THE DAILY CLIPS

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Bethel, ECU discuss clinic closure

By Jackie Drake
Wednesday, June 13, 2012

Bethel — Town commissioners and officials from East Carolina University have begun a dialogue on the closure of Bethel’s Family Medicine Center.

Town officials who want to keep the center open requested a meeting Tuesday afternoon with the Brody School of Medicine administrators after it was announced last week that the clinic would be closed due to financial losses.

“I think the meeting went very well,” Vice Dean Nick Benson said. “The individuals from Bethel did a wonderful job expressing their concerns. This whole connection of the clinic to not only Bethel but also Martin and Edgecombe counties are key aspects to us in this decision. It’s not something we take lightly. We really respect that relationship; we’re trying to be sensitive to that.”

Bethel commissioners could not be reached for comment Tuesday night but a participating resident who asked that his name be withheld said that the meeting was very cordial and productive and left the door open for an ongoing dialogue in the future.

No decision was reached on whether the clinic can remain open or if it will be closed in September as announced.

“Having listened to their concerns, that’s what we need to weigh, what the next steps are going to be,” Benson said.

Transportation remains a significant concern, Benson said. The School of Medicine’s initial announcement last week suggested patients use the Pitt Area Transit System to continue seeing center staff, who are scheduled to move to the new Family Medicine Clinic in Greenville. During a citizens meeting Monday night, several residents said PATS no longer runs regular routes to Bethel, something ECU did not take into account at first.

“We will be having detailed conversations with PATS in the near future,” Benson said.

PATS ended its regular transportation to Bethel this spring because the grant that funded the program ran out, said Mike Taylor, deputy county manager/chief information officer, who oversees PATS.
Bethel residents can schedule transportation by making an appointment, he said. The cost is $7 for one-way, making a trip to Greenville and back to Bethel $14.

“If they are going to promote using PATS as a transportation service, it would benefit them and the public to understand the transportation services we have available and the associated costs. That way, everyone can have a high level of satisfaction,” Taylor said.

No one from the School of Medicine contacted Pitt Area Transit System about what transportation services were available to Bethel prior to last week’s announcement, according to Taylor.

On Tuesday afternoon, a school official called PATS director Rebecca Clayton and the two groups plan to meet in the near future, Clayton said.

Also during Monday night’s meeting, several residents said that they heard that clinic staff were not allowed to take new patients.

“It’s not our habit to close treatment to new patients,” Benson said. “I honestly don’t know (why people are saying that). I can’t comment on where that is coming from. But that has been the experience of several people. That’s an aspect we will continue to examine.”

Senior reporter Ginger Livingston contributed to this story.

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Editorial: Bethel clinic closure worrisome

Wednesday, June 13, 2012

East Carolina University’s Brody School of Medicine ascribes its decision to shutter the Family Medicine Clinic in the town of Bethel to a decline in patient visits and the need to maximize the use of available funds in a time of tight budgets. Fewer people were utilizing the facility’s services, leading to officials’ determination to close the doors effective Sept. 1.

While that may make sense for the bottom line, it marks a significant step away from the mission of both the university and the medical school to serve rural communities in eastern North Carolina. Patients once dependent on the clinic — those who likely lack the ability to easily travel to Greenville — will be all but abandoned while the town they call home suffers yet another blow.

Dozens of Bethel residents gathered at the town’s senior center on Monday following last week’s announcement that medical school officials intended to close the family clinic that has served the community for more than 60 years. They expressed concern for the fate of the clinic’s patients, who they describe as predominantly elderly and without access to transportation to the Family Medicine Clinic in Greenville, which is slated to absorb the Bethel facility’s workload.

Many of those in attendance have seen this story repeat itself in recent years, as car dealerships, the town’s lone grocery store and other critical businesses have all closed. A message recently distributed by Mayor Mike Whitehurst expressed fear that the clinic’s closing would mean an end for the town’s drugstore. And he worried about those who could not drive since the Pitt
Area Transit System no longer routinely shuttles between Bethel and Greenville.

Certainly the fear for those patients is compelling, but so too is the larger issue. The medical school, like East Carolina, was founded to serve the rural communities that lack access to health care. Its emphasis on family health and its determination to bring care to the state’s most desperate corners are what sets it apart from other organizations. While there are many reasons to leave Bethel, to do so when the town faces such a grim future is a tremendous disappointment.

Proper accommodations can and must be made to ensure that those dependent on the clinic maintain the care on which they rely, especially if they lack access to transportation. Sadly, no such assurance can be made for the future of Bethel, as another building goes dark.
Olympic Trials up next for ECU’s Butts

By Ronnie Woodward
Wednesday, June 13, 2012

Tynita Butts completed one of the most decorated seasons in East Carolina track and field history last Friday with a third-place finish in the high jump at the NCAA Outdoor Championships, but a summer vacation is hardly in her immediate plans.

In fact, Butts, who just finished her junior year at ECU, will head to Eugene, Ore., later this month to compete in the U.S. Olympic Trials. When asked about her chances of achieving the U.S. Olympic standard and making the squad, Butts said anything is possible, but she’s not putting much pressure on herself.

“It’s a very difficult thing to do,” she said. “I’m not focused on trying to make it to the Olympics, I’m just trying to set a personal record and have a good meet. ... If it happens it would be nice, but I’m honestly not focused on it.”

Butts has already won five Conference USA championships and earned four All-America nods in her three-year career.

This year, she was named the Southeast Region Athlete of the Year by the U.S. Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association for the indoor and outdoor seasons.
ECU coach Curt Kraft said Butts’ success has put the Pirate program “on the map.” At last week’s NCAA Championships, the other athletes who finished tied for sixth or better were from Arizona, Texas, Alabama, Oklahoma State, Louisville and Georgia.

Butts’ third-place mark is the best for a female athlete in ECU track and field history.

“She’s given our program credibility,” Kraft said. “We are proud of her and everything she’s accomplished, and she does a very nice job of representing our university.”

Of all her accomplishments, Butts said finishing sixth at the U.S. Track and Field Championships during her sophomore year stands out because it was one of her first opportunities to display the Pirate purple and gold on the national stage.

“That was my first big experience around professional, elite athletes,” she said. “It was an opportunity for exposure and to go up there and represent the ECU Pirates. I had the chance to wear my uniform out there and let them know who we are.”

Butts almost didn’t make it to East Carolina.

After an impressive prep career at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., that included four Nike Outdoor championships, two Penn Relays titles and being named The Washington Post’s Athlete of the Year, plenty of colleges were courting her. She said Florida was her top choice and LSU was also in the mix, but she ended her recruitment after a visit to Greenville.

“All I had to do was take that one official visit,” she said. “The coaches expect us to take a risk, and that’s what I did. I believed in what the ECU coaches told me. ... It was a wise decision.”

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Average price of 4-year university up 15 percent

CHRISTINE ARMARIO - AP Education Writer

When those college tuition bills come in, be prepared for sticker shock.

The average tuition at a four-year public university climbed 15 percent between 2008 and 2010, fueled by state budget cuts for higher education and increases of 40 percent and more at universities in states like Georgia, Arizona and California.

The U.S. Department of Education's annual look at college affordability also found significant price increases at the nation's private universities, including at for-profit institutions, where the net price for some schools is now twice as high as Harvard.

At Full Sail University, a film and art school in central Florida, the average price of tuition, fees, books, and other expenses totals $43,990, even when grants and scholarships are factored in. The average net price for an incoming Harvard student: $18,277, according to the department. Net price is cost of attendance minus grant and scholarship aid.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said students need to be smart consumers and states need to do their part by making higher education a priority in their budgets. Forty percent of states cut higher education spending last year, the most important factor in tuition increases.

"As a nation, we need more college graduates in order to stay competitive in the global economy," Duncan said. "But if the costs keep on rising, especially at a time when family incomes are hurting, college will become increasingly unaffordable for the middle class."

Pennsylvania State University had the highest in-state tuition for a four-year public university at $15,250 during the 2010-11 school year. When the costs of room, board and other expenses are factored in, the total rises to $19,816, the fourth highest net price nationwide.

Bill Mahon, a spokesman for the school, said a 19.6 percent cut in state funding last year, coupled with a decade of weak state support, "has left Penn State increasingly reliant on students and their families to fund most of the costs of their Penn State education."

Zach Zimbler, who graduated from Penn State University this spring with a degree in information sciences, said his total tuition came out to about $50,000 for four years. He now has loans totaling around $25,000. He said many students don't realize how much debt they've amassed until it comes time to pay.

"The students themselves don't really know what they're getting into," he said.

Zimbler said he worked during school and feels confident about the value of the education he received, even though it came with a high price tag. He's working on starting his own software business.

The College Affordability and Transparency lists were first published last year to fulfill a reporting requirement passed into law in 2008. The lists track tuition and fees as well as the average net price at public, private and for-profit colleges and universities.
It's one of several recent initiatives by the Department of Education to increase student and parent awareness on the costs of higher education. Last week, presidents from 10 colleges and universities agreed to provide students information on costs, financial aid and monthly loan payments after graduation in an easy-to-understand form. President Barack Obama also issued a mandate to streamline the application process for those who want to enroll in income-based repayment plans, which set a cap on loan payments based on discretionary income.

Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats in Congress are struggling against a July 1 deadline to avert a doubling of interest rates on new federal student loans for 7.4 million people.

The data released Tuesday shows increases for four-year, public institutions that are similar what has been observed over the last decade, though Duncan said costs have increased faster in recent years. Between 2001-02 and 2011-12, in-state tuition and fees at public, four-year colleges increased at an average rate of 5.6 percent each year, according to the College Board's 2011 report on trends in higher education pricing. That rate is higher than in previous decades: In the 1980s, tuition increased at about 4.5 percent each year, and in the 1990s at 3.2 percent.

"Obviously we're at a period of economic instability at the state level, so you'll see among public institutions the increases in tuition and fees are a lot of times a function of declines in state support," said Bryan Cook, director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education. "So we've not been surprised in seeing increases in tuition."

Certain states have been harder hit than others. Five of the 33 public universities with the highest net price, for example, are in Ohio. Six public universities in Georgia saw tuition increases that were higher than 40 percent. The University of California in Berkeley and Los Angeles also saw big price jumps.

The data released by the Education Department goes up until the 2010-11 school year, and in some states, tuition increased again last year.

Cook advised students to look at the data in context: Some schools with big rate increases, for example, still have tuition that is below the nationwide average.

"I think there is more comprehensive information that could be provided contextual information that could be provided for these lists if we really want to provide students and families with the most information to make a good decision about going to college," he said.

There were some bright spots in the data. Community colleges, Duncan noted, remain one of the most consistently affordable options for higher education: The average net price of a community college increased by less than 1 percent between 2007 and 2009. Tuition, room and board average $8,085 at a public, two-year institution in 2010.

"While community colleges have mostly done their part, there is much more the rest of us can and should be doing," Duncan said. "Keeping college affordable is a shared responsibility."
The Pilot, Southern Pines

Aberdeen Survey to Gauge Business Climate

By TED M. NATT JR.

Wednesday, June 13, 2012

The town of Aberdeen has launched a survey to gauge its entrepreneurial climate.

“We want to make sure that we keep downtown and our business community strong and viable,” Planning Director Kathy Liles said last week. “We really need people to do the survey. Otherwise, we don’t have enough information to make intelligent decisions to move Aberdeen forward.”

The survey was developed in partnership with the Office of Engagement, Innovation and Economic Development (OEIED) at East Carolina University and specifically with the university’s Center for Sustainable Tourism.

“Nobody has a perfect entrepreneurial climate,” said Carol Kline, an assistant professor at ECU who also works at the center. “You have to do the assessment first so you can remove the barriers to success. Only then can you start to target the areas that need to be improved.

“The key is getting a big enough sample so that the average scores are meaningful.”

Kline said she would hope for a minimum of 300 respondents. She said 1,000 “would be amazing.”

She made a presentation to Aberdeen stakeholders last week in which she emphasized that they needed to “spread the word” about the survey.

“Ideally, you want to cover the diversity in Aberdeen,” she said. “You want more entrepreneurs to bubble up and start more businesses.”

The survey, which can be found online at www.surveymonkey.com/s/AberdeenEClimate or filled out in person at the Municipal Building on Page Street, is anonymous and takes about 10 minutes to complete because there are 22 questions.

It will measure Aberdeen’s entrepreneurial climate based on physical infrastructure, financial infrastructure, business support services, human capital, social capital, education and training, government and leadership, community culture, quality of life and general context.

“Community culture is my favorite category because of all the intangibles that are hard to define but in the air,” Kline said. “Moore County has so much good stuff in it. But you know that because you’re here.”

Kenny Flowers, director of community and regional development for OEIED, said the survey is part of the Talent Enhancement and Capacity Building Program launched in 2009 by ECU and the N.C. Department of Commerce.

“We’re targeting rural communities because they need the most help,” Flowers said. “One of the things we like to see coming out of this program is communities identifying ways to elevate themselves.”
Aberdeen’s involvement comes at the same time as town leaders are mulling whether to reapply to become an active member of the North Carolina Main Street Program. Aberdeen joined the program in 1990, but soon became inactive.

Town officials have praised the program but are reluctant to commit to it unless they are sure they can make the monetary commitments of the minimum three-year requirement.

The program assists selected communities across the state in restoring economic vitality to their historic downtowns. Using a comprehensive downtown revitalization process developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Main Street encourages economic development within the context of historic preservation.

The program emphasizes a four-point approach for downtown revitalization and historic preservation: organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring.

“We’ve got the application materials ready to submit should we decide to go back into Main Street,” Liles said. “But that doesn’t mean we’re not focused on doing the best we can for our business community. We have access to other resources and we’re taking advantage of those resources.”

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Aspiring engineer tops Smithfield-Selma class

By Colin Campbell, ccampbell@newsobserver.com

SMITHFIELD - Lauren Weaver has been at the top of her class since ninth grade, so no one was surprised to hear her named Smithfield-Selma High School’s 2012 valedictorian.

But while Weaver, a Selma native, has always planned to attend college, her path after high school only recently became clear.

A ninth-grade biology class cemented her passion for science and math, and she’s thinking bioengineering is the field for her.

“I could create some type of artificial organs,” she said of her career goals.

“I’ve always loved science, and I’ve liked the idea of engineering.”

Weaver had expected to study the subject at an in-state school such as N.C. State University, but then she got courted by the University of South Carolina.

Weaver decided to apply, but she also checked out USC’s archrival, Clemson University.

She says she fell in love with the college-town atmosphere, and she’s already started sporting the school’s bright-orange colors.

“It was gorgeous – right there in the mountains,” she said of the Clemson campus.

A scholarship offer made the choice easier, and Weaver will be among the few SSS graduates headed out of state.

She’s also among the first in her family to attend a four-year college.

She’ll major in engineering, but she’ll minor in English – a subject she came to appreciate after a class with SSS teacher Kevin Daughtry. “When I came into high school, I loathed English,” Weaver said.

Outside of class, Weaver has been a member of many school groups, including Students Against Destructive Decisions and the science and arts clubs.

Her advice to other students hoping to make the top of their class?

“Stay focused, don’t lose sight of the big goals and keep your priorities in order,” she said.

Weaver offered parting words to her fellow seniors at Friday’s graduation ceremony.

Joining her on stage was salutatorian Sophronia “Fronia” Knott.

Knott is an aspiring actress who will attend the honors college at East Carolina University, where she plans to major in theater arts and English.

She’s acted in plays at SSS and with Smithfield’s community theater troupe, the Neuse Little Theatre.

Knott had a lead role in the NLT’s 2011 production of “Agnes of God,” and she’s also been an assistant director. Later this month, she’ll lead a group of fellow actors in presenting staged readings of two plays she recently wrote.
Local educator wins dissertation award

From Contributed Reports

Tuesday, June 12, 2012

Rocky Mount resident Pamela H. Breedlove Ed.D., recently was honored at a reception at East Carolina University.

Her dissertation, “Teacher evaluation in North Carolina: Teacher perceptions during a time of change,” was selected to receive the fourth annual Glatthorn Dissertation Award. The award is funded by the family of Dr. Allan A. Glatthorn, who was distinguished research professor of education at East Carolina University and the author of numerous books on educational leadership.

Breedlove is professional development specialist for Wilson County Schools and was formerly a math teacher and principal in Nash County Schools. She also taught math in Edgecombe, Craven and Wayne County Schools and at both Craven and Nash Community Colleges.
Senate budget doesn't buffer schools

Posted: 7:05 a.m. Monday

The spending plan state Senate budget writers rolled out Monday doesn't replace $258 million in federal EduJobs money that school systems will lose this year. Without that money, school superintendents have warned they will likely have to cut teachers, teacher assistants and other school workers.

That puts the Senate at odds with both Gov. Beverly Perdue and the budget passed by House lawmakers earlier this year. "We took a very minimalist approach," said Sen. Richard Stevens, R-Wake, one of the Senate appropriations committee co-chairmen who constructed the budget.

Senate leaders said they were more cautious than their House counterparts, who used savings and other "one-time" money to offset the EduJobs cuts. Doing so, they said, would have merely delayed pressing decisions. Replacing the federal funds, which were handed down as part of the stimulus, has been a key request of school superintendents across the state.

"We are going to see more teachers leaving, and you're going to have school systems that don't have the money to replace these teachers. So, you're going to have class size that goes up," said Brian Lewis, government relations manager for the North Carolina Association of Educators.

But Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger said it was not the state's job to back-fill for federal spending. Berger, R-Rockingham, said many educators have over-estimated the effect of EduJobs, saying that much of that money went to positions outside the classroom.

"Many of these are the same people who were talking about tens of thousands of layoffs as a result of last year's budget, which just didn't happen," he said. "I'm not sure the classroom impact will be as great as some have said."

The Senate did eliminate $74 million in state cuts beyond the federal EduJobs money that were due to go into effect this year. Other early highlights from the Senate budget bill:

It does not appear to include a reserve fund to compensate the survivors of North Carolina's state-sponsored eugenics program, which forcibly sterilized people for decades. That measure has been a key House priority.

Senators did include $47.4 million needed for Berger's Excellence in Public Schools Act. Under that bill, most third-graders would not be able to move on unless they could pass standardized reading tests. It anticipates the conversion of of local mental health agencies to managed care organizations won't save as much money as first projected. This conversion has been fraught with difficulty, and advocates for the mentally ill say most locally run mental health agencies aren't ready for the switch. The House budget anticipated going forward with this change and saving $8.5 million in the coming year. Senate budget writers anticipate spending $11 million due to the delay in converting.

"We want to see the savings first and not count on them," Sen. Pete Bunnstetter, R-Forsyth, said of the mental health provision. According to budget documents, the extra money will allow for "delayed state-wide expansion" of the program.
In general, the Senate budget is more austere, backing away from many of the items that the House budget would have given to agencies. For example, House budget would have allowed the state crime lab in the Triad to add positions to conduct DNA analysis. The Senate budget doesn't provide those funds.

Likewise the Senate doesn't include the money that House budget writers earmarked for a new tax credit for corporations and wealthy individuals who donate to scholarship programs that allow students from poor families to attend private schools. Nor does the Senate proposal include funding for infant mortality prevention programs – such as a program based at East Carolina University that serves low-income women in 29 eastern counties – that the House had included in its version of the budget bill.

The Senate budget would provide $230 million to cover the state's increasing Medicaid shortfall, and about $84 million is set aside for public schools that could be used for either raises or retaining teachers who had been paid by federal EduJobs funding.

Lewis said virtually no school system would give a raise under that plan. "It would be totally imprudent for superintendents to give out raises," he said.

"What looks like a pay raise for teachers is in fact no pay raise at all," he added. "We got on the phone with the (North Carolina) School Boards Association this morning. We were told no raises were going to happen for teachers."

Perdue said in a written statement that she was unhappy with the Senate's effort. “The Senate budget means more pink slips for teachers and classroom cuts that would threaten our children’s future,” she said. “It doesn’t have to be this way. I have outlined two alternatives to fund our schools, but Senate Republicans have rejected both. This budget is simply not good enough for our children or the economic future of our state. I call on the Senate to do better.”

Rank-and-file state employees who aren't teachers are more pleased with the Senate version of the budget, which would put more money into the state retirement system. Senate budget writers also set aside money to give a 1.2 percent salary increases public employees. The House had provided a one-time $250 bonus.

"After promising these raises in last year’s budget, the Senate has chosen to keep their word," Dana Cope, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, said in a letter to his members. "A one-time bonus is no substitute for a base pay raise, which would be a greater benefit for employees in the long-term for compensation and retirement benefits."

Cope encouraged state workers to lobby lawmakers for a budget that would include both the pay raises advocated by the Senate and the five extra days off included in the House spending plan.

House and Senate budget writers do share some common ground. Both budgets would cap the state's gas tax at 37.5 cents per gallon, for example. The Senate is expected to pass its version of the budget this week. The House and Senate would then have to construct a compromise plan to send to Perdue.

"I am confident we’ll be able to work things out with the House," Berger said. "As far as the governor is concerned, I’m hopeful that she would sign the budget, as I’ve been hopeful she would sign a number of other things that we passed."

Reporters: Mark Binker, Cullen Browder
Web Editor: Matthew Burns
For colleges, better financial disclosure shouldn’t be voluntary

By Michelle Singletary
June 13, 2012

Some things just can’t be left up to voluntary compliance.

In yet another effort to get colleges and universities to be level about the costs of higher education, the Obama administration has persuaded 10 schools to provide important financial information to incoming freshmen starting with the 2013-14 school year.

Which majors have the highest unemployment rates?: A recent study breaks down how graduates with various college degrees are faring in today’s difficult job market.

Fees can eat into financial aid and cause cardholders to pay more than they need to access their money.

As part of their financial aid packages, the schools, which represent more than 1.4 million students, said they would disclose at least five key pieces of information: They will be clearer about how much one year of college will cost. They will provide a clear distinction between grants, scholarships and loans. They will provide estimated monthly payments for the federal student loans that graduates will likely owe. And, they will supply information about the percentages of students who enroll from one year to the next, graduate and repay their loans without defaulting.

This type of disclosure, the administration announced, is a big leap forward toward financial aid transparency. Perhaps right about now you’re thinking: Why isn’t such vital information already available for all colleges and universities?

Of course schools provide cost information, but many families complain that what they are given is confusing, making it hard to compare college costs or figure out how much money they would need to borrow.

In a White House news briefing, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said schools are doing “a poor job of making clear how much a student will receive in terms of grants and scholarships, and how much they’ll have to borrow in terms of student loans. . . . Having this important information provided both clearly and transparently will help students and their parents invest wisely and make the best, most informed decision possible about where to enroll.”

The schools that have stepped forward to be more transparent are the state university systems of Maryland, New York, Massachusetts and Texas; Arizona State University; Miami Dade College; North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Vassar College; and Syracuse University.

The Department of Education and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau teamed up to launch the “Know Before You Owe” student loan project as a way to standardize financial aid information. With feedback from the public, the agencies are developing a one-page shopping sheet to help students better understand the type and amount of financial aid they qualify for, and to allow them to compare college offers.
“We plan to have it available in the beginning of the upcoming school year of this fall, and we hope that it will be voluntarily adopted by the higher-education community,” Duncan said.

See, that’s the problem. When you say that the schools are doing a poor job of being upfront and making it difficult for families to know what they owe, then I think we are way past letting them voluntarily correct a problem that has been called to their attention for some time now. These schools are led by highly educated people and they haven’t figured out how to deliver financial aid information in a way that discloses the true cost of a college education to families?

They can figure it out. But many colleges don’t want to. If they did, families would be smacked in the face with the truth, which is that a student can’t afford to attend their schools without a decade or more of debt. This would mean that the colleges would actually have to better control their expenses. Over the years, because students can easily borrow from the federal government or private lenders, the schools have gotten very little price push-back.

The lack of transparency is the higher-education version of a car-buying nightmare, which is to say you never really know what you will owe until you’re sitting in the finance office after having fallen in love with the car.

“Figuring out how to pay for college can be daunting,” CFPB Director Richard Cordray said during the briefing. “It’s often the first major financial decision that a student will make, one that will affect her for the rest of her life.”

So stop giving colleges and universities a choice to continue their poor performance in this area. If, as Cordray said, the stakes have never been higher for families to clearly understand the costs and risks of student debt, then Congress needs to act to mandate that schools use the shopping sheet. Don’t ask. Just tell them to do it.
Discussions of game-based learning tend to focus on K-12 classrooms, but educational gaming isn't just for kids. From simulation-based games, to Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, to Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), to Serious Games that take on real-world social issues (see Purdue University's Serious Games Center), higher education is on the path to widespread integration of all sorts of games in all sorts of classrooms.

In its 2012 report on technology trends in higher education, the New Media Consortium predicts that the horizon for widespread adoption of game-based learning is just two to three years away. Despite some challenges, including economic pressures and institutional barriers, it's a good bet that game-based learning will soon be commonplace in most college and university classrooms.

For some quick perspective on the potential power of game-based learning, a good starting point is Tom Chatfield's TED talk "7 Ways Games Reward the Brain." One of Chatfield's key points about digital gaming is that everything can be measured, which means that rewards can constantly be calibrated to keep players engaged.

In the commercial gaming world, this ability to fine-tune reward cycles based on billions of data points from millions of players is used to keep people spending time and money. In educational gaming, the ability to capture immediate, in-depth data about each student's performance opens the door to entirely new modes of measuring progress and achievement, in ways that reward and reinforce engagement.

Assessment can be ongoing. Feedback can be frequent. Students can know where they stand day-by-day, not just at test time, and exactly where they need to work (play) harder or seek assistance. Rewards for effort can motivate students to keep trying when they might otherwise give up, and educators can adjust what and how they are teaching based on immediate feedback about the individual and collective progress of their students.

At The Atlantic's Technologies in Education Forum in May, Robert Torres, a senior program officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (and a former teacher and principal), spoke to this aspect of game-based learning, saying that the foundation's agenda had shifted over the last two year from games as learning environments to games as assessment environments.

Torres talked about the importance of designing immersive, deep-learning game environments that place students in authentic problem contexts and explained that "we have the technology available now where we can design assessment mechanics into these environments." And the assessment goals are wide and deep. "We're interested in assessing how kids apply skill and knowledge, as well
as assessing complex skills, like collaboration, problem-solving and systems thinking," Torres said. "Unless we really innovate at the level of assessment, we're not going to have big impact."

I'm not a gamer (unless you count a lot of hours spent playing Asteroids and Centipede in the early 80s), but I find the case for game-based learning very compelling, especially when looked at from the assessment angle. Here's why: I would posit that the best educational experiences have many elements in common with gaming. For those students who are 'natural' scholars, succeeding in school has always been based on the kinds of emotional rewards and neurological triggers that Chatfield discussed in his TED talk.

All I have to do is think about the qualities shared by my best professors: they encouraged healthy competition, showed me the pleasure of playing with ideas, facilitated formative "aha!" moments, gave me assignments and tests that pushed me to prove myself, and regularly rewarded me (not only with good grades, but with approval and encouragement).

Not every instructor rose to this level of pedagogical virtuosity, of course. But enough of them did that I was hooked on higher education and prepared to follow a path of lifelong learning.

In my eyes, the promise of game-based learning in post-secondary education is twofold: it leverages 21st-century technology to support essential aspects of great teaching, and it also gives educators new ways to engage a wider range of students, not just those who are already in the metaphorical front row.

Sounds like a win-win situation.

* Amy Southerland

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At alumni weekends, age is no longer a hindrance

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Along with the rest of society, alumni weekends are getting older.

Shenandoah University’s April reunion in Winchester featured a 103-year-old pianist from the Class of 1926. James Madison University drew four 1942 alumni to its spring gathering in Harrisonburg, Va. Loyola University’s Golden Greyhounds dinner last week in Baltimore had nearly 500 registrants, none younger than 70.

Colleges across the Washington area are paying more heed to alumni who graduated at least a half-century ago—because more of them are showing up at reunions. Several schools have organized new groups for “golden” alumni, with induction ceremonies built into reunion weekends.

Alumni weekends are traditionally held in spring or fall, and several local colleges marked the occasion last weekend.

For the institutions, surging numbers of 80-, 90- and 100-year-old alumni who are healthy and mobile present both an opportunity and a challenge. Their very presence on campus serves as an inspiration to younger generations of dedication to one’s alma mater. But the yawning age gap separating old and young can make it difficult for alumni officials to program reunion gatherings.

Millennial alumni, it is said, favor happy hours, open houses and late-night mixers. Twenty- and 30-year alumni are drawn to classy dinners and homecoming games.

Fifty- and 60-year alumni, for their part, sometimes prefer luncheons to dinners and coffee to chardonnay. They crave the intellectual stimulation of a faculty lecture or a state-of-the-college address. They enjoy a simple pleasures of a campus tour. And, oh yes, they prefer an invitation on actual paper.

“It’s just nice to get back,” said Betty Fulk Strider, 86, a 1947 alumna of the University of Mary Washington, the public liberal arts school in Fredericksburg. “And it does mean a lot to me. As you get older, you don’t know how many more of them you’re going to attend.”

Leaders of Mary Washington recently formed a 1908 Society, named for the year of the university’s founding and tailored to alumni who have reached the 50-year reunion mark. Inductees are invited back each year to alumni weekend because they “don’t want to wait five years to attend another reunion,” said Marty Morrison, university spokeswoman. This, too, is becoming common practice.

With their growing numbers, older alumni aren’t just donating time. Although 80- and 90-something alumni might be past their peak earning years, they can be a bountiful source of donations. At Washington College in Maryland, the Older and Wiser group of senior alumni gave more than $1 million at this year’s reunion. Last year, a 96-year-old George Washington University Law School alumnus donated $6 million.

In 2009, GWU began inviting its alumni “emeriti” to walk, clad in golden robes, in the graduation procession. The school’s Alumni Emeriti Society has 5,300 members.
“They serve as an example of what it means to stay connected,” said Mark Forrest, a GWU alumni relations officer.

Annual attendance has been rising, too, at the University of the District of Columbia Legacy Brunch, an event for alumni of 50 years or more, last held in May.

Georgia Herron, 87, is a 1946 graduate of Miner Teachers College, one of several institutions that ultimately merged into UDC. Each year, she assembles a group of classmates from the historic African American institution.

“Last year, it was 10. Now it’s dwindled to about five or six,” she said. “I have to get their children to bring them. But we love to come back to campus.”

There’s scant data on the trend of aging alumni, but college officials say it is far more common now than 20 or 30 years ago to see a table full of alumni marking their 65th or 70th reunion.

“This concept of what it means to be old has changed. Retirement no longer means that you just go into a corner and wait,” said Rae Goldsmith, a vice president at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. “They’re volunteering more, and they’re connecting with their alma mater.”

This spring, the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg, hosted 101-year-old Mildred Williams Doughty, from the Class of ’32, at its Old Guarde Weekend.

Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, drew two men from the Class of 1937 to its May 5 reunion. One is a great-great-nephew of Johns Hopkins’s. The other, a former ambassador, performed on the harmonica.

The roster of activities last weekend at Loyola University Maryland bespoke a multigenerational event, including a family picnic, a golf outing and an estate planning seminar. One evening, the school hosted a healthy turnout of alumni from the early 1940s at its Golden Greyhound dinner dance. Jere Hamill, a 90-year-old alumnus from 1944, served as toastmaster.

“I think this was my last time. I could keep doing it,” he joked, “but I’ve done it so long, I’m sure people are tired of me.”