THE DAILY CLIPS

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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
Pulitzer Prize-winning author
will speak at ECU

One history professor calls James McPherson “the leading Civil War scholar of his generation.”

By Jimmy Ryals
The Daily Reflector

East Carolina University will host a preeminent Civil War historian this week.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author James McPherson will speak at 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Hendrix Theater in Mendenhall Student Center.

McPherson is “the leading Civil War scholar of his generation,” said Gerald Prokopowicz, chairman of the ECU history department. He will discuss the complicated relationship between President Abraham Lincoln and “problem child” Gen. George McClellan, Prokopowicz said. A reception will follow the lecture.

A professor of American history at Princeton University, McPherson won the 1989 Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction for “Battle Cry of Freedom.” The book is widely seen as the leading one-volume history of the war, Prokopowicz said.

McPherson has written 16 other books and appeared on the History Channel, A&E, the Discovery Channel, C-Span and PBS.

His latest book, published this year, is “This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War.” Accessibility to scholars and laymen is a hallmark of his work, Prokopowicz said.

“McPherson, to me, represents a model of how historians can communicate with the wider public,” he said.

The lecture is the latest in the history department’s annual Brewster series. The series is named for Lawrence F. Brewster, who taught history at ECU from 1945 to 1969. Prokopowicz said he hopes the combination of speaker and subject matter will draw a sizable audience.

“The Civil War is America’s most passionately felt history,” he said. “Almost every community, including eastern North Carolina, had a lot of people interested in the war.”

From 6:30 to 11 p.m., shuttles will run between Mendenhall and a parking lot at the corner of Greenville and Charles boulevards.

Jimmy Ryals can be contacted at jryals@coxnc.com and 329-8568.

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: Lecture by Civil War historian James McPherson

WHEN: 8 p.m. Wednesday, with a reception to follow

WHERE: Hendrix Theater, Mendenhall Student Center, East Carolina University

Bus service will ferry people between Mendenhall and a parking lot at Charles and Greenville boulevards.
ADVISER GIVES STUDENTS THAT EXTRA LITTLE PUSH

BY JANE STANCILL  
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — Next week, seniors at Hillside High who have completed their college applications will wear little stickers that say: “I’ve applied. Have you?”

The messages, much like the “I voted” stickers on Election Day, are courtesy of Ebonie Leonard, a UNC-Chapel Hill graduate who’s encouraging others to follow her path to a college degree.

Leonard, 22, works as an adviser at Hillside and Southern high schools in Durham as part of the Carolina College Advising Corps, a program that places recent college graduates in schools with low college attendance.

On Monday, Leonard and Hillside hosted a visit from UNC-Ch admissions officials and UNC-Ch Chancellor James Moeser, who talked to about 50 aspiring college students in the school’s library.

The chancellor tossed Tar Heel T-shirts to students who correctly answered trivia questions about the university. Then he and his staff responded to a flurry of questions: What does it take to get admitted to UNC-Ch? Do you have to apply early to get financial aid? How do you go about studying abroad?

Moeser asked how many planned to go to college. Many hands shot up.

“I don’t have to tell you that’s a million-dollar decision you just made,” he said, citing lifetime earnings potential. “To be successful in the 21st century, you really need a college education.”

Leonard aims to get more students to that goal. On Monday, as students filed into the library, she buttonholed one for failing to respond to a recent email message. “Did you send off your application?” she asked. “How did you feel about it?”

In Leonard’s office at Hillside, a copy of the classic Dr. Seuss book, “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” is displayed prominently on a bookshelf. Leonard, who majored in sociology and plans to attend graduate school, works to dispel the notion that being smart isn’t cool.

She recently tried to talk a student out of taking a year off between high school and college. “I said, ‘What are you going to do for a year?’ I was like, ‘I don’t think that’s the best idea.’”

Leonard offers pep talks to students who don’t think they’re college material. She hounds students about submitting financial aid forms on time. She hopes to take a group of low-income students on a campus tour around North Carolina.

“I’m here for them,” she said. “Any question they have, my door is always open.”

Deon Tedder, a senior, asked Leonard to read his college essay. She told him to give it another try; he ripped it up and started over.

“With the application process, it’s really stressful,” Tedder said. “You’re trying to figure out what they like and how you can impress them.”

Tedder has applied to James Madison University in Virginia and UNC-Ch. Leonard’s enthusiasm for UNC-Ch was contagious, Tedder said.

“She kind of pushes us to go for it,” he said. “You know, you’ll never know unless you try.”

“We need to find out three or four more Ms. Leonards,” Hillside Principal Earl Pappy said.

National data show that the average ratio of high school students to guidance counselors is 488 to one, said Nicole Hurd, executive director of the National College Advising Corps, which is based at UNC-Ch.

“Our students are so underserved, and our guidance counselors are so overwhelmed,” said Hurd, who started a similar College Guide Program at the University of Virginia. “The idea was match [students] up with recent graduates that could get them excited about college.”

The program, paid for in part by a $10 million grant by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, aims to open the doors of higher education to more poor and minority students. The national effort, which follows in the tradition of Teach for America and AmeriCorps, began in August with 60 graduates from 11 colleges and universities around the country.

The Carolina program now has four advisers working in high schools in Alamance, Chatham, Durham and Guilford counties. When fully implemented next year, nine advisers will work in 18 high schools from Abbeville to Charlotte, including 14 threatened with closure by a judge last year because of failure rates.
Beyond rankings: A new way to look for a college

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

When Michael Turchy sought a job with the state of North Carolina straight out of college in 2001, his interviewer seemed surprised that he had already published research on wetlands.

"I had direct experience others didn't have," says Turchy, environmental supervisor for the transportation department and a graduate of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C. "I could tell he was a little impressed."

A leg up in the job market is just one way students can benefit when they work closely with faculty, sometimes side-by-side in research. And the degree to which faculty work with students is the kind of thing prospective students might want to look for when they consider where to apply for college.

Problem is, that kind of information hasn't typically been available to the public in a meaningful way.

The National Survey of Student Engagement wants to change that. While many popular college guides focus on things like SAT scores of incoming freshmen, or a college's party-school reputation, NSSE (pronounced "ness") seeks to gauge the quality of an undergraduate education by looking at how actively involved students are with their studies, professors and the campus community. Decades of research shows that the more engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn.

Colleges appear to welcome such information. Since its 2000 debut, NSSE has surveyed nearly 1,200 schools at least once, and it has spawned similar surveys for law schools, community colleges and other populations.

Most colleges keep results confidential, using their data as an internal assessment tool. But this year, for the first time, NSSE is encouraging participating schools to make their scores publicly available.

USA TODAY, in partnership with NSSE, is publishing this guide in print and online to show how NSSE can enhance the college search. More than 250 schools have agreed to disclose their scores.

Pressure from Congress is one reason colleges are inching toward greater transparency; another is growing discontent with rankings like those compiled by U.S. News & World Report.

Accrediting agencies, which provide a third-party stamp of approval to colleges, have been asking since the 1990s for evidence that students are benefiting from their education. Congress has for years decried the absence of useful information available to students and parents. And a national commission appointed by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings last year urged colleges to consider publishing results from NSSE and other assessment tools as a way to help families see what they're getting for their tuition dollars.

In a bid to circumvent federal oversight, a number of non-profit higher education groups have developed or are developing websites through which consumers can get information, including NSSE scores in some cases, in easy-to-compare formats. More than 600 private institutions have signed up to participate in a website launched in September by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. A similar initiative by the National Association of State Colleges and Land Grant Colleges is expected to debut in January; it was developed with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Other projects are in the works for research universities and online education.

"English professor Julia Williams, who heads the institutional research office at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Ind., says her school is making its NSSE scores available to families for the first time today because transparency is "the right thing to do."

Choosing a college is a major life decision, and families want to feel confident that they have made the right one," she says.

Rankings still rankle

Admissions offices have long grumbled about rankings. But this year the ranks have entered into something resembling rebellion. Dozens of college presidents have vowed to not participate in U.S. News surveys and to not promote their status in the rankings.

They have lots of complaints, but mostly, the argument is that U.S. News rankings focus on the wrong things — wealth, prestige and exclusivity — and mask the characteristics that make each institution distinctive, such as its mission, the types of students it attracts and the resources it has available.

NSSE, in contrast, is "about trying to get people to talk about things that matter," says NSSE director George Kuh, an Indiana University education professor.

Perhaps even more, he suggests, NSSE challenges the rankings-driven notion that only a sliver of colleges are worthy of consideration. "There are many innovative programs being offered today, often at a college or university right around the corner," he says.

Housed in a cinder-block student dorm that has been converted into office space for Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, NSSE is not the only answer to the growing demand for better information. Many schools use more than one assessment, including homegrown studies. More than 330 schools have used the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which assesses critical-thinking skills, since it was piloted in 2002-2003 by the New York-based Council for Aid to Education. About 130 schools use the College Senior Survey, which is conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and is similar to NSSE. A consortium of 31 highly selective private colleges and universities surveys students and shares data.

But the still-growing NSSE remains among the most widely used and, arguably, the most visible. Initially supported with a $3.7 million grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, NSSE has supported itself since 2003. Colleges pay $1,600 to $7,800, with price based on enrollment and other factors.

NSSE is made up of 85 questions, 42 of which contribute to five categories, or "benchmarks." Research shows that these activities, while not direct measures of learning, are associated with student success. Questions seek to elicit information about the level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, the extent to which a college offers an active and collaborative learning environment, opportunities to take advantage of cultural or extracurricular experiences, and whether the school creates a supportive environment for different groups on campus.

To see whether students are challenged academically, for example, they are asked how many books they were assigned to read, how many papers they write and how much time they spend preparing for classes.
Beyond rankings: A new way to look for a college - USATODAY.com

NSSE then tabulates results for each school and provides five benchmark scores showing how it stacks up compared with the national average for similar types of institutions.

After poring over its NSSE findings, Baltimore's College of Notre Dame of Maryland, where two-thirds of the undergraduates attend part time, redesigned its advising, among other things, with an emphasis on better accommodating part-time students.

At Auburn University, a public university in Alabama, the board of trustees this year approved a writing initiative aimed at increasing the quantity and quality of writing done by its undergraduates. The trustees have set a goal for Auburn's scores on certain writing-related NSSE items to surpass the average score for its peer group.

And after NSSE results at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vt., demonstrated that first-year students benefit from regular interaction with professors, the school set a goal to increase the percentage of full-time faculty who teach first-year seminars.

"Very often the data confirm something we already know but perhaps lack empirical confirmation," says John Kulhovick, director of institutional research and communication at Saint Michael's. "The case was easier to make with this data in hand."

Most colleges declined

It's one thing to use the data to quietly improve, another to go public. Most of the schools that were approached about being included in USA TODAY's website either declined or did not respond to multiple requests. And many of those that agreed to publish their results say they worry that the data could be misused.

NSSE strongly discourages the use of NSSE data in any type of ranking, for example, arguing that rankings "are inherently flawed as a tool for accountability and improvement."

Yet just weeks ago, publicly available student engagement data for community colleges were used to come up with rankings. The list, produced by a policy analyst with an education think tank and published in September's Washington Monthly, drew swift rebuke from administrators of that engagement survey.

Another worry is that NSSE could be used to somehow parallel schools with scores that are less than flattering to the naked eye. This year, for example, federal officials proposed that colleges be required to report to the Education Department, as a condition of receiving federal aid, whether their institutions use NSSE or other assessment tools, whether results are available online, and what the Web address is. The request was later withdrawn. But to many higher education groups, that seemed dangerously close to federal regulation.

Underlying those concerns is the sense that NSSE's data are simply too complicated for the average consumer or policymaker to grasp. Consider, for example, that when NSSE scores are provided to colleges, they come with a three-ring binder filled with instructions.

"Most people... do not necessarily have the time to become experts on what it all means," says John Novak, director of institutional research at Indiana University South Bend.

Ilya haven't used NSSE

Notably absent from NSSE's participation list are many of the schools that fare well in U.S. News rankings. None of the Ivies, for instance, have participated, though the number of top-ranked liberal arts colleges is climbing.

The low participation rate doesn't surprise Peter Ewell, vice president of a non-profit higher education consulting group in Boulder, Colo., and chair of the committe of higher education researchers that developed the framework for what eventually became NSSE.

Top-ranked schools are benefiting from U.S. News rankings, he says. "Why throw the dice when you're on top?"

For its part, U.S. News in recent years has published answers to selected NSSE questions volunteered by schools; 176 recently provided results from the 2006 NSSE survey.

Editor Brian Kelly says rankings and NSSE both provide useful information. But with so few schools disclosing NSSE scores, he says he doesn't worry about NSSE replacing rankings as a consumer service.

"The issue is comparability," he says. The discussion keeps "coming back to this notion of why the rankings are valuable. We've been able to come up with comparable data across a wide number of schools."

Former Harvard president and early NSSE supporter Derek Bok, in his 2006 book, Our Underachieving Colleges, suggests that NSSE's low participation rates help "confirm the impression that institutions at the top of the U.S. News rankings are rarely leaders in seeking innovative efforts to improve student learning on their campuses."

But David Jamieson-Drake, director of institutional research at Duke University, which ranked eighth this year among U.S. News' national universities, says that assumption misses the mark. He says he has no major problem with NSSE as an assessment tool; he simply believes other measures are more appropriate for his school. And, he says, he sees no benefit to publishing NSSE scores for comparative purposes. "There is a bit of an attitude of 'Gosh, if you're not doing NSSE, then you're hiding something,'" he says. "I'm frankly somewhat mystified why people are so enthused about NSSE."

Kuh, for his part, acknowledges that NSSE has its limits. That's one reason he recommends that schools use NSSE in rotation with other assessment tools.

"No single assessment tool can tell an institution everything it needs to know," he says, "but almost everyone agrees that (NSSE) focuses on activities that help students develop the habits of the mind that they need to survive and thrive during and after college."

And now, more than ever before, some college officials acknowledge, colleges should be willing to open themselves up to public scrutiny.

"I have colleagues (who have) for years said, 'What we do is self-evident and trust us,'" says Paul Koch, associate vice president for assessment and institutional research at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa.

"The reality is that what we do is not self-evident. It is also clear that our constituents no longer trust us to the degree that they used to, and that is unfortunate."

Contributing: G. Jeffrey MacDonald

Got a college admissions question? Ask our experts here.

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Our thanks to the College of Notre Dame of Maryland for sharing its results. Check out the school's website.

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Health

Trasylol Pulled From Worldwide Market
FDA says clotting drug poses increased death risk, while company says drug still has benefits

By Steven Reinberg
Posted 11/5/07

MONDAY, Nov. 5 (HealthDay News) -- Bayer AG suspended worldwide sales of Trasylol, a clotting drug using during heart surgery to prevent bleeding, on Monday following a request from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to remove the drug from the American market for safety reasons.

The FDA cannot identify a patient population in which the use of Trasylol (aprotinin) outweighs the risk, Dr. John K. Jenkins, director of the FDA's Office of New Drugs, said at an early morning news conference Monday.

However, he added, "The suspension will include a slow phase-out of Trasylol from the marketplace, to decrease the possibility of shortages of the alternative drugs." And he added that Bayer could continue to supply the drug if physicians can identify specific patients who would benefit from it.

"Studies have found that Trasylol can increase the risk of kidney damage compared with other drugs," Dr. Gerald Dal Pan, the FDA's director of the Office of Surveillance and Epidemiology, said during the news conference.

In 2006, he added, the FDA limited the use of Trasylol and strengthened its warnings. Subsequently, he said, studies found that Trasylol increased the risk of in-hospital death among patients undergoing cardiac bypass surgery. In addition, Dal Pan said, two studies this year found that the drug increased the long-term mortality of patients who had undergone bypass surgery.

The suspension follows news last month that a major Canadian trial of the drug was terminated because of an increase in deaths for cardiac surgery patients using it.
The trial was designed to show that Trasylol was better than other drugs in controlling bleeding, Dal Pan said. "That study was halted because Trasylol appeared to increase the risk for death compared with two other drugs," he said.

Based on these findings, the FDA requested last week that Bayer suspend Trasylol pending further review, Dal Pan added.

In a company statement on its Web site Monday, Bayer stressed that the suspension was temporary. "Bayer believes that the totality of the available data continue to support a favorable risk-benefit profile for Trasylol when used according to labeling," the statement said.

The FDA also said Monday that it plans to do a detailed review of the preliminary results from the Canadian trial before deciding whether to allow Trasylol back on the U.S. market.

Trasylol was first approved by the FDA in 1993, and has had a checkered history since then.

In the Canadian trial, called BART, an elevated 30-day and overall death risk caused the study's Data Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB) to recommend stopping patient enrollment. The trial had been set to recruit about 3,000 adults who were candidates for a variety of cardiac surgeries and were at high risk of bleeding.

On Sept. 12, a U.S. Food and Drug Administration advisory panel recommended that Trasylol remain on the market, despite mounting evidence that it might have serious side effects.

In February, a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found patients on the drug were at greater risk of dying over the next five years than those given two other medications. The same researchers had linked the drug to an increased risk of kidney failure, heart failure and stroke in a study published in 2006.

"Our present findings deal with death," one of the JAMA study's authors, Dr. Dennis T. Mangano, said at the time. Mangano, director of the Ischemia Research and Education Foundation, a California-based nonprofit group, said that "the death rate for aprotinin patients far outstrips that for the other two drugs."

His team's study tracked the long-term survival of nearly 3,900 heart patients who underwent coronary artery bypass surgery at 62 medical centers worldwide. The researchers tabulated survival at six weeks, six months, and then annually for five years.

The five-year death rate for patients given Trasylol was 20.8 percent, compared to 15.8 percent for those given another drug, aminocaproic acid, and 14.7 percent for those given tranexamic acid. Both alternative drugs are available in generic versions.
After the 2006 report from Mangano's group, the FDA advised doctors to carefully monitor Trasylol patients for kidney, heart and brain damage -- an action taken after Bayer disclosed study data showing that it increased the risk of death, kidney damage, congestive heart failure and stroke.

The drug does have its defenders.

Dr. T. Bruce Ferguson Jr., associate director of cardiothoracic and vascular surgery at East Carolina University, wrote an accompanying editorial to the JAMA study. He said he believed the study "was inadequate to address the question they were asking because of the way the database was designed."

"The most important factor they were unable to control was why patients got aprotinin," Ferguson said. "There were no data to address that issue, and therefore it cannot account for physician-related bias."

For example, the higher rate of death and other complications linked to the drug might be due to aprotinin being prescribed for "higher-risk patients who could be expected to have a worse outcome and higher mortality," Ferguson said. Other studies have shown that "in carefully selected patients, aprotinin is a good drug," he said.

The information used in the study was thorough and complete, Mangano countered. "In terms of the database, we had between 7,000 and 10,000 pieces of data per patient from 59 centers in 16 countries, including 23 of the 25 top cardiac centers in the United States," he said.

"The findings speak for themselves," Mangano added. "I think they are as accurate as you can get."

He believes that the drug's use should be restricted to about 5 percent of patients in whom other drugs could not be used.

More information

There's more on cardiac surgery at the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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