ECU has to retain more of its students

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, September 24, 2009

A new direction from the University of North Carolina system will force East Carolina University to decrease the number of students who drop out.

UNC President Erskine Bowles said this week that enrollment growth funding, a huge source of revenue for ECU, likely will be tied to retention rates at the state’s public universities in the future.

ECU’s current retention rate of 78.7 falls short of the current UNC General Administration requires rate of 79 percent. Associate Provost Austin Bunch said at a meeting of the academic affairs committee of the ECU Board of Trustees on Thursday at the East Carolina Heart Institute. The full ECU Board of Trustees meets today at 8:30 a.m. in the East Carolina Heart Institute’s conference room.

“Erskine Bowles has said that we will stop growing for growth’s sake but grow in quality,” Bunch said.

The new direction has not been formally adopted as policy by the UNC system, and the retention rate requirements for each university may be shifted before any policy is approved, but ECU’s leaders are not counting on it.

Bunch said that a new retention task force is working on ways to keep the students who are attending ECU at the university including a plan for more tutoring opportunities, better advising practices and more diverse classes for freshmen.

“Those campuses that do not reach retention goals will not be allowed to grow,” said Provost Marilyn Shearer, who got news of the new direction this week in a meeting with Bowles.

Bunch said the retention rate required by UNC General Administration is expected to increase from 79 percent to 81 percent next year and ECU has to be prepared for it.

Enrollment growth funding is a valuable asset to ECU as it increases the size of the student population every year. The school is expected to continue growing and reach 35,000 students in the next decade.

Enrollment is at 27,673 students according to preliminary reports, Bunch said.

The committee also discussed the creation of an honors college at ECU, a move that would be expected to boost retention rates.

The committee agreed to the concept of an honors college and administrators will return with a funding plan at a future meeting.

ECU’s honors program admits students with SAT scores of 1200 or better and a high school GPA of 3.5 or better. ECU students with a GPA of 3.3 are also admitted to the program.

Provost Marilyn Shearer created the honors college planning task force in January.

Officials say a move to an honors college would significantly enhance the university’s capacity to recruit and retain high caliber students and faculty.

The plan would include a new facility to house the honors college as well as a faculty specific to the college,
which would be led by a dean.

An honors college would also produce a new multidisciplinary curriculum and concentrate on community engagement.

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Pirate pride: Show respect for East Carolina's guests

Friday, September 25, 2009

The powerful connection between the East Carolina University football team and its fans was never more evident than it was 10 years ago. Forced to relocate its game with the University of Miami to Raleigh because of the flooding from Hurricane Floyd, the Pirates turned an improbable upset and gave this community a respite, however brief, from the devastation.

For eastern North Carolina, the Pirates provide a focus point of regional pride and shared identity, and East Carolina fans, in turn, act as representatives of the city, the school and this part of the state. It is important that everyone who attends a Pirate home game take that responsibility seriously and act as upstanding ambassadors to visiting fans.

Through three games, the Pirates have not yet met the lofty expectations set forth before the season. Losses to West Virginia and the University of North Carolina followed a narrow win against cross-state rival Appalachian State University when, three weeks ago, the two schools renewed East Carolina's oldest rivalry.

While a loud and raucous Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium provided a home-field edge that helped will the Pirates to victory, not all enjoyed the visit to Greenville. East Carolina, Appalachian State and The Daily Reflector received an e-mail from one ASU fan who described the hostility and ridicule he and his daughter received from some members of the East Carolina faithful. Consigned to a wheelchair, he expressed strong disappointment that his situation was not given consideration. That message appears below this editorial.

The overwhelming majority of Pirate fans enthusiastically support East Carolina, and are welcoming and respectful of guests. They make the atmosphere in Dowdy-Ficklen the best in North Carolina, and they have, on countless occasions, changed the outcome of games. That was the case on Sept. 5 when the noise from the stands made a difference, something that ECU Athletics Director Holland and Head Coach Skip Holtz praised after the game.

But it only takes one or two people acting improperly to diminish the experience for others. It certainly happened in the case of this Appalachian fan. Holland has called such behavior unacceptable, and every Pirate who loves the university should readily agree.

As the 1999 Miami game showed, this community takes tremendous pride in East Carolina. Its successes and setbacks are shared across the region. Fans eager to wear that pride on their sleeves must make sure it reflects in their conduct as well.
Greenville hosts Inclusive Community Breakfast

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, September 24, 2009

Community members of varying faiths, races, nationalities and abilities all sat down to breakfast Thursday morning. The mood was triumphant.

The city hosted its second annual Inclusive Community Breakfast at East Carolina University’s Murphy Center. More than 100 ECU, Pitt Community College, Pitt-Greenville Chamber of Commerce, religious and city leaders gathered to celebrate efforts toward ensuring Greenville is an inclusive community.

"It looks like we still have work to do but it is hopeful," Human Relations Council Chair Franchine Pena said. "It's real easy for us to sit at city hall and make suggestions ... but we have to go to the people.

"Anyone who feels like they have not had a voice ... should feel they can come to us."

The inclusive community initiative was brought back from a National League of Municipalities conference by Mayor Pro-Tem Mildred Council and Councilwoman Rose Glover. The city council adopted it as one of its annual goals the past two years. The council launched the breakfast and an inclusive walk — which was rained out last year but will proceed as planned this Saturday. Signs were posted at the entrances to town: "We Are Building An Inclusive Community."

"What I like about that sign is the word 'we'," said Mayor Pat Dunn during a welcome address. "Our paths cross with a variety of people. We should learn about the wealth and the richness of the lives of others."

She noted that the city is much more diverse today — to its benefit — than when she arrived in 1971. Several ECU personnel also commented on the role the university plays in promoting inclusivity.

Diners were entertained by a vocal performance by an African-American woman, a Korean music artist and Latino dancers before the keynote speaker.

Jeffery S. Elwell is the dean of ECU’s College of Fine Arts and Communication. He lived and taught theater in several colleges and universities nationwide before landing in Greenville.

Elwell spoke about people from different backgrounds and perspectives who impacted his life, particularly a blind student named Doug Armstrong.

Elwell taught and befriended the 20-year-old while working at Gardner-Webb College. The youth refused to let his lifelong disability take him out of the action. Armstrong was student body president, a triple major who later attended law school and was a champion blind runner.

"In two years, I never heard him complain," Elwell said. "He used to say 'Everyone has a handicap. A weak point. Some are just more apparent than others.'"

Elwell concluded that by befriending those outside of our own culture, our lives will be enriched and the world will be a better place.

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Three theater productions open Thursday

By Kelley Kirk
The Daily Reflector

Friday, September 25, 2009

If you're interested in the theater, there will be plenty to chose from beginning Thursday when three local thespian organizations stage productions in Pitt county.

"TwoLives" will be presented by the Greenville Theater Project at Acasias Tipsy Teapot through Oct. 4. The musical "Annie Get Your Gun" will be staged by the Farmville Community Arts Council at the Paramount Theatre in Farmville, also through Oct. 4. And finally, East Carolina University's Loessin Playhouse will present Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" through Oct. 6. (A story about the ECU production will be featured Oct. 2 in the Go! section.)

"TwoLives" is a comedic drama by local residents Anthony and Marlo Holsten. The couple began their collaborative effort soon after learning they'd be parents.

"We thought wouldn't it be great to have a play about all the craziness of having a child and how a couple find each other," Anthony said.

Anthony and Marlo were talking about ideas for their play when Mary McGinley of the Carolinian Shakespeare Festival in New Bern overheard their conversation two years ago.

"She said that next year they'd be doing 'Romeo and Juliet,' and asked if we could have our play ready for then," Anthony said.

The request lit a fire under the couple to get their play finished for its debut at the 2008 festival.

"It's very different from the original. Most of the pieces in the play are revamped and a lot of pieces were added. It's a little more rounded now. Instead of a 'hey, we're getting married' section, we go through proposal, the vows, all of that," Marlo said.

Anthony and Marlo are the only cast members in show.

Admittedly the couple have different working styles from each other, which lead to periods of inactivity or frenzied work on the play.

"She wants to be totally collaborative and I want to go to separate rooms," Anthony said.

"Yes, we have very different working styles," Marlo agreed. "I think we really learned how each other work. We've both done a lot of acting and writing but have always done it alone."

Marlo and Anthony plan to write a second piece called "Three" which deals with all the craziness of parenthood.

Also about a married couple is the Farmville Community Arts Council's production of "Annie Get Your Gun," which will be staged at the Paramount Theatre in Farmville.

The original musical was written by Irving Berlin as a fictionalized version of the life of Annie Oakley, a female sharpshooter from Ohio, and her husband, Frank Butler.

The local production is directed by Hank Moonsheim, who said the Farmville show is a newer, modernized version.
Hacker hits UNC-CH study data

Breach may have exposed personal info for 236,000 women participating in mammography research.

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL - A hacker has infiltrated a computer server housing the personal data of 236,000 women enrolled in a UNC-Chapel Hill research study.

Among the information exposed: Social Security numbers of 163,000 study participants.

Though the intrusion was detected in late July, computer forensics experts say it may have happened two years ago, said Matthew Mauro, chairman of the UNC-CH Department of Radiology.

And though UNC-CH officials and a private computer forensic expert have spent two months investigating, they still don't know who did the hacking, where the attack originated, or even whether data was downloaded.

"There's no direct evidence that any information has been removed," Mauro said. "But we can't say for sure."

The compromised server had all required security measures, Mauro said. It was one of two servers housing data.

IF YOU'VE BEEN HACKED

Women whose personal data have been compromised are urged to place a fraud alert on their credit files by contacting one of three credit bureaus - Equifax, www.equifax.com; Experian, www.experian.com; or TransUnion, www.transunion.com.

If you have questions about the UNC-CH study, call 877-434-3065 starting Monday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

on more than 662,000 women. The data are part of the Carolina Mammography Registry, a 14-year-old project that compiles and analyzes mammography results submitted by radiologists across the state.

The data are submitted to UNC-CH electronically; that process will now be tightened up, Mauro said.

Until several years ago, Social Security numbers were used as patient identification codes, which is why that information was part of some, but not all, patient files.

The project is funded by a five-year National Institutes of Health grant worth more than $2 million. Mauro and the project's chief researcher, Bonnie Yankaskas, say they hope the security breach doesn't affect future

SEE HACKER, PAGE 48
federal funding.

A spokeswoman for the NIH declined to comment Thursday.

"This is the worst thing that could possibly happen," said Yankaskas, who has led the project since its inception. "It's the kind of thing that, in 1995, we didn't even think about. We go through all these measures to make everything secure, and then a hacker comes along and turns it upside down. I'm devastated."

Universities are popular targets for hackers because, unlike private corporations, their computing systems are largely decentralized, said Karen McCall, a UNC Health Care spokeswoman. Thus, security breaches aren't always detected quickly.

While they didn't find evidence that files were downloaded, investigators did find traces of viruses dating to 2007, Mauro said, an indication that the registry had been compromised for that long.

"Once they gain access to a system, they are often just taking a peek," said John Snyder of Net Friends, a Durham security firm. "They may have accessed many systems, and they'll get to you when they get to you."

Snyder cautioned that information may have been taken even if there were no traces of that happening.

"It's pretty easy to make a copy of something to an external source and cover your tracks," he said.

The hacked server has been taken down, its data removed, and the intrusion has prompted a broad examination of computer server security across the medical school, Mauro said. The medical school alone has about 580 servers housing research and clinical data. That does not include UNC Hospitals' patient files, which are maintained separately.

In coming days, the medical school will send letters to all 236,000 study participants about the security breach. School officials said they held off on notifying participants until they had completed their investigation and would be able to field questions.

For 14 years, the research project has studied the practice of mammography and helped identify breast cancer risk factors and improve early detection.

"I know women will be upset by this," said Yankaskas, the lead researcher. "I'm hoping they will appreciate the good this project is doing and let us continue."

Staff writer Ray Martin contributed to this report.

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Well-paid staff, little help for soldiers
UNC program burns through $7.3 million with few tangible results

BY JOSEPH NEFF
STAFF WRITER

In 2004, U.S. Rep. David Price inserted a $10 million program into the federal budget, sending the money to UNC-Chapel Hill for a new effort to help deployed soldiers of the National Guard and Army Reserves.

Five years later, the Citizen Soldier Support Program has spent $7.3 million, but the money has accomplished little for the people it was supposed to help. One-quarter of the money has gone to the university employees are paid more than $100,000 a year, including a deputy director who has been reimbursed $76,000 for food, travel and lodging when she commutes from her home in northern Virginia to North Carolina.

An internal review found that the program produced reams of paperwork but few concrete results.

"The program has produced volumes of documentation, but the vast majority of this documentation is devoted to conceptual ver-

SOLDIERS
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

The head of the N.C. National Guard, Major Gen. William Ingram, has worked with the program since its inception. He said he has experienced many meetings, lots of discussion and stacks of paperwork.

"We're feeding you ideas, we're working with you, but we're not seeing any results," Ingram said in an interview. "We're not seeing a whole lot of action; there's a lot of discussion, but...no results."

Ingram said that after four years, the National Guard recently received the first tangible service from the program: a database of North Carolina mental health providers experienced with the military and problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury.

On Thursday, UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp told the UNC Board of Trustees that he has ordered the program to shape up.

"The program has serious flaws," Thorp said. "We need the program to show drastic improvement in a short period of time."
In this game, Durham, NCCU and Duke all win

Carlton Mack wishes he could have played football against Duke when he was a defensive lineman on N.C. Central University's team.

Mack, a Vietnam veteran who recently retired from IBM, didn't get on the field much at NCCU, but he plans to be at Duke's Wallace Wade Stadium Saturday evening, when the cross-town rivals square off for the first time in their not-so-storied football histories. He'll be rooting for the Eagles and the Bull City.

"I see it as a win-win situation for both schools and the city," he said. "It gives Central a chance to see where they are when they move up to Division 1, and it gives Duke a chance to have a good gate."

The faceoff is more than just a game, though. It's also a chance to forge a new relationship between the two Durham colleges. A joint pep rally featuring live music, local artists and performances by groups from both campuses was held Thursday night at the Durham Athletic Park. A joint halftime show is also planned.

The collaboration marks a big change from the tense relations between the two after an NCCU student accused members of Duke's lacrosse team of raping her in 2006. The charges were discredited, but not before they increased antipathy and distrust between N.C. Central and Duke, sullying the reputations of both.

"I hope the healing's already been done," Mack said. "I see this is as just two teams getting together for a good game."

Tyrone Jenkins would like to see Saturday's game, but he has another obligation.

"It's my anniversary," he said. "I definitely want to go, but I don't think my wife wants to be sitting in anybody's stands" to celebrate the third year of their marriage.

Jenkins is a barber at D&B Barber Shop on Fayetteville Street, where students -- including athletes -- from both colleges sometimes get haircuts. The television is tuned to ESPN, the all-sports network, but the Blue Devils-Eagles clash is not among the marquee matchups sportscasters are talking about.

Even if both teams were playing well -- Duke is 1-2, NCCU is 0-3 -- the game's impact on national football rankings would be negligible. The impact on the schools' image across the nation, though, could be immense, barber Keith Williams said.

"It's a good way to begin to develop a relationship" given the schools' past history, he said. "If nothing else, it gives people who haven't been over there in a long time a reason to go" onto Duke's campus.

At Whole Foods market, across Broad Street from Duke, football fan Richard Porter was finishing up his lunch. A UNC alumnus but not a Duke hater, Porter said the game "can be tremendous" for Durham.

"Any time you have a rivalry, it unites the schools and gives them something in common," he said, adding, "Anything you can do as long as you stay away from politics can bring the communities together. I hope [the Eagles] give Duke a run for their money."
As Porter reflected on how sports can unite people and the city's different communities, limousine driver Tony Ottarski of Durham joined the conversation.

"I think sports is extremely important to a community," he said. "It's not going to be like Duke-Carolina, but I think it's great to have a rivalry" between two cross-town schools. "A lot of people will be interested," he added. "I'll be one."

Unlike Porter, fellow-UNC alum Patrick Calhoun was outspoken about the outcome he desires.

"Duke will probably win," he said. "That's too bad. My guess is that Central will have more fans there than Duke. If I were going to that game, I'd try to find an NCCU shirt and cheer for them."

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Doctor to give UNC commencement address in December

CHAPEL HILL -- Dr. Lisa Carey, associate professor of medicine and UNC Breast Center medical director, will give the December commencement address at UNC-Chapel Hill, Chancellor Holden Thorp announced.

Thorp will preside at the ceremony at 2 p.m. Dec. 20 in the Dean E. Smith Center.

Thorp chose Carey in consultation with the University's Commencement Speaker Selection Committee, which is made up of an equal number of students and faculty.

"I think that this year, with the North Carolina Cancer Hospital coming on line, it's the perfect opportunity for Lisa, who is a pioneer in the breast cancer field and a great role model, to share her message with our students," Thorp said.

Carey joined the UNC faculty in 1998 and has served as the director of the UNC Breast Center since 2003. After graduating from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in 1990, Carey was a resident in internal medicine and then a fellow in oncology from 1990 to 1997 at the school.

Her research focuses on breast cancer, particularly why younger, premenopausal, black women are more likely to develop aggressive cancers. Carey is involved in evaluating the use of specific tumor markers as predictors of response to chemotherapy agents. Carey is the author or co-author of more than 70 manuscripts and book chapters.
September 27, 2009

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

The College Calculation

By DAVID LEONHARDT

The most subversive question about higher education has always been whether the college makes the student or the student makes the college. Sure, Harvard graduates make more money than graduates of just about any other college. And most community-college students will end up making far less than graduates of flagship state universities. But of course these students didn’t enter college with the same preparation and skills. Colleges don’t help to clear up the situation either, because they do so little to measure what students learn between freshman and senior years. So doubt lurks: how much does a college education — the actual teaching and learning that happens on campus — really matter?

A recession makes such doubt all the more salient. Last month, National Public Radio ran a segment called “Is a College Education Worth the Debt?” in which an economist noted that 12 percent of mail carriers have college degrees — the point being that they could have gotten the same jobs without the degrees. In January, “20/20” ran a similar segment, in which somebody identified as an education consultant and a career counselor summed up the case against college. “You could take the pool of collegebound students and you could lock them in a closet for four years,” he said, and thanks to their smarts and work ethic, they would still outearn people who never went to college. I heard a more measured version of these concerns when I recently sat down with a group of college students. They were paying tuition and studying hard, and yet they weren’t sure what they would find on the other side of graduation.

Along with all this skepticism, though, economic downturns also create one big countervailing force that pushes people toward college: many of them have nothing better to do. They have lost their jobs, or they find no jobs waiting for them after high school. In economic terms, the opportunity cost of going to school has been reduced. Over the course of the 1930s, the percentage of 17-year-olds who graduated from high school jumped to 50 percent, from less than 30 percent. Boys — many of whom would have been working in better times — made up the bulk of the influx. In our Great Recession, students have surged into community colleges.

So who is right — these students or the skeptics? It isn’t too much of an exaggeration to say that the field of labor economics has spent the past 30 years trying to come up with an answer. In one paper after another, economists have tried to identify the portion of a person’s success for which schooling can fairly claim credit. One well-known study, co-written by Alan Krueger, a Princeton professor now serving as the Treasury Department’s chief economist, offered some support for the skeptics. It tracked top high-school students through their 30s and found that their alma maters had little impact on their earnings. Students who got into both, say, the University of Pennsylvania and Penn State made roughly the same amount of money, regardless of which they chose. Just as you might hope, the fine-grain status distinctions that preoccupy elite high-school seniors (and more to the point, their parents) seem to be overrated.
The rest of the evidence, however, has tended to point strongly in the other direction. Several studies have found a large earnings gap between more- and less-educated identical twins. Another study compared young men who happened to live close to a college with young men who did not. The two groups were similar except for how easy it was for them to get to school, and the upshot was that the additional education attained by the first group lifted their earnings. “College can’t guarantee anybody a good life,” says Michael McPherson, an economist who runs the Spencer Foundation in Chicago, which finances education research. “But it sure ups the odds substantially.”

Earnings may be a flawed measure of an education’s value, but they’re about the only tangible measure we have. And the work that labor economists have done suggests that colleges do indeed deserve credit for much of the earnings gaps between their graduates and everyone else. The median earnings of full-time workers with bachelor’s degrees was nearly $47,000 in 2007, according to the Census Bureau. The median for someone who had attended college but failed to get a four-year degree was nearly $33,000, and the median for a high-school graduate was nearly $27,000. Compare these numbers with the typical education debt that a college student has on graduation day — $20,000 — and it’s clear that a college education is worth the debt. McPherson slyly points out that even the pundits and professors who suggest otherwise seem to understand this; they tend to send their children to college, often to quite expensive ones.

Yet the skeptics do make one crucial point. Nationwide, half of all students who start college don’t end up with a four-year degree. Not only do these dropouts spend less time in class, but they also miss out on the signalling benefit of the degree — a mark of those who, among other things, have the discipline to finish what they start.

Some would-be dropouts may stay in school if Congress approves a pending proposal to increase Pell Grants to needy students. Still, college tuitions are rising and resources are being cut — two factors that affect graduation rates. Federal spending cushions the blow but isn’t large enough to make up for state cutbacks. At Dyersburg State Community College, in northwest Tennessee, enrollment rose a staggering 28 percent this fall compared with last fall, but the state cut the college’s budget by 16 percent, thanks to the recession, Karen Bowyer, the college’s president, told me. For similar reasons, the University of California system plans to enroll fewer freshmen this year than last. Given the current debate in Washington, it’s worth noting that the rising cost of health care puts more pressure on state budgets than perhaps anything else.

When you look at what’s happening at Dyersburg State and dozens of similar places across the country, you’re left thinking that students understand that they don’t make the college. They need the college. The rest of us would probably say that they do, too. The clichés are familiar enough: the children are our future, I’ll be the education president, etc.

Yet when you look at our actual policies, you have to wonder. Many colleges and high schools still fail to do a good job, year after year, with little consequence. And in the deepest recession in a generation, at the very moment when education would be of most value, money for it is disappearing. It’s almost as if we’ve been convinced that college isn’t, after all, all that different from locking somebody in a closet for four years.

*David Leonhardt is an economics columnist for The Times and a staff writer for the magazine.*
Veterans Report G.I. Bill Fund Delays

By JAMES DAO

Thousands of veterans attending college on the new G.I. Bill are having to take out loans, put off buying textbooks or dig into savings because of delays by the Department of Veterans Affairs in issuing benefit checks, veterans groups and college officials say.

The bill, which took effect Aug. 1, provides money to cover much, and often all, of the costs of attending college — including tuition, housing and books — for veterans who served in the military after Sept. 10, 2001.

The new benefit enticed more than 277,000 veterans and their eligible relatives to apply for assistance. Such a flood of claims had been expected, but the veterans department, with its antiquated technology, has struggled to keep up with it.

This week, the department reported that it had made tuition payments to colleges on just 20,000 of those applications, and had made an additional 13,000 payments directly to veterans for various expenses. The department said that it was taking an average of 35 days to process claims but that the wait could stretch to eight weeks and possibly longer.

"Taking into account the complexity of this bill, we've done about as well as could have been done," said Keith Wilson, the department's education service director. "That doesn't alleviate our concern that we're not meeting everybody's expectations."

So far, colleges around the country appear to be allowing veterans to enroll in classes even though they have not received tuition payments.

But many veterans who had expected to begin receiving assistance for housing, books and other expenses by Sept. 1 are having to pay out of their own pockets. The department now says it never intended to send checks for housing until October, though many veterans say they were not aware of that.

"We're discouraged by what we've seen and how it's affecting veterans in the field," said Ryan Gallucci, spokesman for Amvets, a veterans' service organization. "It is national in scope."

Christen DeNicholas, 23, said the benefit had persuaded her to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design. But after putting down a deposit for an apartment and enrolling in classes, Ms. DeNicholas was notified at orientation that the college had not received her $8,000 tuition payment.

The college has deferred the bill for now, and she has been able to cover her rent with a disability check she receives for a career-ending hip injury she suffered in the Army. But she is using her savings for living expenses, and says that if her G.I. Bill assistance does not arrive in a few weeks, she will drop out to find
work.

"I won't take a loan," she said. "I'm too young to be in debt."

Adam Kelly, 28, said he had had to take out a $3,500 loan just to eat after his assistance failed to arrive this month.

A former musician in an Army band, Mr. Kelly enrolled in Middle Tennessee State University planning to major in pre-med. The college has agreed to let him continue taking classes. All that the people who answer calls to the department's 800 number could tell him was that it could be a month or two before checks for food and housing arrive.

"I'm completely 100 percent dependent on this thing," he said.

Mr. Wilson said the veterans department had prepared for the expected tide of applications by hiring 750 claims processors. But aging technology and the sheer complexity of the program have made it impossible to keep pace, he said.

Many records have to be entered manually into computer systems, he said, and benefits have to be calculated individually for every applicant. Processors must use complex formulas that consider location of the college, type of academic program, a veteran's length of service and other variables.

The department is developing a computer system that will make those calculations automatically, but the system will not be available until late next year, Mr. Wilson said.

Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for veterans, said the veterans department had hurt itself by not communicating well with colleges and veterans about the likelihood of delays.

"For most of our generation of veterans, this is going to be their first interaction with V.A.," Mr. Rieckhoff said. "This is the first true test about whether they can transform this massive bureaucracy."

When Robert S. Barton, 35, left the Navy in 2006, he married and found a job. But when he heard about the new G.I. Bill benefits, he quit and enrolled at Rhode Island College, assuming that the government would cover his tuition and his mortgage.

Now he is being told that his living assistance payments may not arrive until November. Though his wife, who is pregnant, works as a nurse practitioner, her salary does not cover their expenses, and they have had to deplete their savings.

Worried that he will be unable to pay his next mortgage bill, Mr. Barton is not sympathetic to the department's problems.

"They promoted this for quite some time," he said. "What did they think would happen?"