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College costs: Hold Constitution's principle on tuition

Wednesday, November 25, 2009

When the University of California Board of Regents voted to increase undergraduate tuition 32 percent last week, students staged large and vocal protests. East Carolina University Board of Trustees should not expect a similar response to its plan to increase tuition and fees 3.6 percent, but students here can understand their peers' disappointment and anger.

While it may be reasonable to expect undergraduates to assume a share of the operational costs for state universities, North Carolina's Constitution dictates that higher education be kept as free from expense as possible. Each tuition hike — and there have been several in recent years — steps back from that principle and threatens to price a university education beyond the reach of the least fortunate.

The University of North Carolina system was the rare winner in this year's state budget wars, receiving a funding increase of $23 million at a time when virtually all other public sectors were slashed. Such is the support for higher education in this state, and a recognition that, even in times of recession, an investment in universities represents a sound use of limited resources.

That assumes universities apply public funding to their stated goals of educating students and conducting research, which is not always the case. A recent audit of UNC-Chapel Hill found millions in potential savings by reducing spending on administrative costs, which have accelerated at a greater rate than spending on academics.

Those footing the bill deserve a good value for their dollar.

That is especially important as, increasingly, those asked to fund these institutions are undergraduate students.

The UNC system remains one of the best values for higher education in the country. But recent years have seen a steady departure from the principle that qualified North Carolina students should receive a university education as free from expense as possible, as the N.C. Constitution says.

Though System President Erskine Bowles pushed for and received a four-year cap on tuition increases in 2006, its pending expiration has started the push for another increase, perhaps as large as 8 percent. Last week, the East Carolina trustees requested a more modest 3.6 percent hike in tuition and fees, but may still see a larger increase since the General Assembly now sets those figures.

In its deliberations, the Legislature should heed the state's Constitution. What's more, it must recognize the need to preserve higher education as a public resource, rather than a burden for those who seek it.

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Robert Wallace Howard

Robert Wallace Howard "Wally" Howard, 94, died peacefully at his home on Monday, Nov 23, 2009. Mr. Howard was born on Feb. 1, 1915 in Louisville, Ky. to Jack I. Howard and Laurel Wallace Howard. He grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio and Charlotte and graduated from Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He enlisted in the United States Army and served as a pilot in the Army Air Corps in the European Theatre during World War II. Howard was honorably discharged as a Captain. His military commendations included the Bronze Star Medal and EAME Theatre Ribbon with five Battle Stars. Wally Howard had a long and distinguished banking career. He began with GE Credit Corp and Universal Credit Corp in Raleigh prior to World War II. In 1945 he joined Wachovia Bank and Trust Co. and worked in Charlotte, Winston Salem and Salisbury. In 1960 Mr. Howard was transferred to Greenville and was promoted to Senior Vice President of the eastern region of NC. He held this position until his retirement in 1985. He was a graduate of the Executive Program at UNC Chapel Hill. Mr. Howard was a community leader. In Salisbury he was president of the Country Club of Salisbury and the Salisbury Merchants Association. In Greenville he served on the Board of Directors of the Salvation Army and the East Carolina University Foundation. He was on the founding committee of the Greenville Boys Club and was its president for the first 5 years. An avid pilot, Howard served as chairman of the Pitt Greenville Airport Authority. He served in many fund-raising capacities and was a member of the “Greenville Mafia” that raised funds for ECU’s Ficklen Stadium. In 1975 he was named Citizen of the Year by the Greenville Chamber of Commerce. An active sportsman his entire life, Wally loved flying, sailing, tennis, and especially golf. He enjoyed a serious game of chess and watching Pirate football with his friends. One of his favorite pastimes was enjoying sunning on his deck overlooking the golf course. Wally Howard leaves behind a daughter, Scotty Howard Aycoc and husband Howard, of New Smyrna Beach, Fla.; son, Ronald Wallace Howard and wife Shirley, of West Jefferson; granddaughter, Susan Aycoc Bowie and husband, Larry; and step-great-grandson, Dakota, of Bradenton, Fla.; grandson, Howard Hodges Aycoc Jr. and wife, Clare and great-granddaughter, Eileen Elizabeth, of Del Rio, Texas. The family extends sincere thanks to Wally’s dear friends and caretakers for their many deeds and compassion, including Dr. Gary Jones Family Medicine and Asera Care Hospice. At his request, services will be private. Online condolences at www.wilkersonfuneralhome.com.

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Campuses to employees: Take personal day at holidays

In the last week of the year, employees at the Triangle's public universities will have to take vacation or other leave time for at least one day that their university will be closed.

Universities like to shutter operations between Christmas and New Year's to save money. Most of those days are paid holidays. To make up the rest, universities can require employees to use personal vacation or leave time.

The mandate creates a hardship for some but brings massive energy savings as computers and lights are turned off for long stretches and building temperatures are lowered.

UNC-Chapel Hill will have one such "closed" day, Dec. 31. That day, employees must use vacation, leave or comp time to account for the day off. N.C. State employees have two such days, and N.C. Central University workers have three.

"I don't like it," said Tommy Griffin, a heating and air conditioning repairman who chairs the Employee Forum at UNC-CH. "I don't think it's fair to employees. I understand why they're doing it, but it's still a burden on employees who have to take it."

Employees can generally use annual leave, bonus leave, comp time or a floating holiday to account for the day off.

At NCSU, the mandate has generated a lot of discussion, said Steve Carlton, a crime prevention officer who leads NCSU's staff senate.

"Some people don't want to use their own leave," he said. "Others are happy to use it to have an extended break."

The mandate won't apply to employees who perform critical functions, and research labs where experiments are in progress will remain accessible to workers.

But the shutdown will affect a lot of campus buildings. NCSU will shut 233 buildings - 86 percent of all facilities - from Dec. 24 through Jan. 4.

NCSU calls the initiative the "Temperature Setback" program. From 2005 to 2008, it has saved more than $850,000 in energy costs and 48 billion BTUs of energy, enough to power about 700 average American automobiles for a year, said Tracy Dixon, director of NCSU's sustainability office.

NCSU employees will have to use vacation leave Dec. 30 and 31; NCCU employees, Dec. 29-31.

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RI college heads agree to 2 percent pay cut

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- The presidents of Rhode Island’s three public colleges as well as about 300 nonunion employees in the state’s higher education system will take a 2 percent pay cut for the next six months to help address budget cuts.

The University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, the Community College of Rhode Island and the Office of Higher Education have been asked to cut $9.4 million this year.

Acting Higher Education Commissioner Steven Maurano tells The Providence Journal the pay cuts will only save about $150,000, although the exact amount is still being calculated.

The remaining savings will likely come through a combination of leaving positions vacant and increasing tuition and fees.

The state faces a $200 million deficit for the current fiscal year.

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Dozen from New England named Rhodes Scholars

By Emma Stickgold, Globe Correspondent | November 23, 2009

Ugwechi Amadi had to turn down the volume on her phone so her parents' screams of delight did not deafen her as she told them the big news.

Amadi, 21, a senior at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was one of 32 students nationwide to be named a Rhodes Scholar yesterday - an honor that comes with thousands of dollars' worth of education and the chance to study at Oxford University in England.

For her Nigerian-born parents, Amadi said, the economic struggles and racial tensions they encountered as immigrants in a country they moved to for its rich educational experiences seemed worth it.

"Through it all, my parents just kept a positive attitude," she said yesterday.

This year, 12 of the students who won the coveted award (from the 1,500 nationwide who applied) live or attend college in New England.

Darryl Finkton, a Harvard senior from Indianapolis, said his mother was quiet when he told her he was about to move to England for the next two years.

"I don't think it's set in," said Finkton in a telephone interview. "It's kind of weird - you never think you're actually going to win."

The recipients have a wish list for solving the world's ills and have already made impressive strides toward their goals.

While Amadi, of Camden, N.C., has been studying the parts of the brain that are ravaged by Alzheimer's disease, Finkton has been working with his Harvard roommate to improve the quality of water in many African and Caribbean countries.

Amadi's goal: to detect Alzheimer's earlier and find a way to prevent it.

Finkton's goal: to ensure that poverty does not mean inferior health care and to help the developing nations become less dependent on foreign aid.

Caroline Huang, 21, another recipient also from MIT, had been focused on brain research before last summer, when she started working in the office of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy and the Cambridge Women's Commission earlier this year.

But the senior found through her experiences there that the public policy aspect of science was equally compelling.

Huang, of Newark, Del., now has a torrent of ideas for what she wants to do. She talks about "establishing guidelines to figure out how families should decide whether genetic testing is right for them" and her passion for "a patient-based approach to looking at health care."

Huang's classmate and fellow Rhodes recipient, Steven Mo, has been working in laboratories that use nanotechnology to detect tumors, and he hopes the Oxford degree that comes with completion of the program introduces him to a new array of sciences.
While much of his work has focused on cancer, “I feel like in order to be a great scientist, you cannot be too narrow-minded,” said Mo, who grew up mostly in Houston and Taiwan.

Two applicants from each of 16 districts nationwide are selected for the Rhodes honor.

Another Rhodes Scholar, Grace Tiao, 23, who graduated from Harvard in 2008, said applicants in her district were getting text messages from their friends competing in other regions as deliberations played out.

“I think the long-term goal is to write literary nonfiction about science, in particular environments and human relationships and human activities, for a general audience,” Tiao, from Marietta, Ga., said of her plans.

This year’s other New England recipients are: William J. Oppenheim III of New Canaan, Conn., a 2009 graduate of Bowdoin; Matthew L. Baum of Watertown, who graduated from Yale; Roxanne Bras, Jean Junior, and Eva Lam, all of Harvard; Zohar Atkins of Brown; and Russell Perkins of Wesleyan.

The scholarships, which are now valued at roughly $50,000 annually, were created in 1902 by the will of Cecil Rhodes, a British philanthropist and African colonial pioneer.

Students spend dozens of hours putting together an extensive application and preparing for interviews.

The biggest challenge, students say, is boiling your life’s plans and experience into a 1,000-word personal statement.

“I kept saying,” said Amadi, “What 1,000 words am I going to choose that’s going to get across who I am?”

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