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College fair offers a look at educational opportunities

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

About 1,000 Pitt County students and parents had the chance Wednesday to learn more about educational opportunities beyond high school.

The Pitt County College Fair, held at the Greenville Convention Center, attracted people from public, private and home schools who chatted with representatives of about 50 two and four-year colleges and universities from North Carolina, Virginia and South Carolina.

Chris Murphy, assistant director of admissions at East Carolina University and one of the event's coordinators, said the event was one of the final stops of an eight-week tour throughout the Carolinas sponsored by the Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

It was intended to introduce those interested in furthering their education to opportunities they may not be aware of, Murphy said.

"It is a chance for them to talk to schools they are really interested in, but it is also a chance for them to find out more about schools they might not know a lot about," Murphy said. "We have a good mix of large schools and small schools, and that is good because students are looking for different things. You can get all of it here."

Nearly all seniors and some juniors from Pitt County's six public high schools were bused to the fair Wednesday morning along with students from The Oakwood School and Parrott Academy. They spent 45-minute increments at the event, and left with bags filled with flyers and other items handed out by the college representatives.

Later in the day, parents and all others interested had the chance to attend the fair and a financial aid workshop sponsored by the College Foundation of North Carolina.

"We want them to look and see all of the options they have," Pitt County Schools Executive Director for Students Services Travis Lewis said. "They are very blessed to be in a state with so many wonderful universities both public and private that you have to choose from. If someone wants a small, private college, it is represented here. If they want a larger university, it is represented here. If they want a community college experience, it is represented here. They have a plethora of options available to them as to where they want to continue their education."

Murphy said many seniors are just now starting to apply for college. Deadlines vary among institutions, but they are typically in February or March.

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Group accepts Halloween candy for troops

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

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One kid's Halloween loot is another man's Christmas candy.

Give2TheTroops is accepting Halloween treats to add to Christmas stockings being sent to hundreds of troops who won't be home for the holidays. Barbara Whitehead, branch director for the nonprofit organization's North Carolina's office, said parents can bring in their family's excess Halloween candy or kids can solicit candy donations door to door.

"We've had kids trick or treat for Give2TheTroops," she said. "It's cool enough (in Iraq and Afghanistan) to send the chocolate. The guys are excited to get the candy."

Individually wrapped candy brought to the Greenville location will be added to care packages that Give2TheTroops has already begun shipping for Christmas. When packages have to travel from the post office to overseas military bases and then be transported to remote locations, it takes weeks for them to arrive.

This means holidays at Give2TheTroops often overlap. By Halloween, volunteers will be finishing their third week of work on Christmas packages.

Last year, the organization shipped 800 packages for Christmas. This year, there are more than 1,000 troops in the database, and 300 additional troops have signed on in recent weeks.

Already this season, the organization has prepared more than 1,000 stockings to accompany troops that are being deployed just before Christmas, and the military has requested 1,200 more within the next week.

"That's on top of our regular care packages," Whitehead said. "These troops will be arriving in Afghanistan very close to Christmas. It will be so close to Christmas, they will not be able to have things mailed to them until probably January. If we can get it packed ... at least they'll have that little reminder of home."

For troops serving overseas, reminders of home range from Slim Jims and Kool-Aid mix to Ritz crackers and Oreos. Simple snack foods often top the list of most wanted items.

For troops in Afghanistan, the most needed items this time of year are things to help keep them warm. Whitehead said that troops in the mountain regions could have four feet of snow in December, so Give2TheTroops is shipping socks, gloves, blankets and hot chocolate mix.

Sources of donations are almost as varied as the donations themselves. A homeschool group from Edenton just brought Christmas stockings, a Goldsboro church has been collecting blankets, a child from Cumberland County has collected DVDs.

There is a wide range of volunteers as well, from children to senior adults and Scout troops to church groups. On Saturday, volunteers from the nine-church community service effort Operation InAsMuch packed boxes alongside East Carolina University students from Beta Alpha Psi accounting honors society.

"That's what I love about it," Whitehead said, "all different ages and from different backgrounds and everybody working together."

It will take all of them, she said, to have the Christmas packages shipped before Thanksgiving. While volunteers
still will be needed in December, they'll be packing gifts for Valentine's Day.

"Somebody called this week and wanted to know if they could do Halloween cards," Whitehead said. "We're working on Christmas cards."

Give2TheTroops, 3109 Landmark St., is open for volunteers from 2:30-7:30 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays and 9 a.m. to noon Saturdays. Other volunteer appointments can be arranged by calling 321-8227 or e-mailing Barbara@Give2thetroops.org. Donations of $3-$5 per package are requested to help offset shipping costs.

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Oblinger admits to a few regrets

RALEIGH -- If he had it to do over, former N.C. State Chancellor James Oblinger would have taken a closer look at university policy before giving his provost, who was on the brink of resigning, a sizable severance deal this year.

And he would have been more forthcoming with the media, he said in an interview Wednesday, the same day he was identified as a finalist for the presidency at New Mexico State University, a land-grant public institution that, like NCSU, emphasizes research.

Oblinger and the four other finalists will be on campus for interviews in November, and the university expects a decision Nov. 19. He knows he'll face questions about his resignation from NCSU's chancellorship, which came amid questions about his role in the controversial hiring of former first ladyMary Easley.

One misstep: The day before Provost Larry Nielsen resigned, Oblinger brokered a deal to pay him $310,255 over three years on top of his faculty salary.

Campus leaders quickly rejected the deal, which went against university policy.

"I'm not the kind of guy who would have knowingly done something wrong," he said Wednesday. "I think, yeah, I should have reviewed that original letter [offer] to make sure policies were being followed."

Oblinger also said he now realizes he should have responded more quickly to reporters' questions in the months leading to his resignation.

Oblinger, 63, came to NCSU in 1986 as an associate dean in the agriculture school. He became provost in 2002 and chancellor three years later.

He stepped down June 9 and has been on a six-month leave before returning to the faculty. In that time, Oblinger said, he realized he still wants to be a university leader. Many of the issues he tackled at NCSU - campus construction, private fundraising, economic development and student aid - are also important in New Mexico, he said.

"I think I have something to offer still in the administrative role," he said. "I could be very contributory as a faculty member, but I think my current strength is still in these large, big-picture areas."

The New Mexico State job is the only one he has pursued since leaving the NCSU chancellorship, he said.

In a Wednesday news release, Del Archuleta, New Mexico State search committee chairman, said the backgrounds of all five finalists had been investigated.

"It is our belief that each finalist has a strong record of positive accomplishments and should advance to
the next stage," he said. "Through the interview process we fully expect that the community will question the candidates and research their backgrounds. We are confident that the discussions will be open and candid. This process will serve to identify the best leader for NMSU."

Oblinger isn't the only New Mexico State finalist with baggage. Another, Richard Herman, resigned the chancellorship of the University of Illinois just last week amid an admissions scandal that has grabbed national headlines.

The other finalists are Barbara Couture, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Michael Ortiz, president, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; and Lisa Rossbacher, president, Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Ga.

New Mexico State is a land-grant university of about 31,000 students at five campuses. The largest, with about 17,200 students, is in Las Cruces.

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New works of science nonfiction

U-Va. students are using 'BioBricks' to try to build an original life form

By Emma Brown
Washington Post Staff Writer
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CHARLOTTESVILLE -- Creating an original organism required no bolt of lightning for a team of University of Virginia students. But it did take buckets of ice, vials of bacteria and a FedEx delivery.

Nestled in the package were bits of DNA, whipped up in California and ordered online. When they arrived at a lab crowded with flasks, pipettes and aging equipment held together with pieces of red tape, the students plunged vials of E. coli bacteria into the ice-filled buckets. Then they heated the vials up and cooled them down again.

During that process, the tiny bacterial cells cracked open just enough to let the DNA inside, and a new life form was born: an army of tiny arsenic-absorbers, offering the possibility of cheaper, easier ways to clean up contaminated water.

"We're kind of making a new machine," said Dan Tarjan, a senior majoring in biology, as he returned to the lab one morning last week, croissant in hand.

Building microscopic critters via genetic tinkering was once the stuff of science fiction -- and just a generation ago, it was confined to the world's most sophisticated laboratories. But with more powerful computers and cheaper equipment, it is within reach of students at high schools, community colleges and universities, hundreds of whom are competing this year to create the coolest new organism on the planet.

The International Genetically Engineered Machine competition, which will be held Halloween weekend at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is built on the premise that life can be broken down into a warehouse of off-the-shelf, interchangeable parts and reassembled into creatures that have never existed.

U-Va.'s invention, dubbed an arsenic sponge by its creators, will vie for the grand prize -- an oversized silver Lego block -- with offerings from 102 other teams, including a bacteria-powered battery (City College of San Francisco) and an anti-allergy drug made with a gene found in tick saliva and bacteria that live in human noses (Brown University).

Adherents call this kind of science synthetic biology. Critics call it scary.

Synthetic biology is something like the genetic engineering that has been making headlines for years --
think Flavr Savr tomatoes, engineered for longer shelf life, or glowing monkeys, altered with a jellyfish gene.

But two things set it apart: The DNA building blocks don't have to come from nature; they can be designed and created in a lab, a process that's becoming faster and cheaper. And there's the idea that life, like cars or computers, can be designed and built from standardized parts that behave predictably.

At the heart of the competition is MIT's Registry of Standard Biological Parts, founded in 2003 as a physical repository and online catalogue of DNA pieces whose function and behavior have been defined. Called BioBricks, these are the building blocks that students use, Lego-like, to build new organisms.

Students are constantly designing new BioBricks, such as the DNA that arrived at U-Va.'s lab last month, a tweaked version of a gene that occurs naturally in plants. Creating them is one of the criteria by which the teams are judged. Last year, teams added 1,300 parts, bringing the number of BioBricks to about 3,350.

Fluent in plasmids

When all goes well, the new organisms work as their creators intend. In 2006, students from Edinburgh, Scotland, built a strain of bacteria that villagers in Bangladesh could use to test the potability of water. In the presence of arsenic, which poisons an estimated quarter of wells there, the bacteria turned red. Last year, a team from Slovenia built a vaccine for Helicobacter pylori, ulcer-causing bacteria that infect half the world's population.

It doesn't always go well, however, and on this morning it was not clear that the U-Va. team's arsenic sponge was soaking up anything at all. In between munches on his croissant, Tarjan filled a bucket of ice to cool down another batch of E. coli. "What I want to do," he said, "is start a company that does this."

The iGEM competition began in 2004 with five teams and a few dozen students. This year, organizers said they expect about 1,050 students, nearly all of whom are fluent in the language of plasmids and protein-coding sequences.

"We're not modest. We all believe that in these next 50 years, synthetic biology is going to be the Industrial Revolution of our time," said Randy Rettberg, director of the competition. "We are making synthetic biologists that the world is going to need."

The expansion of the competition mirrors the growth of the field. Researchers at universities and in private industry are buzzing with the possibility of engineering cells to act like tiny factories, manufacturing products such as clean biofuels, powerful new medicines and sponges, like the U-Va. team's project, that soak up pollutants from the environment.

A company based in Emeryville, Calif., called Amyris has opened a demonstration plant in Brazil that uses engineered microorganisms to convert sugar cane into biofuel and tinkered with E. coli to produce a key anti-malarial drug ingredient. Scientists with another Bay Area initiative, the Synthetic Biology Engineering Research Center, are trying to develop organisms to seek and destroy malignant tumors, Rettberg said.
'Worries for the future'

Despite its promise, synthetic biology is unnerving to those who doubt that scientists can keep their inventions from escaping their labs and wreaking havoc and who wonder whether regulators can keep the field's powerful potential out of the hands of terrorists.

"IGEM is effectively an attempt to build a workforce for . . . a very disruptive industry," said Jim Thomas, a researcher with the Ottawa-based ETC Group, a nonprofit group that opposes genetic engineering in agriculture.

"It's sold as it's light, it's fun, it's hip, it's green. It's not being sold as risky, as untested. One of the big concerns is that kids are being taught that DNA is a computer code, and you can program biological organisms the same way you can program a computer. I think that's going to prove to be a bad analogy."

Rettberg said he understands that people are concerned about kids creating new life before they're old enough to buy beer. But students are generally working with strains as harmless as flour and water, he said. They're bound by their schools' lab safety protocols and, at the competition, are judged partly by how they address risks.

"There are worries for the future, but we're not there yet," he said, "and by the time we get there, we will have done a lot more to work on how to do a better job."

There are also thorny intellectual property rights issues, not to mention moral questions about messing with nature on such a profound level.

"This question of these things are made by God, and therefore how should we be dealing with those things because they were made by God -- that's just beyond my job description," Rettberg said.

Chris Von Dollen, a junior at Johns Hopkins University, where iGEM team members are contributing to a long-term faculty project to redesign the genetic makeup of yeast, said he's not bothered by safety concerns. Yeast, after all, is everywhere.

"I like messing with genes and genomes, throwing things in and out and manipulating all that stuff," he said. "We've already controlled so many other things in nature that it's become unnatural. To me, it's just one more step in the process."

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