director of the doctor of nursing practice Health Resources and Services Administration grant. She also served as director of the Ph.D. program and assistant dean for research and evidence-based practice.

“We are excited to have Dr. Pressler join our College of Nursing. Her expertise in graduate education will be a valuable asset to our college as we continue to build our MSN and PhD programs and plan for a DNP program in the future,” Sylvia Brown, dean of the college, said.

Pressler earned her doctoral degree from Case Western Reserve University, postdoctoral fellowship from the University of Rochester, and her pediatric nurse practitioner certificate and master of arts degree from the University of Iowa.

The ECU College of Nursing has an enrollment of about 1,200 students in baccalaureate, master’s and doctoral nursing programs. It is the largest producer of new nursing graduates in the state and offers the only nurse midwifery plan of study and alternate entry MSN option for non-nursing bachelor degree holders in the state.
Donna Phillips selected to serve on East Carolina University Board of Visitors
Monday, September 19, 2011
WorkWeek

Donna Phillips, senior economic developer and manager for the North Carolina Department of Commerce’s recruitment efforts for the Eastern region, has been named to the East Carolina University Board of Visitors.

Phillips earned a bachelor’s of science in business administration in 1991 from ECU, graduating cum laude, and earned a master’s degree in business administration in 1994 from ECU. She is working to become a certified economic developer (CEcD) and serves as a volunteer on many boards and committees, including the Small Business Technology Development Center advisory board and the ECU industrial technology program advisory board.

She has been in her role as senior economic developer and manager with the Department of Commerce since 2004. From 1999 to 2004, Phillips served as commerce’s existing industry specialist for the Eastern Region. Previous experience include assistant director for Duplin County Economic Development and marketing consultant for the Wayne County Chamber of Commerce and Wayne County Economic Development Alliance.
Phillips is a native of Murfreesboro and received an associate of science in business administration, magna cum laude, from Chowan College before attending ECU. She is a member of the Board of Visitors for Chowan University and was selected as the 2009 Chowan University Distinguished Alumni.

Phillips also received the 2001 Gov. James E. Holshouser Professional Development Scholarship to the Economic Development Institute for general funding support. Other recognition include being selected as the 2002 Young Careerist of the Year for the Greenville-Pitt County Business and Professional Women and the N.C. Department of Commerce Excellence Award for “Creativity” in April 2008. She also was selected by the ECU College of Business as Distinguished Alumni feature for Stocknotes Publication in 2009.
Local Allstate agent Derek Perry presented East Carolina University a check for $6,100 during halftime of the ECU-Virginia Tech football game at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium as part of Allstate’s “Good Hands” Field Goal Net donation program.

Since 2008, Allstate has supported the East Carolina University general scholarship fund with donations as part of the field goal net program, one of the most visible programs in college football. During home games at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium, Allstate has donated $300 for each field goal and $100 for each extra point successfully converted by the Pirates.

During the 2010 season, ECU kickers converted 16 field goals and 56 extra points at home games, resulting in a $6,100 donation from Allstate to support student scholarships at the university.

The field goal net program kicked off in 2005 at 30 stadiums and has since expanded.
UNC-CH takes its MBA online

BY ALAN M. WOLF - Correspondent

D'Andre Payne and Erik Sneed don't mind being guinea pigs.

They're among the small crop of students enrolled in a new online MBA program started this summer by UNC-Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School. MBA@UNC is one of the first online-only business degree programs started by a highly ranked university.

The effort is a bold bet by the school that an online degree will carry the same prestige and allow it to expand its share of the global executive education market.

The 19 students, for their part, are counting on UNC-CH's commitment to proving that an online-only MBA is ready for prime time. And they're hoping UNC-CH's brand will increase acceptance and help overcome any stigma attached to an online degree.

"There's always some nervousness, being the first," said Erik Sneed, a project manager for Harrah's Cherokee casino in western North Carolina. "But there's also a thrill being part of the first group."
Sneed wanted an MBA from a prestigious school like Kenan-Flagler, but he also needed a program that fit with the demands of his job. He oversees the casino's $650 million expansion and couldn't make constant trips to a campus for evening or weekend classes.

One big issue has been time management. In addition to working six days a week and spending time with his family, he now spends several hours a day with online classes, web-based discussions with fellow students, homework and more.

"It's meant some late nights and early mornings," Sneed said. "It's just the reality of an academically rigorous program. You're not just going on a computer and printing out a degree."

**Not at Duke**

Not everyone is convinced an online degree is the future of business-school education, even for far-flung, time-crunch corporate climbers.

Duke University's Fuqua School of Business has had an online component to its global executive MBA program since the late 1990s. But there are no plans to experiment with an online-only degree, said Mary Frances Luce, senior associate dean for faculty.

"There's something very powerful about being in a classroom with students," Luce said. "It has a very different feeling than when you're just using technology. You notice nonverbal clues. If students look confused, you naturally adjust the pace of teaching."

Even as technology continues to improve, "I don't see a way it replaces the face to face," she added.

UNC-CH officials will incorporate two long weekends of in-person time in Chapel Hill to augment the online aspects of its program.

The inaugural class didn't get a price break - the two-year program costs $89,000. But the first group of students does get a few perks, including extra attention and interaction to make sure there aren't any major kinks, said Kenan-Flagler associate dean Douglas Shackelford.

"It's kind of scary when you launch a new venture," Shackelford said. "The first week that we went online, I was terrified I would get an email any minute saying it crashed the Internet. The technology has been flawless to date, which is good."

**Idea could spread**
Shackelford is confident that UNC-CH's success will spur rival schools to embrace similar programs.

"I can't go anywhere in the academic world and corporate world without someone asking me how it's going," he said. "Ultimately, the test is whether the students gain the knowledge they need. If they do, the program is going to explode and a lot of schools are going to follow us."

Program officials expect to add more students gradually, but will reach a limit in terms of maintaining quality, Shackelford said. The next class starting in October will have 34 students.

"We're not worried about the erosion of the brand," he added. "We know how to do an MBA education."

For Payne, who lives in Cary and works for a Triangle pharmaceutical development company, the program offered a chance to be part of a "ground-breaking experience." He appreciates the flexibility that allows him to access some parts of the program on his own schedule.

The students use webcams and headsets during live sessions to communicate with each other and their professors. There are sessions that students can access on their own schedules.

Desktop-sharing software allows students to work on projects together in real time. The technology is based on platforms similar to social media networks such as Facebook, and it's very user-friendly, Payne said.

"It's just as if we were sitting around a coffee table together, staring at the same computer," Payne said. "It doesn't really feel like I'm in an online program because I interact with other students so frequently. We haven't had any hiccups."

How MBA@UNC stacks up

**Length:** About 2 years - versus 21 months for a full-time MBA, and 20 months for a weekend MBA.

**Cost:** $89,000 - versus about $49,000 for a full-time MBA for N.C. residents, and $72,500 for an evening MBA.

**Classes:** All online, with a three-day weekend residency at the end of each quarter. Students are required to attend at least two.
UNC-Chapel Hill is probing academic "irregularities" in its African and Afro-American studies department, targeting independent study classes after data released to The News & Observer this week showed that football players accounted for more than 20 percent of class enrollments over the past five years.

Karen Gil, dean of UNC-Chapel Hill's College of Arts and Sciences, which includes the African studies department, said in a faculty newspaper published Wednesday that the college would review "policies and practices" collegewide for independent studies and "directed readings" courses. A university spokeswoman, Nancy Davis, confirmed the independent study courses within the department are among the possible irregularities officials have found.

University officials have said the possible irregularities involve nonathletes as well. Gil, Chancellor Holden Thorp and other officials have declined numerous requests to explain the irregularities.

Independent study classes typically allow a student to work one-on-one with a professor to develop a lengthy term paper in a narrow subject area. Directed readings courses often require the same effort, but are tied to a specific set of readings required by the professor.

There is no classroom time for such courses, which makes them vulnerable to academic fraud. In 2006, The New York Times reported that Auburn University's sociology department chairman was allowing football players to take independent-study-style classes that required little or no work, boosting their grade point averages and helping them maintain their eligibility on the field.

John Nichols, co-chairman of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, a reform group of faculty at colleges with big-time sports programs, said the number of student athlete enrollments raises a red flag that the university needs to dig into.

"Not knowing the local situation, it sounds like the academic side of the house is responding in an appropriate fashion to a potentially serious problem," said Nichols, a Penn State University professor.
African Studies

The African Studies Department has come under scrutiny in the wake of the NCAA's investigation of academic misconduct and impermissible benefits in UNC-CH's football program. The department's chairman resigned after a series of troublesome disclosures about two players taking African studies classes, and the hiring of a sports agent to teach a summer class.

University records show the African Studies Department offered 76 independent study undergraduate classes over the past five years. Of 327 enrollments in those classes, football players accounted for 68, or 21 percent. Davis said there was one men's basketball player, at the time a senior, who took an independent study in that department during that period.

Davis said university officials can not say whether that percentage is problematic.

Gil said in the faculty report that she wants administrators to make recommendations as to what students should be expected to produce for such courses and how much contact during a semester they should have with professors or teaching assistants. She also wants them to offer guidance as to what kinds of conditions need to be set for courses that involve lectures and seminars that are not delivered in the standard classroom format, and what steps should be taken to convert directed readings courses to permanent courses.

Thorp delivered similar remarks to faculty members at their regular council meeting Friday.

The moves are the latest development related to the long-running NCAA investigation. Last season, 14 players missed at least one game, and seven sat out the entire 2010 season in connection with the probe.

In June, the NCAA notified UNC-CH of nine major violations, much of which pertain to a former assistant coach receiving money from a sports agent and football players receiving trips and other perks from agents or their go-betweens. UNC-CH has until Monday to respond to the allegations and is scheduled to appear Oct. 28 before the NCAA's Committee on Infractions.

Plagiarism

Since the notice of allegations, Thorp has fired football coach Butch Davis and accepted the early retirement of athletic director Dick Baddour. But
more problems have emerged for the university that speak directly to its academic integrity.

Former football player Michael McAdoo, in a bid to get reinstated to the team, made public a paper he wrote for one African Studies class and rival N.C. State University fans charged that the paper was heavily plagiarized. The N&O later confirmed the plagiarism and reported that the professor, Julius Nyang'oro, had missed it.

A transcript for another banned football player, Marvin Austin, showed that he had been allowed as an incoming freshman to take an upper-level African Studies class taught by Nyang'oro - who was also the department's longtime chairman - before taking a slate of introductory courses that included a remedial writing class. Nyang'oro resigned from the chairmanship two weeks ago after The N&O reported the sports agent hiring. Nyang'oro has declined numerous interview requests.

This week, NCAA officials visited the campus, but neither they nor UNC-CH officials would say why they were there.

'Directed readings'

Anecdotal evidence shows the department is popular with football and men's basketball players, but only a handful of them identify it as their major.

Two other majors - communications and exercise and sports science - are much more popular with student athletes.

Davis said of the 112 players on this season's football team, a third of them - 37 - have taken more than one course in the department, and 12 have taken at least three.

Nyang'oro is one of 16 professors who taught independent study classes within the department. It's unclear who taught the independent study classes that are being checked for irregularities, what was required of the students who took them, or what grades the students received.

It's also unclear how many "directed readings" classes were offered by the department. UNC-CH also has had difficulty producing syllabuses of some upper-level classes Nyang'oro taught, including the intermediate Swahili class that got McAdoo in trouble. University officials so far have been unable to confirm when and where that class was held. That class is not typically an independent study course.

Staff writer Ken Tysiac and news researcher David Raynor contributed to this report.

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UNC may offer self-imposed sanctions

BY KEN TYSIAC - Staff Writer

University of North Carolina officials and lawyers face a delicate balancing act as an important NCAA deadline approaches.

UNC's response to NCAA charges of nine major violations is due Monday, 90 days after the NCAA outlined its case against the school in the June 21 Notice of Allegations.

That response is expected to include penalties UNC will impose on itself. Schools facing major violations often self sanction to display penitence and respect for NCAA rules. The Committee on Infractions, which has scheduled a hearing for UNC on Oct. 28 in Indianapolis, can either accept the self-imposed penalties or add to them.

The goal of school administrators, said Florida lawyer Michael Buckner, is to make the self-imposed penalties fit the particular violations without making them more severe than the penalties the Committee on Infractions would impose.

Buckner specializes in college sports law and represents schools in front of the NCAA.

"A school and its legal counsel, they're trying to get that sweet spot," Buckner said. "It's kind of like walking a tight rope."

Sanctions can include a probation period, scholarship reductions, forfeiting past wins and a postseason ban for any number of years. UNC athletic director Dick Baddour would not comment on UNC's response because the NCAA prohibits it, but did say that the school wants to keep players on future teams from being punished.

"I'm on record as saying that my goal is that we as much as possible... minimize the impact on the future, particularly as it relates to the student-athletes," Baddour said.

UNC is preparing its response with the help of two lawyers that specialize in helping schools that are investigated by the NCAA. Rick Evrard of Bond, Schoeneck & King in Overland Park, Kan., is a former NCAA enforcement representative who has worked with the school virtually since the beginning of the case.
William King of Lightfoot, Franklin and White in Birmingham, Ala., was added more recently and has represented schools on NCAA compliance issues for the past 10 years.

"They have direct experience with the enforcement staff and the Committee on Infractions, so they have experience that we just don't have," Baddour said.

"They bring their talent and skills in helping you prepare the document. But the document...has truly been a team effort. It comes from terrific work from the U's legal staff as well as the lawyers we've used from outside as well as the department of athletics."

**Appropriate penalties**

The NCAA has charged North Carolina with major violations in an investigation of impermissible benefits and academic misconduct that began 15 months ago.

Fourteen players missed at least one game last season, and seven missed the entire season. Three - Greg Little, Robert Quinn and Michael McAdoo - were permanently banned by the NCAA, and Marvin Austin's violations were considered so severe that UNC didn't even try to get him reinstated.

Buckner is not working on the UNC case, but said he is familiar enough to discuss an appropriate response.

He said penalties would have to include a significant probation period. Two to three years would be appropriate, Buckner said, adding that the school might self impose two years and then hope that the Committee on Infractions wouldn't add a third year.

Several scholarship reductions over a period of two years also would be in order, Buckner said. He said vacating games or seasons in which UNC used ineligible players could be appropriate.

Buckner expects UNC officials, based on a "failure to monitor" charge levied by the NCAA, to describe improvements in systems that the school has put in place to comply with NCAA rules.

Those could include closer monitoring of high-profile athletes and social media, and more intensive background checks for employees.

**Bowl ban?**

Buckner wasn't sure whether UNC's transgressions were serious enough to merit withdrawing from a bowl game for a year.
"It would be a toss-up whether they [UNC] would want to impose a postseason ban," Buckner said.

According to Buckner, schools whose teams seem unlikely to reach the postseason in the current season often impose a one-year ban as a penalty that looks substantial but would be essentially meaningless.

But the Tar Heels, who are 2-0 and coming off a win over Rutgers, seem on their way to becoming bowl eligible this fall. The evidence points to the Tar Heels hoping to avoid a bowl ban.

UNC avoided the most serious NCAA charge of lack of institutional control. Baddour said UNC also hopes the NCAA will take into account the school's cooperation and voluntarily withholding players from competition last season when their eligibility was in question.

"As you develop your response to the NCAA violations, our approach has been to look at it from as balanced a position as possible," Baddour said. "And by balanced I mean what happened in the past, what did you do as an institution when you discovered that there were violations and how you treated them, and that would certainly include that we held some players out."

Buckner said changes in the football staff at UNC also could cause the Committee on Infractions to look more favorably on the school. Coach Butch Davis was fired in July, and associate head coach John Blake resigned in September of 2010.

The NCAA charged Blake with partnering with the late sports agent Gary Wichard to recruit college players to Wichard's agency. Davis was not personally cited by the NCAA, and UNC chancellor Holden Thorp has said he didn't fire Davis in July in an attempt to soften the NCAA's sanctions.

Despite all of UNC's meticulous planning and the work of numerous lawyers, Buckner said it's impossible to predict for certain how the Committee on Infractions will react.

At times, Buckner said, information comes out during the committee's hearing that can affect the penalty that's handed down. He also said it's common for the Committee on Infractions to add some penalty to what's self imposed, because schools usually tailor their punishments to reflect the smallest amount of severity that the NCAA will accept.

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Tillis: Let’s find way to keep Teaching Fellows

House Speaker Thom Tillis said lawmakers are rethinking their decision to phase out funding for the N.C. Teaching Fellows Program.

“I have heard from enough teachers and enough superintendents and enough advocates that I am convinced that we have got to find a way to bridge it back,” Tillis said a town hall meeting last week in Wilmington.

“I am convinced it's a good program,” he said.

Faced with a $2.5 billion budget shortfall, the legislature began the first step toward phasing out the 25-year old program that offers partial scholarships to bright high school students if they agree to teach four years in North Carolina schools.

The budget eliminates funding for next year's freshman class of scholars but also includes language for eventually phasing the program out.

But even as they were cutting it, a number of GOP lawmakers expressed ambivalence about the cuts, and expressed some hope that they might find money to reinstate the cuts when the legislature meets in its short session next May.

Tillis suggested that the legislature may not have gotten that cut right.

“I don't believe when you are talking about a $20 billion budget and a state that has some 600,000 employees that you are going to get it all right,” Tillis said.

Tillis said he has asked his staff to look at “creative ways” to keep the funding going for next year's crop of Teaching Fellow freshmen class.
ACC grows to 14 with addition of Syracuse, Pittsburgh

BY KEN TYSIAC - Staff Writer

Pittsburgh and Syracuse are leaving the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference in a move that ACC Commissioner John Swofford said will strengthen the conference as its membership grows to 14 schools.

Big East bylaws call for Pittsburgh and Syracuse each to pay a $5 million exit fee and to wait 27 months before departing.

In a Sunday morning teleconference arranged by the ACC, Pittsburgh Chancellor Mark Nordenberg said his university plans to comply with those bylaws but is open to an earlier, negotiated departure that wouldn't leave Pitt with an extended, lame-duck status in the Big East.

"I would think that in the weeks ahead, everyone will be looking at the transition period and trying to determine whether the 27-month notice period really serves everyone's best interests," Nordenberg said.

Swofford said the move bridges the ACC's geographic footprint from Maryland to Massachusetts so the conference's reach extends over the entire Eastern Seaboard, from Boston College to Miami.

Adding Pittsburgh and Syracuse also opens up new possibilities for the ACC. Expanding membership by two schools allows the ACC to reopen negotiations with TV rights holder ESPN in a move that Swofford predicted will more than pay for the additional two schools.

The ACC is in the first year of a 12-year contract worth a reported $1.86 billion to the conference.

Getting two more schools in the Northeast also creates the possibility of including New York City's Madison Square Garden - the longtime home of the Big East basketball tournament - as part of the rotation for the ACC men's tournament, Swofford said.

"I don't think there's any question that taking a look at New York and Madison Square Garden would be very appealing for ACC basketball fans," Swofford said, "and more so now with teams in closer proximity and with that being the media center of the world, so to speak. We'd probably be remiss if we didn't think of it in those terms."
The move follows the ACC's addition of Miami and Virginia Tech in 2004 and Boston College in 2005 to expand to 12 members. A question left unanswered is whether ACC presidents ultimately would like to have 16 members in the conference as Big Ten, Pac-12 and SEC expansion have the college athletic world buzzing over the concept of "superconferences."

Swofford said the changing college athletic landscape makes it certain that stronger conferences will continue to be approached by schools hoping to join.

He said the ACC has received inquiries from a double-digit number of schools aspiring to become members, but he declined to name the specific schools.

"We're very comfortable with this 14," he said. "The only thing I would add to that is that we are not philosophically opposed to 16, but for now we are very pleased with this 14. We think it's an excellent group."

Although the Palm Beach Post reported last week that Florida State will establish a committee to assess its long-term conference options, Swofford said he believes the current membership of the ACC is unified.

Last week, ACC presidents unanimously voted to increase the conference's exit fee to about $20 million; it had been about $12 million to $14 million. Swofford acknowledged it's possible the ACC could lose schools, but said he is confident in the commitment the current members have to one another.

"In all of our conversations about this, both individually and collectively, and any conversations I've had with any of our presidents and/or athletic directors, I have never once received any indication of anything other than that they are fully committed to the Atlantic Coast Conference," Swofford said.

Developing a scheduling strategy and evaluating the divisional breakdown of the ACC in football will be one of the many tasks ahead as Pittsburgh and Syracuse prepare to enter.

In football, the Atlantic Division is home to N.C. State, Wake Forest, Clemson, Boston College, Florida State and Maryland. The Coastal Division consists of Duke, North Carolina, Georgia Tech, Miami, Virginia and Virginia Tech.

Swofford said ACC officials haven't yet discussed future options for divisions.
Wake Forest athletic director Ron Wellman said Saturday the conference has talked at length about strengthening the relationship between Wake Forest, Duke, North Carolina and N.C. State from a scheduling standpoint. Before the expansion to 12 members in 2004-05 changed the scheduling format, ACC schools played each conference opponent twice each season in men's basketball and once a year in football. "All four of us were charter members of the conference," Wellman said of the N.C. schools, "and for us to have the opportunity to play a double round-robin in basketball would really excite our fans. And to play everyone in football every year would be wonderful. "Whether that can be achieved or not remains to be seen." Swofford declined to comment on any possible talks with Texas after reports last week that the Big 12 school was considering joining the ACC or the Pac-12, or operating as an independent. One stumbling block for Texas' entry to the ACC could be the newly created Longhorn Network, which is solely devoted to Texas sports. ACC administrators hold sacred the principle of equal revenue sharing among all members and that extends to TV rights. "We really haven't sat down and analyzed how that could be made to work in our particular situation, but the fundamental principle is one that's important to us," Swofford said. "There are rights that are released by our television rights holder at times, but ESPN is so extensive in what they show, there aren't a lot of those rights left." Swofford said Pittsburgh and Syracuse strengthen the rich tradition of academic and athletic success in the ACC. Both schools have been NCAA tournament staples in men's basketball. Pittsburgh has made three consecutive bowl trips, eight in 11 years; Syracuse played in a bowl in 2010 for the first time in six seasons. In the current U.S. News & World Report rankings of universities nationwide, Pittsburgh ranks 58th and Syracuse 62nd. Officials at each school said joining the ACC gives their athletic departments stability.
"This is really a wonderful day for Syracuse," said Chancellor Nancy Cantor. "We believe it's a tremendous opportunity, and the fit academically and athletically is tremendously important to us."

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ACC membership timeline

May 8, 1953: Seven schools - Clemson, Duke, Maryland, North Carolina, N.C. State, South Carolina and Wake Forest - withdraw from the Southern Conference and meet at the Sedgefield Inn near Greensboro to draw up new bylaws. The next month, the bylaws are adopted, and the Atlantic Coast Conference is formed.

December 4, 1953: Conference officials meet again at the Sedgefield Inn and admit Virginia as the league's eighth member.

June 30, 1971: South Carolina becomes the first and only school to resign from the ACC. It leaves to become independent.

April 3, 1978: Georgia Tech, formerly of the Metro Conference, is admitted as the ACC's eighth school.

July 1, 1991: Florida State also leaves the Metro Conference to become ACC's ninth member.

July 1, 2004: Miami and Virginia Tech leave the Big East to become the ACC's 11th and 12th members.

July 1, 2005: Boston College becomes the league's 12th member after accepting the invitation in October, 2003.

Sept. 18, 2011: The ACC announces it will add Pittsburgh and Syracuse as its 13th and 14th members.
When Larry Conrad took over as UNC-Chapel Hill's technology chief more than three years ago, university staffers balked at his proposal to beef up the campus data backbone. The one-gigabit network - 10 to 20 times faster than an average home Internet connection - wasn't exactly slow. And they had little incentive to invest any further.

"They said, 'Well, there's not demand for higher bandwidth,' " said Conrad, the university's vice chancellor for information technology and chief information officer. "We didn't have people beating our doors down with demands for connectivity."

Then Conrad learned how researchers were transferring their data. Bypassing the campus network, faculty employed the "sneakernet," storing information on discs and drives that they'd physically ferry across campus from one office to another.

Since then, his staff has upgraded to a 10-gigabit network, capable of rocketing data along at 10 billion bits every second. The demand for that speed didn't take long to show up.
"We've determined over the summer that's completely turned around," Conrad said. "Researchers are no longer sending graduate students around with stacks of CDs."

Now Conrad - along with colleagues at Duke University, N.C. State University and more than 30 other universities across the country - hopes to spark that same need for speed beyond the campus borders with a project called Gig.U. The partnership aims to accelerate the rollout of next-generation networks by enticing private companies to invest in "test beds" that surround university communities.

And with that investment, partners hope, will come new companies capable of putting ultra-high-speed networks to work.

"What we're saying is, let's make it transparent what communities can do to attract these kinds of businesses, and we'll see if there's a match," said Blair Levin, executive director of Gig.U and a fellow at the Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program.

'Innovator's dilemma'

North Carolina is no stranger to the push for super-fast networks.

When Google announced it would build a one-gigabit infrastructure in select areas across the country, 36 communities in the state, from Wilmington to Asheville, responded.

Constructing such a network is expensive, but Levin said the Google project showed there are ways government can help lower the costs for the private sector, reducing risk and clearing the way for upgrades.

But Levin said there's another reason traditional Internet providers haven't yet shown a willingness to invest in next-generation networks: a lack of demand.

With small improvements in speed, companies and customers can lose sight of big advances in connectivity, leading to the "innovator's dilemma," said Tracy Futhey, Duke's vice president for information technology.

"People get accustomed to technology and services and how they're provided," Futhey said. "There comes a point when incremental improvements seem to be acceptable."

And with large capital investments needed to leap ahead, deployment of next-generation networks can stall. That's why Gig.U is focusing on university communities, where consumers are more likely to clamor for faster service if and when providers offer it.
"The price investment gap is lower because you have higher density, which lowers costs of deployment," Levin said.

It's a sort of chicken and egg problem that Gig.U hopes to help solve. "If America wants to provide leadership in next-generation networks like it did in the first, there needs to be a critical mass of these communities," Levin said.

**If you build it ...**

But there's another reason university communities are ideal targets for high-speed network deployment: They're the ones most likely to spawn creative uses for such technology.

"Hopefully, we're creating a lot of petri dishes where experimentation can take place," said Kevin Davis, an assistant director for information technology at Duke who is working closely with the Gig.U project. "There's that 'Field of Dreams' idea that 'If you build it, they will come.' "

Such applications could, for example, advance cloud computing and storage. Conrad spoke with a doctor who said ultra-high-speed networks could help him diagnose diabetes from his home with high-definition video of a patient's eye.

"Those kinds of things fundamentally change the delivery of medicine in North Carolina," Conrad said. "This is tremendously exciting."

And although Gig.U creators say universities aren't the only places where innovation originates, the surrounding communities make a safe bet for it. "If we want to have innovation, don't ask a 57-year-old like me what will be created. Give the tools of creation to the best and brightest faculty, graduate students, people hanging around Chapel Hill," Levin said. "I have an enormous amount of faith they will invent things."

**Time to act**

Before that happens, Gig.U partners will be busy. Last week, project organizers sent a formal request for information to service providers and other companies to gauge interest and help answer questions about what it will take to roll out next-generation network technology. Then the group will begin gathering proposals for plans to move forward.

Although there's no real timeline for the project, such area technology leaders as Futhey say Gig.U could be an important first step toward making the country more competitive.
"It's a reality that most people who have looked at what's happening around the world recognize - the U.S. is far down on the list of countries with broadband access in general," Futhey said.

Fixing that low ranking, they say, will take a collaborative effort between the public and private sectors to build a foundation for the best bandwidth capability in the world.

"These are difficult times. Every public university in the country is in some form of distress," Conrad said. "But a place like UNC-Chapel Hill didn't get to be the place it is with people deciding to get conservative and hunker down.

"Times of crises in particular are when you need out-of-the-box thinking."
A new report on higher education trends has an international perspective. But because, in the United States, so many decisions on education policy are made at the state level, North Carolinians can and should draw some important lessons.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, based in Paris, affirms that in one sense America still can claim to be the best educated country. It is home to 26 percent of the world's 225 million people whose education extends to the college level, ranking ahead of China and Japan in that category. Yet that figure masks an alarming slippage among the young.

It turns out that higher education is significantly more widespread among people approaching retirement age than for people at the outset of their working lives. According to the OECD, that gives us the dubious distinction of being the only country where - to put it in a nutshell - folks in their late 50s and early 60s are more likely to have attained a higher education credential than folks in their late 20s and early 30s.

The economic benefits of higher education also are underscored in the group's report - for example, someone with a post-high school degree is on track to earn 79 percent more than his or her peer who stood pat with a high school diploma. College grads also are less vulnerable to recession-driven slumps in the job market of the kind with which we're all too familiar.

Yet Americans' readiness for higher education is nothing to crow about, as might be inferred from the disappointing numbers of younger people seeking degrees. High school students perform at only middling levels on proficiency tests, well behind levels in countries such as Finland and South Korea.

These are deep-seated trends that will take wise policies, money and personal motivation to counter. For decision-makers, they pose sharp challenges.

How, for example, can sizable cuts in education budgets - or sharp increases in college costs - be justified at a time when our position in a competitive global economy is shown to be increasingly perilous? That competitiveness
is not an abstract, feel-good goal. It makes the difference in the real-world marketplace for jobs, day in and day out, right here on the ground in our home communities.

North Carolina has taken pride in its university system, from classrooms where undergraduates probe the arts and sciences to laboratories where professors carry out high-stakes research. Its community colleges, with their close ties to industry, have helped keep the state's workforce from being even more severely wracked by the recession. But to shortchange either of those great resources, or the public schools where young people acquire the essential tools for college success, is to yield to mediocrity, both educational and economic.

The pump must be primed, or it will deliver nothing of value. And as a state and society, we will be at risk of a painful, tragic withering.