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Cigna and UNC Health dicker

A major health insurer is fighting over fees with one of the Triangle's largest hospital systems, a situation that could disrupt medical care for thousands of patients.

Cigna HealthCare and the UNC Health Care System, which includes Rex Healthcare in Raleigh, can't agree on terms of a new contract. The existing contract expires Dec. 31.

The two sides are still in negotiations, but if the contract expires, about 25,000 Cigna members would have to pay "out of network" charges to visit UNC, Rex or affiliated physicians, said UNC spokeswoman Karen McCall. Sticking points include money, and how and when patients pay providers, she added.

Cigna has notified members that UNC and Rex are demanding rates that are twice as much as what Medicare "has established as fair reimbursement in North Carolina."

Those costs would be passed on to the employers it covers, something "difficult to imagine in a state with one of the highest levels of unemployment," according to a statement issued by Cigna. "The impact of UNC/Rex's demand hits area businesses of all sizes, both public and private, in a time when companies are already constrained by the economic environment and struggling to stay open, keep jobs and offer health benefits."

But UNC argues that it's "asking Cigna for fair and equitable payment" similar to what other Triangle medical centers receive, UNC Health Care CEO William Roper wrote in a letter to patients. The letter, and a similar one from Rex president David Strong, asks patients to contact Cigna and urge the company not to "reject a fair contract."

Wake County is among the employers warning workers covered by Cigna about the situation. Nearly 6,200 Wake County employees, dependents and retirees are covered by Cigna.

Many of those employees were disrupted and frustrated two years ago when UnitedHealthcare and WakeMed clashed over their contract. It took more than four months for the two sides to resolve their differences and sign a new deal.

Cigna plans to help members find new doctors if there's a disruption. The company also noted that some patients, including pregnant women or transplant patients, will be able to continue receiving care at UNC or Rex for a limited time.

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Duke student comes with his own housing

DURHAM -- Even by starving-grad-student standards, Duke student Ken Ilgunas' campus housing is humble. It is, however, mobile. Ilgunas, 26, is shacking up in a 1994 Ford Econoline as a means of getting through his liberal studies graduate program without debt. Parked in a lot on the edge of campus, he cooks with camping equipment and subsists largely on peanut butter.

Ilgunas, who grew up in Niagara Falls, N.Y., doesn't think he's really roughing it. He showers and exercises in the campus gym and knows all the 24-hour buildings where he can keep warm, dry and connected to the Internet.

"I'm rarely in the van. Just to eat and sleep," he said this week. "Generally it's not the most convenient place. The closest bathroom is a quarter-mile away and there's no source of water nearby. But with that said, I live pretty comfortably. I bring a water jug to campus and fill it up."

Ilgunas isn't doing this out of necessity. Rather, it's a self-test of sorts prompted by the $32,000 in debt he was left with after getting his undergraduate degree from the University at Buffalo, a state university in New York. He paid that debt off working full time for 2-1/2 years, and he swore never to be similarly saddled again.

His Duke courses are $3,000 each, but grants cut that to $1,000 per course. Between money he makes working part-time and the summers he spends as a park ranger, he gets by.

Ilgunas figures it's only a matter of time before the campus cops come knocking. Until then, though, he's not saying exactly where he parks and lives.

He bought the van for $1,500 this spring and tore out some seats. He sleeps on the converted back seat, using a sleeping bag for cold nights. It's comfortable enough, though the heat is no picnic. He's reluctant to run the air conditioning; it could blow his cover.

"I got here and it was 95 degrees and 75 percent humidity," he said. "It was like a greenhouse. I'd be in there a minute and my clothes would be totally saturated."

An aspiring writer and devotee of "Walden," Henry David Thoreau's classic account of solitude and self-discovery, Ilgunas has another year or two of schooling ahead of him and hopes to remain in his van.

He need not worry. A Duke official said that while the university doesn't encourage Ilgunas' method of housing, he doesn't appear to be violating any campus rules.

"Our first concern is for his health and safety, and we offer guidance and counsel to help him transition to a new home," Duke spokesman Michael Schoenfeld said. "That said, it is certainly a creative part of his education, though I don't think Thoreau had to worry about parking tickets at Walden."

Duke on $4.34 a day
Ilgunas was raised in a suburban, middle-class family. His mother is a nurse, his father is a factory worker. It was a good life, but left Ilgunas unsettled.

Now, he buys food in bulk and eats, on average, for $4.34 a day.

"I felt there was something vapid about the suburban lifestyle," he said.

"People work 40 hours a week and come home and watch TV. There's no beauty or poetry or adventure in that sort of life. I recognized I wasn't getting something out of that lifestyle."

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From studio to storefront

CHAPEL HILL -- Every year, art students at UNC create original, bold and innovative works - most of which never see the light of day.

Thanks to a new student-run art gallery in downtown Chapel Hill and a one-day art and print sale set for Friday, many of those pieces are now available not only for public viewing but for purchase.

Students in UNC's Kappa Pi Art/Art History Honors Society opened The Artery at the beginning of November on East Rosemary Street. The gallery, which is open seven days a week (well, six days and one evening: Friday's hours are 5 to 9 p.m.), features works by a dozen or so artists on a monthly rotation.

This Friday, the gallery's regular exhibit will be complemented by the third annual Holiday Student Print and Art Sale. The one-day holiday sale will feature etchings, screen prints, photographs, drawings, paintings, digital works and ceramics by dozens of UNC art students.

"This, in a perfect world, is the next generation of famous artists," said Mike Sonnichsen, a lecturer and print and photo labs coordinator with the UNC Department of Art. "Everybody knows the Ackland Art Museum, but not a lot of the public knows what goes on in the art studios on campus. This is a chance for people to see what the artists of the future are doing.

"It's a valuable lesson for the students, too, to get a handle on the commerce side of art. They learn a lot about theory and technique, but if you have any serious desire to make a career as a creative person, you need to learn commerce, too."

'A great idea'

The Artery grew out of a discussion several students with art professor Jeff Whetstone. He mentioned that several years ago a small group of students had opened their own art gallery in a temporarily vacant space on Franklin Street.

"We thought, 'That's a great idea,'" said Hallie Ringle, a junior art history major. "So a few of us started looking into what it would take to do the same thing."

As students are trained to do, they started by doing research. "The town of Chapel Hill posts vacant properties on their Web site," said studio art major Gavin Hackeling. "We contacted some of the property owners of those places to see whether anyone might be willing to let us use a space at a discounted rate."

They scored even better than that. The owners of the Bank of America building happened to have a suitable empty storefront, home to a succession of restaurants and bars over the years.

"They were very generous," Hackeling said. "They let us use it for free until they find a permanent tenant."
The students cleaned and organized the space and selected the works to be shown during the first month. The contributors are all university students, but they aren't all art majors. A striking painting in "acrylic/graffiti" is by Devin Coley, a journalism major. Adam Wertz, a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in biology with no formal art training, has two large pieces on display, blown-up antique photographs he has accented with acrylic paint.

The Friday art sale, Sonnichsen said, is good for the gallery artists and for the students whose works will be offered only that day. University rules preclude holding the sale on campus.

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College Dropouts Cite Low Money and High Stress

By TAMAR LEWIN

Most dropouts leave college because they have trouble going to school while working to support themselves, according to a report released Wednesday by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research group.

The report, “With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them,” was based on a recent survey of more than 600 individuals aged 22 to 30, comparing those who started a college education but did not complete it with those who received a degree or certificate from a two- or four-year institution.

With the Obama administration pushing to improve the nation’s competitiveness by doubling the number of college graduates, many educators, foundations and policy groups are turning their attention to college dropouts.

While 2.8 million students enroll in some form of higher education each year, most do not proceed straight through to graduation. Only one in five of those who enroll in two-year institutions earn an associate degree within three years, and only two in five of those who start four-year colleges complete their degrees within six years.

“The conventional wisdom is that students leave school because they aren’t willing to work hard and aren’t really interested in more education,” said Jean Johnson, executive vice president of Public Agenda. “What we found was almost precisely the opposite. Most work and go to school at the same time, and most are not getting financial help from their families or the system itself.”

The study, which has a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points, found substantial differences between those who completed a degree and those who did not. Among those who dropped out, nearly 6 in 10 got no help from their parents in paying tuition. Among those who got degrees, more than 6 in 10 had tuition help from their families.

About 7 in 10 of the dropouts said they had no scholarship or loan aid. Among those who got degrees, only about four in 10 went without such aid.

Almost three-quarters of those who completed a degree had household incomes above $35,000. Among the dropouts, more than half had household incomes below $35,000. And while 7 in 10 of the college graduates had parents who had completed at least some college work, four in 10 of the dropouts had parents with nothing beyond a high school diploma.

Colleges need to be aware, the report emphasized, that only about a quarter of those enrolled in higher education fit the popular image of a college student living in a dorm and attending classes full time. Almost as many have dependent children.
The top reason the dropouts gave for leaving college was that it was just too hard to support themselves and go to school at the same time. Balancing work and school was a bigger barrier than finding money for tuition, they said. In fact, more than a third of the dropouts said that even if they got a grant that covered their books and tuition, it would be hard to go back to school, given their work and family commitments.

At a news conference Wednesday announcing the report, underwritten by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Frankie Barria, a 24-year-old former student from New York City, described the stops and starts of his educational journey.

“When I started college, I was living on my own at age 19,” Mr. Barria said. “My mom had left. Usually the bird leaves the nest, but in my case, the nest left the bird.”

Mr. Barria first enrolled at City College, but found it “unbelievably hard” to do well in school and maintain his job, so he left school. Later, he completed a semester at Kingsborough Community College, but stopped when his job became too demanding. Eventually, he enrolled at Medgar Evers College, but did not finish even one semester.

“Having a roof over my head and food to eat was more important,” he said.

Asked to rate 12 possible changes, the dropouts’ most popular solutions were allowing part-time students to qualify for financial aid, offering more courses on weekends and evenings, cutting costs and providing child care. The least popular were putting more classes online and making the college application process easier.

Hilary Pennington, a Gates Foundation education official, said two big factors associated with degree completion were going straight to college after high school and enrolling full time. But, Ms. Pennington added, colleges need to be more accountable for making sure their students graduate.

“If you try to leave a cellphone system, they almost won’t let you leave, and I just wonder if there’s something we need to think about in higher education,” she said. “We need a system where, if someone is struggling, if professors notice that somebody is missing a lot of classes, if someone doesn’t early register, they immediately go to student-life services, and someone reaches out.”
UC charges higher fees to broader range of graduate students

Future social workers, architects and urban planners will be considered 'professional' degree candidates and will be required to pay up to $8,000 more a year in additional fees.

By Larry Gordon

December 10, 2009

Future social workers, architects and urban planners studying at the University of California are about to get a change in status they might not want.

Starting next year, these UC students will be considered "professional" degree candidates and will be required to pay as much as $8,000 more a year in student fees than they do now. They will join law, business and medical students, among others, who have paid big surcharges for years. And some people say that isn't fair.

As the UC system grapples with state funding cuts, its leaders recently approved steep increases in the charges that students in professional graduate schools must shell out on top of regular student fees. The regents also added seven programs to those required to pay the surcharges, with landscape design, social work and physical therapy majors now among students who will face them.

Some critics say the university's actions are based on the erroneous idea that all professional school graduates land well-paying jobs and can easily repay their loans. And they say the university is losing the soul of a low-cost public institution.

"The state and the regents are putting the burden of the state budget gap on the students and the real concern is about the privatization of the university," said Jessica Luk, a UC Berkeley graduate student in city and regional planning.

The surcharges will affect about 12,000 professional school students, pushing their total UC fees 46% to 230% higher than those of graduate students in such programs as English or chemistry.

Administrators say the professional programs, with personal mentoring and often higher faculty salaries, are more costly to run than other graduate programs. The new fees are intended to prevent
further cuts to teaching staff and other services, UC officials say.

"Nobody is happy, nobody wants to raise fees. At the same time, we have an obligation to put on the highest quality educational program we can," said Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., dean of UCLA's School of Public Affairs. The school is planning to charge $5,200 more next year for its master's in social welfare and urban planning, matching a previously established fee for the master's in public policy, and bringing a California student's total annual costs to about $19,000, not including room and board.

Without the extra revenue, Gilliam said, the school would have to lay off nontenured teachers who lead field work courses that are important to academic accrediting agencies.

UC pledges that at least a third of the new revenue will be used to bolster financial aid, especially for students already enrolled. But critics contend that some low- and middle-income applicants might still be scared away.

Under the new fee schedule, UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall law school will have the highest professional fee, a $31,355 surcharge that will bring total annual costs for California residents, not including room, board and books, to $44,200, up 21% from this year. Among professional degrees with the lowest fee will be the social welfare program at the same campus, where a new $4,000 charge will bring the total to $18,163.

Also at UC Berkeley, Luk's regional planning program and others in the College of Environmental Design will face a new $6,000 professional degree fee, in addition to about $14,000 in other UC charges.

In a pledge not shared by all UC programs, the college's dean, Jennifer Wolch, said all 140 or so current students continuing next year will be shielded from the new fee. "We felt it would be unfair in mid-course to change the rules of the game," Wolch said.

But although they're happy for the help in the short term, Luk and others said that UC's future and that of its graduates remain at stake. More students will be forced to take on large loans, which can dissuade them from public service and push them toward more highly paid corporate jobs, she said. Besides, Luk added, lumping city planners with future doctors "is incongruent."

Hugo Sarmiento, in the second year of a UCLA master's program in urban planning and Latin American studies, dreads the higher costs. (The new urban planning fee still requires some faculty review.) He said he would have to borrow more next year and hope that his part-time campus job as a writing coach remains funded.

"It's already hard to pay for school and it's just going to get harder," Sarmiento said.

Partly because they tend to be older and have busier schedules, graduate students traditionally have been less likely than undergraduates to protest UC policies. But that appears to be changing, said Sarmiento, who joined rallies last month against the fee hikes.

"It's affecting graduate students in a very direct way. It's outrageous and it's harder for people to ignore," he said.
News of the professional fee hikes was overshadowed last month by the regents' decision at the same meeting to raise systemwide fees for undergraduates by $2,500, or 32%, and to impose similar basic fee increases on most graduate students.

The board also voted to expand the number of programs subject to the professional school surcharge from 37 to 44. For programs that had it already, the fee will rise 7% to 20% next year, with plans for further increases through 2013.

UC officials acknowledge that with the shift, 24 of the university's 44 professional degree programs will now cost more than the average charged for similar degrees at other high-quality public universities.

Among those above the average will be UCLA's master's degree programs in architecture, whose students will pay a new $8,000 professional fee, for a total cost of about $21,700 for in-state residents. Professors say comparisons also should be made to more expensive private schools, with which they compete; for instance, Columbia University's graduate architecture program charges more than $38,000 a year.

Not all students oppose the increases.

Deane Madsen, a UCLA student leader who is in the second year of a master's in architecture, said he supports the higher fees as a way to keep low student-to-faculty ratios and maintain other services.

For example, his current studio section, which is designing a theoretical school, housing and retail center for a real Koreatown location, has one instructor for every 15 students. That allows for a lot of personal attention in the bright, loft-like space crammed with drawing desks and computers. With fewer instructors, he said, "it would be a lot harder to communicate and have a productive studio environment."

Madsen, who switched from an acting career, said he considers his UCLA education equivalent to the Ivy League and still a bargain, although the narrowing of the cost gap worries him. "Plenty of people are already financially pinched by this economy and adding another $8,000 a year is quite significant," he said.

Alan Noah-Navarro, a third-year architecture student, said he understands the need for the new fee but is relieved to finish school this spring before it is implemented. He expects his student loans to total $80,000 when he enters a weakened job market that often pays young architects no more than $40,000 a year.

"It is kind of a shame," he said of the increase. "Architects don't come out and make a lot of money."

Future earning power played some role in setting the professional fees, according to Lawrence H. Pitts, the UC system's interim provost and executive vice president for academic affairs.

"I think it would be naive not to assume that is part of the considerations and that would not be a consideration unique to the University of California," he said.
Pitts said that past professional fees did not seem to hurt enrollments. Even with larger loans, students "decided the debt was worth the investment," he said.

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