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ECU will focus on student retention

- UNC official says funding and growth will be tied to the ability to keep more students in the classroom and boost graduation rates.

BY JOSH HUMPHRIES
The Daily Reflector

The continued growth of East Carolina University may be dependent on improved retention and graduation rates.

University of North Carolina System President Erskine Bowles said last week that enrollment growth funding will ultimately be tied to each UNC school’s ability to keep students on campus and boost graduation rates.

It isn’t clear yet how the funding will be tied to retention and graduation rates but each system school already has targets set by the UNC General Administration.

ECU’s current retention rate of 78.7 falls just short of the 79 percent target. 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, said Associate Provost Austin Bunch.

Enrollment growth funding provides a large boost for ECU and has allowed the university to be a leader in the state in distance education, Bunch said.

Long-term university and UNC system plans have projected that enrollment at ECU, including distance education students, will be around 37,000 within a decade but that projection likely will be reconsidered based on a new direction toward quality rather than quantity of students in the UNC system, Bunch said.

ECU, along with the other UNC schools, will be expected to improve retention and graduation rates before they are allowed to grow, Bowles said.

A new retention task force is working on ways to keep the students who are accepted at the university. Plans including more tutoring opportunities and better advising practices. Officials also are discussing ways to boost enrollment in freshman seminar classes that help students adjust to the college environment.

A related study of the retention rates and grade point averages (GPA) of students who live on campus versus students who live off campus may prompt a change in the housing requirements at ECU, Bunch said.

A surge in enrollment over the past few years has forced ECU to assign some students to off-campus apartments.

Freshmen students who were assigned to off-campus housing had a retention rate of 63.7 percent in 2008 in comparison to an 80.1 percent retention rate for students who were assigned to live on campus.

The average GPA of freshman students on campus was 2.59. Students who were assigned to off-campus housing had an average GPA of 2.02.

Students who live off campus, but were not assigned to ECU housing also have lower GPA and retention averages than students who live in the residence halls.

"We are studying the possibility of requiring first time-full time freshmen to live in the residence halls," Bunch said. "Students who live in residence halls tend to do better academically and adjust better as students. They are part of the whole campus culture."

Officials will have to consider building or acquiring more residence halls as enrollment grows.

Bunch said administrators are looking for the best options for housing in the future as enrollment, retention, graduation and housing are all tied together along with many other factors including admission standards, which were recently raised at ECU.

Preliminary numbers for the 2009-10 school year indicate that enrollment is down slightly from last year due to the very large freshman class of 2008. Final head count numbers will not be available until mid-October, but ECU has an estimated 27,673 students this year compared to 27,703 last year.

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ECU students help vaccinate Craven residents against the flu

Sue Book
2009-09-30 19:11:40

A group of area residents prepared themselves this week to dodge one of two 2009 strains of flu that are active in Craven County.

About 275 people each rolled up a sleeve Tuesday at the Craven County Health Department’s seasonal flu shot clinic and let senior students in the East Carolina University College of Nursing inject them with the seasonal flu vaccine.

One recipient told a companion as she left the first of two clinics scheduled for the season that “it was the epitome of efficiency.”

Scott Harrelson, the county health director, said he also “thought it was very well-run,” after observing Craven’s clinic for the first time this year.

Harrelson applauded the nursing students and Teresa Ellen, the Craven director of nursing; Pat Dixon, adult health services supervisor; Summerly Cotton, adult health nurse; and the efforts of East Carolina University. Another clinic will be offered from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Wednesday.

“We have a similar mass clinic in New Hanover, but this one averaged less than 10 minutes per person staggered by appointment,” Harrelson said. “It looked like they had it down to a science.”

The ECU nursing seniors included Havelock resident Jennifer Vitter, wife of a Marine stationed here and originally from Joliet, Ill.; Lynn P. McCrystal of Chapel Hill; and Joseph Kibirango, originally from Uganda and Madagascar and now of Durham.

The registered nurse candidates, proud of the 1,000-student program’s ranking as one of the top five nursing colleges in the nation, will also assist at flu vaccine clinics at the MERCI Clinic on Oct. 7 and Oct. 14, McCrystal said.

McCrystal, who served in the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan until a parachuting injury sidelined him, said 109 of the seniors will graduate in December. But his double major in political science and nursing will keep him in school longer, in hope of a career running a health department like Craven’s.

The students also plan to help conduct Craven County’s H1N1, or “swine flu,” clinics that will be at the health department once the vaccine is available.

Harrelson said no news is available on ship dates for the H1N1 vaccine, but all of those planning to provide the vaccine in Craven County have their paperwork signed and submitted and await its arrival sometime this month.

“There was some question of whether H1N1 has peaked for the year,” Harrelson said, “but it
is still classified as widespread. Without a number of confirmed cases, it’s hard to get a handle on it and many ride it out without seeing a doctor. But local physicians are saying they are seeing patients with both kinds of flu as are we in the child health clinic.”

Harrelson said he is pleased that one-third of the students in Craven County schools signed up to receive flu shots at school. The department has been conducting flu shot clinics in the schools for the past two weeks.

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Stimulus jolts Triangle science

Triangle area researchers won a massive infusion of $145 million in federal stimulus money Wednesday for scientific projects large and small -- including an ambitious effort to seek cancer treatments by unraveling the complex genetics of tumors.

Of the 521 grants awarded to the state, 415 are in the 4th Congressional District, which includes the Triangle. The big winners were UNC-Chapel Hill, with 186 grants worth more than $60 million, and Duke University, with 181 grants totaling more than $75 million.

The stimulus bill enacted this year included $10 billion for the National Institutes of Health, which opened the financial spigot to projects that might have otherwise taken years to fund.

In addition to creating high-paying jobs in scientific fields, the money will spur the pace of discovery into conditions that affect millions, including heart disease, autism, Alzheimer's and breast cancer.

"What it should do is help to extend existing research programs but also help to create new research programs into the future that will be very competitive with respect to obtaining other funding," said Wayne Holden, an executive vice president with RTI International, a think tank in Research Triangle Park that received 10 grants.

One of the largest awards is headed to UNC-CH, which was tapped as one of 12 research institutions in the nation to receive a Cancer Genome Atlas Grant for research into the mechanisms of how cancer grows and spreads. That knowledge is crucial for developing new therapies and even cures.

The five-year award could total from $13 million to $20 million, university officials said, and will result in the hiring of at least six people for lab and computer work.

"It's really the next phase of the Human Genome Project," said Dr. Charles Perou, referring to the huge national effort to create a blueprint of the human DNA sequence. Perou, associate professor of genetics, and pathology and laboratory medicine, is one of the leaders of the university's cancer atlas project.

"Now what we need is a blueprint of what it is to be a cancer tumor," he said.

Perou said this area of science has already borne fruit. Genetic research has found that breast cancer is actually four or five different diseases -- each responding differently to treatments based on the molecular origins.

"We hope to get a more comprehensive picture of the genetic causes and then use that information to improve treatments and outcomes for cancer patients," Perou said.

The UNC-CH portion of the money for the project will fund research to characterize the different genetic signatures that cancers express. The other national institutions receiving Cancer Genome Atlas will conduct similar work or provide data support. All will share findings.
Perou said the university was positioned to compete for the grant because it had been allocated state money to buy the sophisticated tools necessary for the genetic inquiry. The project is led by the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center but involves scientists throughout the university.

Price sees a boost

U.S. Rep. David Price, a Chapel Hill Democrat who represents the Triangle, said he encouraged his local institutions to look at opportunities in the economic stimulus package. But he said he had not influenced NIH's decisions on who won the grants.

"Some people in Washington have asked, 'How does medical research provide a financial stimulus?'" Price said in an interview. "I don't think you have to ask people in our area that question. That's a big part of our economy."

Staff writer Barbara Barrett contributed to this report.
UNC-CH delays capital campaign

CHAPEL HILL -- A year ago, UNC-Chapel Hill officials were basking in the glow of a recently completed fundraising drive that brought in $2.38 billion -- and already talking up the next campaign.

The new target: $4 billion, which, if reached, would have placed UNC-CH in the company of only a handful of institutions that have set such a goal.

But then the bottom fell out of the economy, taking with it the university's ambitious plans.

"The strong headwinds have taken that conversation away for a while. The psyche of donors is still pretty fragile," said Matt Kupec, UNC-CH's vice chancellor for university advancement. "A lot of our donors have been stunned. Their portfolios have declined. But things will turn around again."

So the UNC-CH fundraising machine will chug along without the fanfare that comes with capital campaigns. These formal fundraising drives, which can last five years or more, lay out a university's needs and priorities and invite alums to get involved, all the better to rekindle the love for the old alma mater and loosen the purse strings. It's a huge effort, which is why universities don't kick off campaigns without an indication that they'll be successful.

But don't shed a tear for UNC-CH; the university continues to bring in heaps of private cash. In 2008-09, donors gave $271 million, the second-highest single-year total. The only better year was 2007-08, the final year of the Carolina First campaign, when the university raked in just more than $300 million.

Down the road in Durham, there's a similar situation. Duke University completed its most recent capital campaign, a $2.4 billion effort, in 2003. Since then, officials have been laying the groundwork for the next one and would be deep in planning now if not for the recession, said Michael Schoenfeld, a Duke spokesman. Now, the university is delaying its timeline for at least a year, he said.

"If people are feeling less secure about assets and less secure about their employment, they may be more reluctant to give," he said, adding that Duke's overall fundraising strategies won't change. "During a period of uncertainty, you want to refocus people on Duke's priorities."

Across U.S. public higher education, fundraising is becoming increasingly important as state support has lessened. Even in North Carolina, where public universities receive a larger share of support than their counterparts in most states, universities say private fundraising is vital.

At N.C. State University, Chancellor James Woodward shielded the development office from the budget cuts that led to the elimination of more than 200 staff jobs, saying the university needed a stronger fundraising operation.

Across the country, some universities are forging ahead with planned drives. Others are not, wary of sending the wrong message to donors whose financial situations have changed.

"There are any number of good reasons why a university might take a step back," said Rae Goldsmith,
vice president for advancement resources with the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, a national fundraisers' group. "And some are still going into campaigns with a sense of optimism but maybe changing their goals."

Routing cash to aid

One common adjustment: A lot of universities are shifting their priorities from bricks and mortar -- a new library or science building, for example -- to financial aid, a reflection of how the recession is hurting students, Goldsmith said.

At UNC-CH, fundraisers are looking for more gifts now, rather than donations to the endowment. A gift could be spent immediately; an endowment is invested, with interest drawn off little by little.

"What you want to do is put more into endowment because that gives it longer life," Goldsmith said. "But that doesn't always speak to an immediate need. It goes to this concept of having to give students financial aid now."

At UNC-CH, students need that money. This fall, 23 percent more students qualified for student aid than did a year ago, according to university officials.

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UNC says hacker got into fewer files than reported

CHAPEL HILL -- A hacker who accessed a UNC-Chapel Hill computer server may not have seen as much information as officials originally feared.

UNC School of Medicine officials said last week that a security breach had exposed data related to as many as 236,000 women enrolled in a mammography study, including 163,000 Social Security numbers.

Now, school officials say the number of exposed files is actually about 160,000 total, including about 114,000 Social Security numbers, said Stephanie Crayton, a UNC Health Care spokeswoman.

"As we're getting knee-deep into the investigation, we're finding the numbers coming down," she said.

The intrusion was detected in July but may have occurred as far back as 2007. A hacker got into the Carolina Mammography Registry, a 14-year-old UNC medical school research project that stores and analyzes mammogram information submitted by radiologists across the state. Officials aren't yet clear whether information was removed, though they don't believe so.

The medical school set up a phone line for people with questions. By midweek, that line had received several dozen calls from women enrolled in the study, officials said.

The number to call is 877-434-3065 from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.