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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
Night moves: Safety the focus of downtown debate

Friday, October 30, 2009

In the spirit of the season, Greenville’s raucous Halloween party downtown will once again provide both trick and treat for this community. While thousands of revelers will flood the city’s heart to enjoy the annual celebration, the security demands of the event require extensive planning, considerable manpower and significant expense.

Though the consumption of those resources haunts taxpayers and public officials each year, it is a price tag that the city has collectively agreed to accept in the interest of public safety. A similar debate has been central to this year’s municipal campaign, and voters will determine a course of action when they cast ballots on Tuesday.

With pleasant temperatures expected on the rare Saturday Halloween, thousands of costumed revelers are expected in downtown Greenville this year for the annual festivities. The event is one of the city’s largest gatherings, and an opportune night for restaurants, bars and nightclubs downtown to enjoy a financial windfall.

Ensuring that the party proceeds without incident will be a phalanx of law enforcement officers and fire/rescue workers from around the region. They will staff checkpoints, search for weapons and manage the crowd as it swells to fill the streets. Their goal is simple: to provide a safe and enjoyable atmosphere, free from violence, for those downtown to enjoy.

That is the system every year, and Greenville budgets to ensure that the annual expense incurred is accommodated. The city has tried in the past to dampen or end the festivities — following riots in the 1970s and about 140 arrests in 1989 — to no avail. Halloween is now part of the city’s fabric, with taxpayers accepting the bill each year.

That is the heart of the issue now facing downtown the other 364 days of the year. Following the tragic shooting deaths of two men in July, the City Council bolstered the law enforcement presence in the interest of public safety. However, the additional staffing comes at a greater expense, one now paid for entirely by city funds.

A proposed ordinance would alter that balance, requiring nightclubs and bars to pay for off-duty officers to work at their establishments, reducing the city’s expense. The council will ultimately decide the best course of action, following Tuesday’s election.

The city must find a way to reduce crime and to do so in a thoughtful and equitable manner. The downtown issue has been central to debate in the municipal campaign, and voters will help determine how the city should proceed on this very crucial issue.

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Everything Shakespeare in less than two hours

The Daily Reflector

Friday, October 30, 2009

The S. Rudolph Alexander Performing Arts Series will present the Reduced Shakespeare Company's production of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Wright Auditorium.

"The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" is all 37 Shakespeare plays in an irreverent, fast-paced 97-minute romp. The production was London's longest-running comedy with 10 years at the Criterion Theatre.

The Reduced Shakespeare Company was founded in 1981 by Daniel Singer, who wrote a 25-minute version of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" for four actors. When one of the actors — a female — broke her ankle just three weeks before the show's opening, it was suggested that a school friend of cast member Jess Borgeson — who was playing the lead — fill in for her in drag. Adam Long's performance as Ophelia and Gertrude received high praise and enjoyed a large following of fans.

Since its 1981 origins as a pass-the-hat act in California, the Reduced Shakespeare Company has created six stage shows, several TV programs and numerous radio pieces.

They've performed at the White House, Lincoln Center, London's West End, The Kennedy Center, Seattle Repertory Theatre, American Repertory Theatre and Montreal's Just For Laughs Festival.

Tickets for Wednesday's performance are $32 for adults, $28 for ECU faculty/staff and $10 for students.

Call 328-4788 or visit www.ecuarts.com

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Packed colleges adapt on the fly

For as many as eight hours a week, Mike Taylor, president of Stanly Community College, is not schmoozing donors or leading a meeting on scholarships at the school's Albemarle campus. He's teaching an online version of Political Science 120, American Government -- lecturing, drafting tests or grading papers.

At South Piedmont Community College, paralegal students have been spending hours in front of a computer when they ordinarily would have been in a classroom with an instructor. The school has increased enrollment in hybrid courses that are part-classroom and part-online by 70 percent over last year.

Both schools, like North Carolina's other 56 community college campuses, are responding to an unprecedented spike in enrollment. Not surprisingly, much of the increase is the result of unemployed workers seeking retraining in hopes of finding new jobs.

Enrollment has also ballooned because community colleges are a bargain. Recession-weary high school graduates who are short on money are spending a year or two at a community college before moving on to a more expensive four-year university. Roughly speaking, in-state tuition for a full-time student at Wake Tech Community College, in Raleigh, is $1,600 per year, compared with almost $3,900 at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"That has been the biggest change, a growing number of young people who are going to a technical program or to get started on general courses and move to a university at a later date," said South Piedmont President John McKay.

College enrollment nationally hit an all-time high last October of 11.5 million, or 40 percent of young adults from age 18 to 24, according to a Pew Center study released Thursday. Enrollment has been rising for years, but the recent spike was entirely at community colleges, according to the report.

While enrollment at four-year institutions was flat from 2007 to 2008, community college student ranks jumped from 3.1 million to 3.4 million young adults. The schools have seen that uptick continue this year.

"That's the community college story," said Scott Ralls, president of the state system. "The worse the economy is, the more likely we are to grow."

North Carolina's community colleges grew out of the industrial expansion after World War II. An increasing number of workers needed more than a high school education but not a four-year degree, and state leaders responded by quickly building a network of community colleges and industrial education centers that is now among the largest in the country.

The budget tightens
This year, community college campuses have felt the crunch of more bodies at the same time their budgets have been pinched by cuts in state funding.

The system estimates it has the equivalent of 96,000 full-time students this fall. Many of its students are part time, so calculations are based on the number of courses taken instead of just a head count. That's an increase of more than 14 percent, or about 12,000 over last fall.

In response, administrators are adding evening and online courses, increasing faculty workloads and increasing class sizes. Students are feeling it.

"They're so crunched for space. I don't think there's a lot of one-on-one attention [from instructors] anymore," said Sara Leon, 19, a South Piedmont student.

State budget cuts fell less severely on community colleges than some agencies this year, but the funding was still trimmed by about 6 percent. There's no extra money to hire additional instructors or add classroom space. The colleges have to improvise and adapt.

Pulling double duty

Taylor, president at Stanly Community College, is among a long list of administrators who trade desks for lecterns during part of the day. He returned to teaching for the first time in three or four years, helping ensure his school's adage: "Education anytime, any place, any pace."

Nearly half of the schools in the system report ordering administrators into the classroom to help meet the demand for courses, though some have been teaching for years.

Jerry Simpson, vice president for student services at Randolph Community College, returned to the classroom this fall to teach a study skills course. It subtracts from his ability to do his day job, but the teaching time can be rejuvenating, he said.

"You have not only the classroom time, but the preparation and grading," Simpson said. "On the other hand, it's very satisfying."

South Piedmont's Monroe campus was already packed with a trailer park of temporary classrooms before the current enrollment surge. To help relieve the squeeze on classrooms, more instruction has moved online. Last fall 1,205 students at the school's two campuses took at least one online course. This semester the figure is 1,528, a 27 percent increase.

The school also has pumped up its "blended" class format, which is part classroom instruction and part online, from 189 students last year to 322 this year.

"They might meet one day on campus," said McKay, South Piedmont's president. "That frees up classroom space."

Students, though, get less direct instruction to help guide them through assignments, said Laura Haynes, 20, a South Piedmont student taking three blended classes.

"Half of our class work ends up being online because we can't get it all in class," said Haynes, of Wadesboro. "It takes much longer to get our papers back in classes and see how we're doing."
Heather Hooks, a communications instructor at South Piedmont, said faculty and students alike muddle through the obstacles created by crowding. Enrollment means potential employment to students and continued employment for faculty.

"Whatever frustration there is from, 'I'm going to have five more students than last year,' the next thought is, 'But I still have a job,'" Hooks said.

mjohnson@charlottobserver.com or 919-829-4774
A Financial Check-Up Long Before Tuition Bills Begin

By MELISSA KORN

As high-school seniors' college search kicks into high gear, many parents are fretting about how to pay.

While an ideal college savings plan would have started years ago, it's not too late to catch up. Here are some moves families can make during the next few months to boost savings in the right accounts and ease the financial-aid process.

First, schedule a basic financial check-up. Tally your income, expenses and savings, and identify where you can cut back—delay vacations or home renovations, for example. (One thing that's off-limits: retirement fund contributions.)

Financial aid insiders recommend that parents do the math with their children, to keep everyone's expectations in check. "It's important for parents to have realistic discussions about what they can afford," says Justin Draeger of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. This way, kids won't fixate on out-of-reach and out-of-budget schools.

Once the financial boundaries are set, aid experts suggest talking about where students stand the best shot at receiving merit aid. For example, a student with a 3.2 grade point average likely won't be showered with scholarships at elite Georgetown University, but may be eligible for certain grants at nearby University of Maryland.

"You can position the family's assets all you want," says Martin Greatorex of The College Navigator LLC, a college planning company in Milford, Conn. "But if you're not positioning the student [for the right schools], it's fruitless."

Regardless of your child's abilities, you can't bank on him or her winning a full ride. Accelerate savings in the final year before college if you haven't yet socked much away. Money meant to pay for a ski trip could go into a savings account, but with dismal interest rates, parents playing catch-up may want to put the funds in 529 college savings plans instead. Stay safe with short-term bonds or a money-market account—you won't see significant gains, but you won't see losses unless inflation spikes, either.

"Principal protection is of paramount importance" at this late point, says Steve Kutlenios, vice president of Allegheny Financial Group in Pittsburgh and a certified college-planning specialist. Participation in a 529 plan also provides a nice tax break, as earnings in the accounts grow tax-deferred and distributions are tax-free when used for qualified college costs. A number of states also provide thousands of dollars in income tax credits for residents participating in their plans, and five states give residents breaks for participating in any plan.

An individual can make a single $65,000 deposit without any tax hit by using up five years of gift tax exemptions at once, giving a major boost to the 529 account in one fell swoop.
While increasing savings is smart, you have to make sure that money is put in places that won’t ultimately hurt your child’s shot at financial aid. The basic rule of aid is that the more assets and income a family has, the less assistance the student will receive from government and institutional sources. (“So why save?” you may ask. Because the aid is never really enough.)

For families with college coming in fall 2010, the federal government will determine aid based on 2009 taxes along with the assets you hold on the day you apply for financial aid. To preview a potential package based on your expected year-end income, check out the government-sponsored calculator fafsa4caster.ed.gov or FinAid.org’s Expected Family Contribution estimator. Schools need your tax returns before responding with an official aid offer—so keep organized over the coming months and file your return as early as you can.

Another way to estimate your contribution is to contact the financial aid offices at the schools your child plans to apply to, says Mr. Draeger of NASFAA. Aid officials should be willing to tell applicants the average amount students and families pay after federal, state and school aid. That figure “will really give [families] a more realistic depiction of how much they’ll be expected to pay out of pocket,” Mr. Draeger says.

For financial aid purposes, the income and assets of the child are assessed at a higher rate than the parents’ assets, which means it’s best to keep assets in parents’ names. For example, if a child has $10,000 in savings, the school will likely ask for a $2,000 contribution, or 20%. If that $10,000 was in the parents’ account, it would be assessed at a maximum 5.6%, or $560. Student income is also assessed at a higher rate than parent income. (Most 529 savings plans are considered parental assets.)

Because students’ money is assessed at such a high rate, advisers recommend families spend that down first. Have your child buy that car or school-required laptop now so the account balances won’t be so daunting. If you have a Uniform Gift to Minors Act (UGMA) or Uniform Transfer to Minors Act (UTMA) account in which the parent is named as custodian or trustee for the child, the funds in those accounts will be counted as the child’s at financial aid time. Be sure to consult a lawyer before using that money on your child’s behalf to avoid legal complications.

People lucky enough to have generous extended family can ask for contributions to a child’s 529 account rather than checks made out in Junior’s name. Mr. Kutlein of Allegheny Financial even recommends asking grandparents and uncles to hold off until after college graduation, at which point they can help pay off loans.

Even if your child spurns the well-priced local public university in favor of an expensive private college, don’t withdraw funds from your retirement account. Qualified retirement accounts, including 401(k)s and IRAs, aren’t included in financial aid assessments, so you would only hurting yourself down the line by making a withdrawal. If anything, increase your contributions over the next few months—your taxable income will drop, thereby decreasing the expected family contribution and boosting potential aid. Parents can also cut their income and assets by delaying bonuses and timing regular investment withdrawals carefully.

Whatever you do to help finance college, whether it involves opening a new 529 savings account or cutting back on vacations, there’s one main rule to follow when it comes time to fill out the forms: Be truthful. Financial aid applications are audited more often than IRS forms, and penalties for fraud include fines up to $20,000 or jail time.

Write to Melissa Korn at melissa.korn@dowjones.com
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College Enrollment Set Record in 2008

By TAMAR LEWIN

Almost 40 percent of the nation's 18- to 24-year-olds in 2008 were enrolled in college, a record number, according to a Pew Research Center report released on Thursday.

The rise was driven almost entirely by a surge in students attending community colleges.

"We have anecdotally got this sense that there's been this college enrollment boom," said Richard Fry, a senior research associate at the Pew center who wrote the report, "but now we've got confirmation, and we know that at least among young adults, the increase seems to be a two-year college phenomenon."

"What's behind this," Mr. Fry added, "is that we have the biggest pool of young adults we've ever had who've finished high school."

The previous record for college enrollment among 18- to 24-year-olds was 38.9 percent in 2005.

The new report, using data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, found that a record 84.9 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had completed high school as of October 2008, up a full percentage point from the previous year.

The percentage of high school dropouts, meanwhile, has been declining. In October 2008, 9.3 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had dropped out of school, compared with 10.2 percent in 2007.

"The high school completion numbers are somewhat startling, since they fly in the face of the very negative impression people have gotten about dropouts," Mr. Fry said.

Although solid numbers for this year's college enrollment are not yet available, the Pew report said that early estimates in the Census Bureau's September 2009 Current Population Survey hinted that the record 2008 number might be surpassed.

The census data on which the report is based has, however, an optimistic skew. Because it includes only the noninstitutionalized civilian population, and since prisoners are especially likely to be high school dropouts, the overall dropout rates among Americans 18 to 24 are probably higher than reported, and college enrollment rates somewhat lower.

The Census Bureau is expected to release its own analysis of the October 2008 college enrollment data next week.

With the recession, which officially began in December 2007, the young adults' steepest drop was in employment. Only 50.4 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds were employed in October 2008, compared with 52.7
percent in 2007.

While the year-to-year changes are not huge, the longer-term trends show significant shifts. In 1973, only 24 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college, only 80.7 had completed high school, and 15.7 had dropped out of high school.

Enrollment has been rising at two- and four-year colleges alike for decades. And most young adults still prefer four-year colleges, even though they are more expensive.

But the increase in the rate of students going to college reflected in the Pew report was attributable almost entirely to increased community-college enrollment. About 3.4 million, or 11.8 percent, of young adults were enrolled at community colleges, up from 3.1 million, or 10.9 percent, in 2007.

Enrollment at four-year colleges was essentially flat, at about eight million, or 27.8 percent of young adults, the Pew report said.

College enrollment varies by race and ethnicity. Nearly 41 percent of white 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college in 2008, compared with about 32 percent of black young adults and 26 percent of Hispanics in that age group.