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Ex-Packer Koonce gives inside look at player trauma, transitions

By Mike Freeman | CBSSports.com National NFL Insider

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At the end of George Koonce's doctoral thesis, a definitive look at life after the NFL, Koonce comes to a blunt conclusion. Remember, Koonce is a former NFL player who spent a large chunk of his life in and around professional football, playing the bulk of his career in Green Bay.

Koonce writes in his thesis: "Through my personal experience and the experiences of those whom I have interviewed for this study, I conclude that playing in the NFL is detrimental to one's life and well-being, especially for the players who are engulfed in the role of a professional athlete."
These are obviously strong words, but Koonce makes his case in a fascinating, stunning, at times frightening and often entertaining look at life in football and what happens after the game ends. Other research on the subject has been done by authors of all types, but Koonce has the added bona fides of having played in the NFL for almost a decade.

The effects of head trauma and CTE, and how they impact players once they leave the game, are one of the hottest topics in football and will be for years, if not decades. The death of Junior Seau has only intensified the discussion.

The main thrust of Koonce's argument is that a lack of identity, extreme pain from the injuries of playing football, drug addiction (including painkillers) and being unprepared for life after football are far more detrimental for ex-NFL players than realized by almost everyone in the sport, including those who play, coach and manage it. But Koonce doesn't shy away from giving players their fair share of blame for their post-football troubles.

Koonce's thesis is called Role Transition of National Football League Retired Athletes: A Grounded Theory Approach, and he wrote it for Marquette University to help fulfill his doctorate in philosophy. It's more than 70,000 words.

Koonce says throughout his career he spoke to more than 5,000 NFL players, and for the dissertation, interviewed 21 ex-players (using many pseudonyms). He examines this issue as thoroughly as anyone ever has.

We're not allowed to print the entire work, but chunks of it appear below. Some highlights of his research include:

• A 1989 study of former NFL players reveals that 62 percent of those surveyed reported leaving football with permanent injuries. The study also said players reported emotional problems with only 21 percent saying they had no emotional issues during the transition period out of football.

• Another study: 21 percent of participants experienced four or more career changes since leaving football. "The relatively high number of changes," Koonce writes, "indicates that the transition process for athletes is a rather volatile experience."

• One study of former NFL players regarding depression and pain concluded that 14.7 percent of respondents experienced moderate to severe depression and 47.6 percent reported difficulty with pain as quite or very common. Frequently reported problems include having trouble sleeping, financial difficulties, marital or relationship problems and problems with fitness,
exercise and aging. The participants experienced levels of depressive symptoms similar to those of the general population, writes Koonce, but the impact of those symptoms was compounded by high levels of difficulty with pain.

- Four distinct stages of transition are identified in a 1991 study: (1) awareness that the end is near prior to career termination; (2) denial during the first two to six months; (3) transition marked by conflict and trauma, lasting up to five years and (4) acceptance of a new reality. These stages are similar to those defined by Kubler-Ross for death and dying.

Other parts of the dissertation ... in Koonce's own words.

I witnessed how, for most players, their passion was football. It was hard to develop a love or passion for anything else. That said, some players got married. I knew some players who got married because they thought the coaches would look more favorably on them for supporting a family. These same guys never stopped seeing multiple girlfriends because they never developed an understanding of what it meant to love another individual as much as they loved themselves and football. To them, it was perfectly normal to give themselves physically but never emotionally to these women. These same players were shocked when their wives filed for divorce.

My personal experience has been playing football from the age of nine, participating in Pop Warner, middle school, high school, collegiate and professional football (NFL Europe, Green Bay Packers, and Seattle Seahawks) through the age of 32. In addition to playing, I have had the opportunity to be an assistant athletic director at East Carolina University, director of player development for the Green Bay Packers, senior associate athletic director for Marquette University, and an athletic director for a Division I program for a total of 10 years following my playing days. In all, I have enjoyed 33 years of observing and participating in sport.

In April 1991, I signed with the Atlanta Falcons as an undrafted free agent. My signing bonus was $15,000 and my base salary was $125,000. I attended three minicamps, lasting one week each, and six weeks of training camp. I was paid $750 a week for camps. I was released by the Falcons after the last week of training camp and never saw the $125,000 because I failed to make the team's opening day roster. While I was fortunate to join NFL Europe in January 1992, most players never get another shot. During camps, the teams start with 85 players, and 33 of those guys get cut every year by each of the 32 NFL teams -- a total of 1,024 players. The majority of those guys have
not played 3.5 years. My experience with the Falcons happens to probably about 80 percent of the guys trying to break into the NFL. Those players who are fortunate to make the team roster do not realize that it is just a matter of time before they get that tap on the shoulder and hear those dreaded words, "The coach wants to see you, and please bring your playbook."

Could I call an old playing buddy who had been out of the league for a few years for support? No; a player does not call another player who has been deselected because of embarrassment and vulnerability. Prior to that moment, the player had been great at everything. He was a warrior, a hero, a victor, and now -- what is he? He cannot let people know that he is weak. So, he keeps all that to himself and works out, trying to do things to keep himself busy mentally.

One of my personal acquaintances provides an extreme example of someone finding it hard to transition from the NFL to ordinary life. He had had a long and successful professional career, but upon his retirement from the NFL, he had a difficult time finding a place in the business world. Each morning he would leave his home in a business suit with his briefcase, and each evening he would return, giving every appearance to his family that things were going well. The truth is he was actually sitting all day long in a parked car, despairing over his inability to fit into the business community. He eventually took his own life and that of his wife as well.

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The facts remain, however, that the average age of a player leaving the game is 28 and the average life expectancy for retired NFL players is 53 to 59 years. That leaves a player with almost 30 years between leaving the game and his ability to claim retirement benefits. If he lives to the average age of 57 for a retired player, he will only receive those benefits for a couple of years.

On average, players have a 30-year income gap to cover between their NFL career ending and being eligible for retirement benefits. Most players are so role engulfed that they are not considering those 30 years when they are active in the sport. Many have extensive injuries and their bodies need to heal before they will be able to even begin to consider what they will pursue in their post-NFL life. For others, they have injuries that never heal, and their health insurance coverage runs out long before their bodies are in a condition to take on another career. In one case, injuries ruined a second career.
For example, Reggie Williams, a former Cincinnati Bengal and Dartmouth College graduate, played in the league for 14 years. After his retirement, he became an executive at Disney. Due to extensive injuries caused during his playing years, he had his knees operated on 17 times, which included having both knees replaced. Complications with bone infections had doctors thinking they may have to amputate his right leg, but they were able to avoid that. Nevertheless, he had to quit his job at Disney at the age of 53 because of the pain in his legs and will have to take antibiotics for the rest of his life. He was successful both on and off the field, but his injuries now have him rehabbing the right side of his body for three hours a day. He estimates that his medical expenses are around $500,000. Most of those expenses were covered with the insurance he carried at Disney, but he still had extensive out of pocket expenses. He applied for NFL disability benefits but was notified that he was not eligible.

On June 2, 1992, I received my first paycheck from the Green Bay Packers for $45,000. I was hesitant to spend the signing bonus because I was not guaranteed another check until after training camp. I put the check in the bank and waited. After six weeks of training camp, I made the 53-man roster. The first item on my list was to secure an apartment. When I filled out the application, I was denied. I was fortunate to have a teammate willing to co-sign for my apartment. I did not have enough financial experiences to build my credit. ... Many players fall prey to the rampant spending that characterizes some of the professional football culture, regardless of their upbringing. I was no different. My first major purchase was a 1992 white Corvette with red interior for $38,000.

Another interesting opportunity for players to spend extravagantly was for jewelry and apparel. Representatives were invited into the locker room periodically to address player needs and wants for personalized jewelry and apparel. Some players would spend $250,000 on jewelry. Tailors would come in with clothing packages ranging from $5,000 to $25,000. These packages would contain suits, shirts and ties. The tailors would take orders in the preseason and have the packages ready for the season.

The idea that satisfaction is only connected to football glory even influences many players' post-football career selections. Many players like being around that feeling of adoration and seek jobs where they can stay connected to football. Careers in radio and TV are appealing because of the comfort area. These jobs allow them to not feel vulnerable and completely cut off
from the sport. While many former athletes will do anything to stay around the sport, re-entering sport in a different capacity is not always easy. Job qualifications are still essential to secure a non-player position. This causes many athletes to feel frustration. They want to coach, but they cannot coach. They want to scout, but they cannot scout. They are not afraid of experiencing other areas; it is just that they have not had a chance to develop any other skill sets. Football is all that they have known from a very young age, and they believe they should be able to capitalize continually on that.

Becoming addicted to the glorified sense of self can have many negative consequences for former players attempting to change careers. Thoughts of glory, fame and incredible achievement can overwhelm a person's sense of what it means to be content. Instead of going for well-roundedness, some athletes continue to look for self-esteem in the eyes of others. For some players, a long-term career in sport also results in an over-estimation of their own skills. Those who maintain a narrow identity approach academics and job preparation in a way that leads to crisis rather than relief during the transition period. It is no surprise, therefore, when they experience high stress over the long haul. A number of athletes admit that idealization of their own ability is part of this mindset as well. Confidence is developed in athletes without a reality check. As the stakes get higher and an individual becomes more successful in football, self-aggrandizement often increases.

On May 2, Koonce submitted his thesis. It was the same day Seau shot and killed himself. They were in the same draft class.
Former NFL linebacker George Koonce has spent the last several years examining the emotional affect of retiring from football.

Former NFL linebacker George Koonce recently submitted to Marquette University a doctoral dissertation on transitioning from life outside the game. This column represents his personal experience, as told to NFC West blogger Mike Sando.

Guest column: Surviving life after the NFL

May, 15, 2012
By George Koonce | Special to ESPN.com

I had a wonderful wife, beautiful children, money in the bank and a Super Bowl ring back on that day in 2003 when my post-NFL transition took my Chevy Suburban around a 25-mph corner at three times the posted speed. Whatever happened that day was going to happen. I didn't really care.

By the grace of God, I survived what was, in retrospect, a suicide attempt. But paramedics weren't going to cart me off. No chance. The football tough guy in me refused to get into that ambulance. My wife, Tunisia, drove me to the hospital and saved my life with words, not medicine.
"George," she said, "I don't understand what you are going through, but I sympathize. We cannot reinvent who you are, but we can redefine who you are."

Thanks to Tunisia, that car crash in North Carolina was a turning point. I would seek counseling, join a church and continue my education with the goal of becoming an athletic director. Tunisia even insisted I continue my education while she bravely fought the breast cancer that would ultimately claim her life in 2009.

The day Junior Seau committed suicide was also the day I submitted to Marquette University my doctoral dissertation on the difficulties NFL players face in transitioning away from the game. While it's fashionable to blame concussions for Junior's early demise and it's certainly possible brain trauma played a role, the adjustment to life after football came to my mind immediately.

Eight years as a linebacker with the Green Bay Packers and one with the Seattle Seahawks should have set me up for life. Instead, the tunnel vision and unwavering devotion a football career demanded had left me utterly unprepared for anything else.

Football is different from other major sports in that way. Hard work and dedication cannot make you a 7-foot-1 center in the NBA, but it can help a 6-foot-2 linebacker go from 205 to 245 pounds while gaining speed and athleticism. That was the path I followed from undrafted prospect at East Carolina to NFL starting lineups from 1992 to 2000.

I played nine years in the NFL, one in NFL Europe and didn't have any concussions on record. But I did have suicidal thoughts in my first year away from the game. Not all of us suffered concussions, but all of us are going to go through the transition. And if you're like most players, you've spent most of your life focusing on the next play, the next quarter, the next half, the next game, the next offseason.

After spending nine years in the NFL, former linebacker George Koonce felt directionless upon his retirement.

Look at Dave Duerson. There are more than 200,000 living alums from Notre Dame. Some run major corporations around the world. Becoming a Notre Dame trustee would be a dream for them. Dave Duerson was a trustee at Notre Dame not only because he was a good football player at one time, but because of his business acumen and his dedication to being one of the
best safeties in the league. And when that went away, and with the culmination of the concussions he had suffered, he ended his life.

Notice that we're not reading about NBA greats killing themselves. But we have someone like Junior Seau, who might be the best inside linebacker to ever put on a uniform, and that is what he did on May 2.

I'm not downplaying basketball careers or the work NBA players put in, but in the NFL, you have to be obsessed with the role to make it. ("Role engulfment" is the academic term for it.) There are no prodigies in the NFL. There are no Hakeem Olajuwons, who show up at the University of Houston from Nigeria and suddenly become the first pick in the draft. In football, you can have someone like my former teammate, Desmond Howard win the Heisman Trophy and become Super Bowl MVP after everyone told him he was too small, too short and too slow. He has a heart the size of Wisconsin and simply will not quit.

You say, "You know what, I'm going to prove Peter King wrong or Chris Berman wrong or my childhood friend who said I couldn't make it." So you get even more consumed, more isolated in the sport of football, and then you have no skill set once the game is finished with you.

In college, my day was sketched out for me from 6:30 a.m. until 9 o’clock at night. There was no difference when I transitioned to the NFL. It was all about trying to win a championship, trying to get prepared. The role engulfs you even more. They pay those NFL assistant coaches well to show George how to drop back into the flat or cover a running back. I didn't have those life coaches when I left the game. That support system disappeared and I was lost.

When that day comes and they say your services are no longer needed, you are in a very lonely and dark place. That first year out of football, I drank. I can distinctly remember going into Walmart, buying the first three seasons of "Law & Order" and watching them alone at our beach place from Thursday through Sunday night. It was such a lonely time. And it was on the drive back home when I took that turn at 75 mph just to see what would happen.

One month, I was returning an interception for a touchdown during a Seahawks victory over Atlanta. The next month, I was finished. Even my agent stopped calling. I’d spoken to him on the phone three or four times a day since signing with him out of college, and now he wouldn’t take my calls. I’d had a decent 2000 season, finishing second on the Seahawks in tackles, but I was 32 years old, had a bad knee and was suddenly expendable.
In the locker room, you want to talk about how we're going to get past the Cowboys or 49ers. We’re not talking about weaknesses. We’re not talking about being scared. When guys start feeling that way in retirement, they go off by themselves and they start self-medicating: drinking, taking pain pills, taking narcotics, trying to fill that void.

Football becomes your identity. Your family buys into it, your friends buy into it, the alums from your college buy into it. And then it is gone. You are gone.

What can we do to help?

The NFL and NFL Players Association just hammered out a 10-year agreement. How much money is allocated toward players' transition away from the game? What about deferring some of the players' salaries until they reach a certain age and have matured enough to use it more wisely?

We hear about mentors when the focus should be on sponsors -- someone who goes beyond pointing athletes in the right direction, instead helping to personally make the introductions that make all the difference.

At the college level, Title IX forced the NCAA to account for women's athletics. Why can't the NCAA implement a senior level position for player and community development?

The average NFL career lasts only a few years. The game requires a player's unconditional investment while promising a very conditional and one-dimensional return. It produces too many athletes unprepared for anything else. More of them than we know will have thoughts like the ones I had coming around that curve in Kinston, N.C.

It's time to do more about it.

George Koonce played professional football for 10 years -- eight years in Green Bay, one year in Seattle and one year in NFL Europe -- and helped the Green Bay Packers to the Super Bowl XXXI title. Koonce has served as senior associate athletics director at Marquette University, athletics director at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, director of player development for the Packers and special assistant to the athletic director at East Carolina University. In his current role as director of development for Marquette, Koonce raises money for the Urban Scholars Program, which affords first-generation college students from diverse backgrounds opportunities to receive college educations.
Greenville police have arrested a former East Carolina University football player in connection with a cemetery crash that damaged a dozen headstones.

Brandon Michael Jackson, 22, of Greenville was arrested by officers at 12:40 p.m. Tuesday in connection with the May 3 wreck at Greenwood Cemetery, a news release said. Police obtained a warrant for his arrest on Thursday.

Jackson allegedly drove a silver 2006 Lexus at a high rate of speed when it crashed through a chainlink fence at East Fourth Street and Cemetery Road about 2:30 a.m., damaging 15-20 headstones. The driver fled before police arrived, the release said.

He was charged with failure to report an accident involving property damage and operating a motor vehicle without a license.

He was taken to the Pitt County Detention Center and placed under a $10,000 secured bond.

Jackson was a player during the 2009-10 year after transferring from the University of Kentucky. He was dismissed from the team on March 29, 2010, after he was arrested for underage drinking and other offenses in downtown Greenville.

Court records since then show that Jackson has been charged with driving while impaired, no operator’s license, drug and traffic-related charges.
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U.S. Army recruiters Staff Sgt. Patrick Fults and Sgt. Jeffrey Cullison talk with young people about career opportunities in the military at Wednesday's Youth Summit.

Career fair drives home a point

By Colin Campbell - ccampbell@newsobserver.com

SMITHFIELD - Jerry Goodman has been eager to find a full-time job, but in a down economy with no high school diploma, that’s next to impossible, he says. “I called a lot of places, and they asked me if I was currently in school,” Goodman said. “This basically was holding me back – not having my GED.”

But Goodman is nearly done earning the qualification through “Yes I Can,” a program of Johnston County Industries. And on Wednesday, he was looking to his future as he walked through a career fair held during JCI’s annual Youth Summit. Goodman knows even his GED won’t be enough to get the better jobs he wants, so
he’s looking at community colleges for training – many of which attended last week’s event. Goodman wants an associate’s degree to help him land work as an automotive technician. “I just like working on cars,” he said.

Goodman was one of about 200 high school students and young adults who attended Wednesday’s Youth Summit at Johnston Community College. JCI, a Selma nonprofit that helps Johnston residents with barriers to employment, sponsored the event with help from Johnston County schools and a grant from East Carolina University.

The young people attended workshops on skills like interviewing, and dozens of employers, training programs and colleges were on hand for the career-resource fair. “It’s all about learning about employment skills, encouraging them to get a diploma and further their education,” said Linda Ridout, who helped organize the event.

With unemployment high, sending in a paper application doesn’t cut it anymore, Ridout said. “These kids need to know there’s a way to go about searching for jobs,” she said. “You’ve got to know how to interview, how to speak to people.”

And while the event gave young people a chance to meet recruiters from McDonald’s, Golden Corral, the N.C. Highway Patrol and other employers, not all will hire workers straight out of high school. Walt Warren, a corporate recruiter for Gregory Poole Equipment Co. in Raleigh, said he told participants about the associate’s degrees required for jobs at his company.

Warren said many teens aren’t aware that operating construction equipment takes special skills. He steers them to two-year programs at area community colleges. “We’re really focusing on the community college level,” Warren said. “That’s where our new workers will come from.”

And with the right degree, new jobs are coming available even in the down economy. Gregory Poole hired more than 120 new workers last year, Warren said.

A stable job is one reason GED student Diedra McDaniel wants to become a certified nursing assistant. “I always liked doing stuff in the health field,” she said. She plans to attend JCC to earn the certification, and McDaneil said she’s already gained many job skills through programming at Johnston County Industries.

Next up for “Yes I Can” participants is the Summer Youth Employment Initiative, now in its third year. For three months this summer, young people ages 16-21 will be placed with area employers to lend a hand and get real workplace experience.
Wingate welcomes Hancock back home

By Keith Cannon

WINGATE - The Wingate Bulldogs’ new women’s basketball coach already has some banners hanging in Cuddy Arena on campus.

Ann Hancock, an outstanding player on some of the best women’s basketball teams in the Division II school’s history and a veteran Division I coach, was introduced as Wingate’s fourth women’s basketball coach at a Tuesday afternoon news conference. The audience included her parents and a number of her former professors.

“I chose Wingate University,” said Hancock, a 1992 graduate, paraphrasing Division II’s current marketing slogan. “It’s right for me, and it’s home. I can’t be more excited to be back.”

Hancock has spent the past two seasons as an assistant coach at East Carolina, following a decade as head coach at UNC Wilmington. She also worked for eight
seasons as an assistant on Sylvia Hatchell’s staff at North Carolina, a tenure that included the Tar Heels’ 1994 national championship season.

“Her coaching career has prepared her well for this opportunity,” said athletics director Steve Poston. “It’s rare that you get a chance to bring back one of your own to lead your program, but we had a ‘short list’ with one name on it.”

Hancock replaces Barbara Nelson, who resigned to pursue other opportunities, according to a statement released by the athletic department on May 4. Nelson, a former coach at Providence Day, led the Bulldogs to a 101-51 record and three NCAA Division II tournament berths in her five seasons, including an Elite Eight appearance in 2008.

Hancock said she hopes to keep up the program’s tradition of successful teams, which goes back to her playing days (1989-1992). She scored 2,195 career points for teams that advanced to the NAIA national tournament in each of her seasons in uniform.

“Contrary to the rumors, I did play defense and I did occasionally pass the ball,” she joked.

She said she’s looking forward to coaching at the Division II level after 20 seasons coaching Division I. She compiled a 138-156 record in 10 seasons at UNC Wilmington and holds the Seahawks’ record for career coaching victories in women’s basketball.

“It’s the total package here. Great academics, beautiful campus and facilities, history and tradition,” Hancock said. “Not every place has that. And it’s more of a balance of athletics and other things at this level – the core values.”

Hancock, an Elizabethtown native, said she’s been in touch with returning players and will soon start work on putting a coaching staff together. The Bulldogs will be coming off a 24-8 season in which they advanced to the Southeast Regional final.

“We’ll get up and down the floor and play fast, with a lot of man-to-man defense,” she said. “Most of all we’ll play hard, and it’ll be a style that fans will want to watch.”
Investigation at UNC takes a criminal turn

Orange County District Attorney Jim Woodall was so concerned by the report on the Department of African and Afro-American Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that he has asked the State Bureau of Investigation to take up the case.

Woodall granted that it is unlikely that anything criminal was going on, but he asked the SBI to look into the possibility of academic, computer or financial fraud by professor Julius Nyang’oro or administrator Debbie Crowder.

UNC System President Tom Ross said Monday that he and Chancellor Holden Thorp also reached out to the SBI.

"On Friday, Chancellor Thorp and I instructed the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Public Safety to contact the SBI to report possible criminal activity stemming from concerns about a payment made to Professor Nyang’oro for a 2011 summer school course," Ross said in a statement Monday. "We understand that the local district attorney also contacted the SBI on Friday. Reporting to the SBI was the right thing to do given the circumstances.

"Earlier in the investigation, the campus had consulted with the District Attorney's Office and with the SBI about unauthorized or forged faculty signatures, and was advised at that time by law enforcement that those activities did not warrant criminal prosecution," Ross continued. "We still do not know whether any crime has been committed, but welcome the SBI's review."

An internal UNC investigation of department courses between summer session 2007 and fall 2011 found unauthorized grades, forged signatures and courses where work was assigned and grades issued with little contact between professor and students.
The university authorized the probe after published reports showed apparent plagiarism and other discrepancies on a course paper written by former Tar Heels football player Michael McAdoo.

Nyang’oro, who was department chair in the African and Afro-American Studies program, resigned his chairmanship last August, immediately before the university began its investigation. He will retire completely effective July 1. Crowder retired in fall 2009.

Woodall said the SBI has free rein to look into any possible crimes, including conspiracy to conceal criminal activity.

The faculty members behind the internal investigation warned that “the unprofessional or unethical actions noted in this report risk damaging the professional reputations of the faculty in the Department of African and Afro-American Studies as a whole.”

The report states that Nyang’oro and Crowder are the only two individuals who are directly linked to the irregular courses and grades.

According to the report, grades for 59 students in nine courses were submitted to the registrar with forged signatures of professors who said they never taught the course. During that same span, “several faculty members” stated that there were unauthorized grade changes and they were not aware of who authorized the adjustments.

McAdoo was one of seven players forced to sit out the 2010 football season while the NCAA investigated the Tar Heel football program. The NCAA ruled McAdoo ineligible for receiving improper assistance from tutor Jennifer Wiley on multiple assignments across several academic terms. When McAdoo filed a suit against both UNC and the NCAA seeking reinstatement, his course work came to light.

McAdoo's suit was dismissed, and is now under appeal. He went on to an NFL career, signing last season with the Baltimore Ravens for the league minimum of $270,000.
NCSU professor honored by New Zealand for disaster mission

By Jay Price - jprice@newsobserver.com

RALEIGH - An N.C. State University professor has been honored by New Zealand for helping the island nation during its worst peacetime disaster, recognition that has come after more than 30 years.

John Williamson, who now teaches botany but was then a Navy helicopter pilot supporting scientific missions, was awarded a special medal for a job that was as dangerous as it was grim.

It began with a rare opportunity for mildly adventurous travelers.
Excitement was surely building among the 257 passengers and crew at midday Nov. 28, 1979, as the last of the exploration-themed in-flight movies ended and the Air New Zealand DC-10 approached the frozen coastline.

First up on the 11-hour sightseeing loop south from Auckland was a look at Ross Island and, with luck, McMurdo Station, the U.S. scientific base in Antarctica.

Visibility wasn’t great, and as the jet descended to give passengers a better look, the pilot didn’t know that back in Auckland someone had programmed an error into their navigation computer.

“Where’s Erebus in relation to us at the moment?” one crewmember asked, no doubt peering around for a glimpse of the world’s southernmost active volcano. “Left about 20 or 25 miles,” came a reply, according to the cockpit voice recorder.

Mount Erebus is nearly 12,500 feet high. The jet was flying at 1,500 feet.

The ground, clad in ice and snow, began rising rapidly, and the pilot pulled the jet’s nose up so sharply that its belly and wings left a perfect impression, a giant snow angel, with the impact. Then Flight TE901 disintegrated into thousands of pieces of jagged aluminum confetti and body after mangled body scattered up the frozen mountainside, against a howling wind.

Williamson – then Lt. Cmdr. Williamson of the U.S. Navy – was flying his Huey helicopter back from dropping a group of geologists in the surreal Dry Valleys, where winds can reach 200 mph in some of the driest terrain on Earth. He was headed to base at McMurdo when he began hearing fragments of radio traffic from the station’s air controller, who was trying to reach the missing jet and other nearby aircraft.

Then the call came: McMurdo control wanted him to join another Huey and a C-130 transport plane in a search.

The plane’s crew soon spotted the long field of debris, and the other Huey crew got to the crash site. Weather is always a challenge in Antarctica, and the gusts blowing down Erebus were so sharp that one spun the first Huey on the scene 180 degrees. The pilots gave up any notion of landing.

**They saw enough**

But they saw enough to know that it was almost certain no one had survived. Williamson turned around and headed for McMurdo, as did the other chopper.

As so often happened on the icy continent, the weather was in charge. What clearly would be a massive and mind-numbing recovery effort would have to wait until the wind eased.
A day and a half later, Operation Overdue, as it was dubbed, began in earnest, and lasted for about two weeks.

Williamson and the handful of other Navy pilots stationed in McMurdo began flying again and again, often in dangerous weather.

His first view of the crash site was sobering.

“It was just an unidentifiable smudge on the side of the mountain, with really no recognizable pieces left except part of the tail (area),” he said in an interview this week.

Early on, they flew to the crash site and hovered just over the ice as New Zealand police rescue teams and other recovery crew jumped out. Then they began picking up the bodies and remains those teams were collecting.

Often, the weather was too bad to fly, recalled Williamson. When they did, the winds still hit a dangerous 60 mph at times, and they couldn’t even land to pick up bodies because the slope was too steep.

Williamson said they would rest the front foot or two of the helicopter’s skids on a tiny shelf cut into the ice to make it a little more stable than just hovering, though the rotors were so close to the ground in front that they tossed snow and ice and threatened the legs of members of the recovery team.

Between weather delays and the pending thaw of the ice runway used by cargo planes, the recovery operation was up against the clock.

For dozens of recovery flights, a crewmember would jump out and attach a cargo net full of bodies and human remains to the Huey’s belly.

There were so many bodies, so many remains, that there was little choice but to treat them as a kind of grim bulk cargo, flown in nets to McMurdo, then shipped out on pallets fork-lifted into the back of military transport planes.

Williamson sometimes pauses in mid-sentence when he talks about what he saw and did. The only way to cope with the gruesome task, he said, was to focus entirely on getting the work done.

“You actually don’t think when you see something like that,” he said. “You go into professional mode, and frankly, given the conditions, you had to be focused or you’d be joining the bodies on the surface pretty quickly.”

The Kiwis, Americans and others on the ground had it worse, he said. They were working up to 20 hours a day in arctic conditions. The gore was endless, and they sometimes spent more time trying to chase scavenging gulls off the remains than recovering them.
“The ones who had to get out and go onto the slopes and confront that directly, I just cannot imagine that,” he said.

From military to science

Williamson entered the military through the ROTC after graduating from the University of Oklahoma in 1971. The Navy trained him as an oceanographer but, it being the Vietnam era, gave him few choices for his career path and he ended up in flight school.

Later, after the Antarctic recovery operation, one of the researchers he was flying around and supplying told him he should think about going back into science, and showed him an ad that a professor at Oregon State University had posted for a graduate assistant.

He got the job and has been an academic ever since.

It was for Williamson’s role in that terrible recovery operation that he was awarded the New Zealand Special Service Medal (Erebus) in a ceremony last week at the New Zealand Embassy in Washington, D.C.

The honor, given to those who helped with the recovery, crash investigation and identification of victims, was officially approved in 2006 and the first ones were awarded in 2009. Particularly for honorees in the United States, it took awhile to identify and locate everyone who was eligible, then set up dates for award ceremonies, said New Zealand embassy officials.

In the United States, the Mount Erebus Disaster, as it’s called, is little known. But in New Zealand, it’s seared into of the national memory.

“We’re a small country, so everyone knows someone who knows someone who was affected,” New Zealand’s ambassador to the U.S., Mike Moore, said in an interview Tuesday.

Moore, who awarded Williamson and three other Americans the medal, said New Zealand is unusually stingy with honors such as medals but that in this case it was well-earned.

“They were gallant beyond the call of duty,” he said. “There’s nothing in the textbooks for what they did, so it was great to be able to say thank you.”

The ceremony, Williamson said, reminded him how important the disaster and recovery operation were for Kiwis.

“Every New Zealander there knew every detail of what happened,” he said. “Every little detail.”
During the recovery operation, Williamson said, the pilots had disabled an emergency release that would have allowed them to jettison the remains slung in nets below if it started swinging and threatened to destabilize the helicopter.

They risked their own lives to avoid any chance of accidentally losing their precious cargo.

“My wife tells me we were probably crazy, but we didn’t want to lose them down a crevasse or something,” he said. “Getting them back to their families was what we were really trying to do at that point, and the New Zealanders apparently really appreciated that.”
Session discusses CEO post of Vidant
By K.J. Williams
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, May 16, 2012

A series of articles on nonprofit hospitals in North Carolina by the News & Observer was discussed at Tuesday’s meeting of the Vidant Health board of trustees.

Greenville-based Vidant Health is a not-for-profit entity that owns or manages 10 hospitals, including Vidant Medical Center, along with medical facilities and physician practices.

Steve Lawler, president of Vidant Medical Center, serves as chairman of the N.C. Hospital Association’s board of trustees. He said the association is encouraging hospitals to respond to articles on nonprofit hospitals that ran in April in the News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer. Those articles discuss the high profits earned by some large nonprofit hospitals, the generous compensation for executives and collection policies that target patients with unpaid medical bills.

Dr. David Herman, Vidant Health’s president and chief operating officer, said Vidant's policies already are in line with several areas where the articles say nonprofit hospitals need to improve.

One of the News & Observer articles listed the salary of 25 nonprofit hospital executives, including Vidant Health CEO Dave McRae. Copies of the articles were included in binders distributed at the meeting.

McRae was listed as receiving total compensation of $1.53 million in 2010 along with a $7.7 million supplemental executive retirement fund.

After hearing several reports, the board went into a closed session to discuss personnel matters related to the CEO position and to consult with an attorney.
Vidant Health spokeswoman Barbara Dunn said the hospital will make an announcement in four to six weeks. She could not confirm whether or not it would be a retirement announcement from McRae.

After the two-hour closed session, the board unanimously voted in open session to approve a motion to delegate authority to a committee for the approval of a CEO employment contract, and an amendment to the employment contract of the CEO emeritus for Vidant Health. The title of emeritus refers to someone who is retired but retains the title.

The compensation and benefits committee also can make amendments in line with the Internal Revenue Code.

There was no discussion of the motion in open session preceding the vote. Officials declined to comment on the specifics of the motion afterward. However, officials said a news release would be distributed once negotiations have concluded.

In other matters, a summary of a quality improvement committee report was given by chairwoman Thomasine Kennedy. She said a six-month quality tracking report indicates the system reached 97 percent optimal care for the period, reaching 98 percent in the second quarter.

Optimal care refers to meeting standards for patients treated for heart failure, heart attack, pneumonia and surgical care.

The optimal care level for last year was 95 percent.

According to a six-month scorecard from Oct. 1 through March 31, the system as a whole showed an 87 percent reduction in medication errors that harmed patients, a 23 percent reduction in hospital-acquired infections, a 15 percent reduction in serious safety events, and an 8 percent drop in bed sores. There was no improvement in patient falls.

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Senator: Reform education
By Ginger Livingston
The Daily Reflector
Wednesday, May 16, 2012

KINSTON — Reforming the state’s education system will improve business recruitment, the state Senate’s president pro tem told a group of regional business leaders Tuesday.

Sen. Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, touted the proposed Excellent Public School Act during a meeting with about 20 members of North Carolina’s Eastern Region Chamber and area legislators.

The General Assembly begins its short session at noon today, and the reform legislation is expected to dominate discussions along with adoption of the fiscal year 2012-13 budget.

Berger and Senate Republicans introduced the legislation last month, saying its goal is to improve reading performance, end social promotion, improve school performance and accountability, give school systems greater calendar flexibility, and recruit teachers from outside the education profession.

“Where we are isn’t where we need to be,” Berger said. “Where we are is a place that isn’t fair to our kids.”

Studies show 20 percent of ninth-graders will fall short of graduating from high school. More telling of public education’s problems, Berger said, is that the community college system spends $100 million annually on remedial classes that prepare students to do college-level work.

Statistics also show 40 percent of third-graders don’t read at grade level, he said.

“If education is the key to opportunity in North Carolina, we can’t tolerate the current state of things,” Berger said.

To improve reading performance, the legislation proposes assessing kindergartners when they enter school to obtain a performance database.
The data would be used to monitor the growth of individual children, Berger said. It also would be used to determine if pre-kindergarten programs are adequately preparing children for school, he said.

A study of a pre-kindergarten program in Charlotte found that while its participants performed better in kindergarten than children from similar backgrounds who were in the program, by the third grade the two groups were performing at equal levels, Berger said. Berger said he isn’t looking for a way to end pre-kindergarten programs, but adjustments, if necessary, should be considered.

Along with developing performance measures, Berger said teachers will be required to take three hours of literacy training when earning continuing education credits.

The legislation also proposes retaining third-graders who don’t meet reading performance standards. School systems would have the flexibility of keeping the students in third grade for another year or holding summertime reading camps to catch students up, he said.

School performance measures would be simplified, Berger said. Instead of referring to institutions as schools of excellence or schools making expected growth, achievement would be measured through a letter grade system, he said.

Berger said he wants to look beyond traditional teacher education programs to recruit teachers. He wants to recruit people from other professions or new graduates with non-education degrees. They would receive training similar to that provided by Teach for America, whose candidates aren’t required to earn a full education degree.

Berger said he had solicited comments from superintendents and other educators about the proposals. For both groups, the end of teacher tenure has dominated discussion.

Berger said teachers from smaller school systems repeatedly have said they believe ending tenure will take away their protection from angry parents with connections on their local schools boards. Berger said he believes the proposal for teacher evaluation will offer adequate protection from such reprisals.

The legislation proposes spending $40 million to implement reforms, which include covering transportation costs and facility operations for the five days added to the school calendar during last year’s legislative session.

It also would cover the costs of running summer reading programs to help third graders reach their reading goals, he said.

It also would cover the costs of establishing assessments.

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Backer of Common Core School Curriculum Is Chosen to Lead College Board

David Coleman says the College Board’s mission goes beyond measuring and testing to “designing high-quality curriculum.”

By TAMAR LEWIN
Published: May 16, 2012

David Coleman, an architect of the common core curriculum standards that are being adopted in nearly all 50 states, will become the president of the College Board, starting in October.

The College Board, a membership organization of high schools and colleges that administers the SAT, the Advanced Placement program and other standardized tests, helped design the standards — an outline of what students should learn in English and math from kindergarten through high school — meant to ensure that all high school graduates are prepared for college.

Mr. Coleman’s new position will involve a continued focus on college readiness. “We have a crisis in education, and over the next few years, the main thing on the College Board’s agenda is to deliver its social mission,”
he said in an interview on Tuesday. “The College Board is not just about measuring and testing, but designing high-quality curriculum.”

For the last year, Mr. Coleman, 42, a former Rhodes scholar and McKinsey & Company consultant, has been barnstorming the nation, speaking to thousands of teachers to explain and promote the standards. He will succeed Gaston Caperton, who last year announced his plans to step down. Mr. Caperton came under some criticism for his salary of $1.3 million; Mr. Coleman will earn a base of $550,000, with total compensation of nearly $750,000.

“David is innovative and an excellent choice for the College Board,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. “He’s put the common core on the map and he’s very respectful of the teacher voice.”

Many other leading education figures, including Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, and former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, also endorsed the appointment.

Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, said, “David is one of the true creative geniuses in the ed reform world, one of the brightest, most engaging and most persistent people in the field.”

While full adoption of the standards is uncertain — and the possibility that all states would agree to use the same tests and passing scores a distant fantasy — the advent of common standards could someday make college admission tests like the SAT almost irrelevant. And some education experts say that possibility, even far down the road, has helped spur the College Board’s growing emphasis on its Advanced Placement program.

In the interview, Mr. Coleman spoke far more of the AP program than of any other aspect of the College Board’s work.

“The College Board should consider any student in an AP class a student in our care,” said Mr. Coleman, a co-founder at Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit organization that promotes the common core. “We need to find better ways to support their success.”

Robert Scott, the Texas commissioner of education whose state is one of a handful that has not adopted the common core, said he thinks highly of Mr. Coleman, and shares his educational goals — but not the desire for national standards.
“Texas law requires curriculum decisions to involve teachers, parents and other members of the community, and you can’t do that if you’re adopting standards developed somewhere else,” Mr. Scott said.

Mr. Coleman and the standards have other critics, too.

“There’s no reason on earth for common core standards and these tests that we’re wasting billions of dollars on,” said Stephen Krashen, an emeritus education professor at the University of Southern California. “The problem is poverty, poverty, poverty. Middle-class children who go to well-funded schools do very well, but even the best tests, the most inspiring teachers, won’t mean anything if the kids don’t have enough to eat.”

In progressive education circles, Mr. Coleman is often criticized for his emphasis on “informational texts” over fiction, and his push for students to write fewer personal and opinion pieces. Last year, he gave a speech making that point in strong terms, asserting that it would be rare, in the working world, for someone to say, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.” Reaction on education blogs was explosive.

On Tuesday, Mr. Coleman said he should have chosen his language more carefully, emphasizing that he was talking about older students.

Over all, Mr. Coleman said, there is widespread enthusiasm for the standards. “The degree of consensus is remarkable,” he said. “I think a lot of my success has been my ability to work with teachers.”

A version of this article appeared in print on May 16, 2012, on page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: Backer of Common Core School Curriculum Is Chosen to Lead College Board.
State grant aid goes increasingly to the wealthy

By Daniel de Vise

State grant and scholarship programs for college students increasingly favor students who aren’t needy, according to a new report.

The report, “Beyond Need and Merit,” comes from the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. Ostensibly, it recommends that states eliminate the distinction between need-based aid and merit aid and instead award all grant aid by a simple formula that considers both.

But what the report really advocates is that all states base their grant programs primarily on need. Its top recommendation: “Focus resources on students whose chance of enrolling and succeeding in college will be most improved by the receipt of state support.”

A surprisingly large number of states don’t do that.

Twenty years ago, the report says, 90 percent of state grant dollars were awarded at least partly according to financial need. Today, that share has dipped to 70 percent.

At least 13 states have enacted large merit-based grant programs in the last two decades. Such programs are popular among middle-class families who vote.

The result: 35 percent of aid recipients in Louisiana come from families with family incomes above $80,000. A Georgia grant program favors students in the top income quartile.

Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia all award less than half of their state aid according to financial need.

An inventory of aid programs in Washington, D.C. found that just 6 percent of state-based grant aid went to students according to need. The best-known program, Tuition Assistance Grants, is open to rich and poor alike.

Virginia spends about two-fifths of grant dollars without regard to need. Maryland, by contrast, allots only 5 percent of scholarship funds without considering need.
The authors, who include college-finance guru Sandy Baum, suggest states eliminate the current complex web of aid programs and streamline the state scholarship effort into a single, simple program that targets students according to income and family size, period.

For example, a state might enact a sliding scale of aid according to income: $4,000 to a student from a family at the poverty line, $1,000 for a family earning $50,000 and a cutoff of $60,000 in household income.

This matters because states are spending a growing share of a shrinking higher-education budget on grant aid. State subsidies declined from $8,700 per student to $7,100 per student between 2008 and 2011, after inflation. Yet, over the same span, state grant aid grew from $8.4 billion to $9.2 billion.

*By Daniel de Vise | 10:49 AM ET, 05/15/2012*
Why So Many Ph.D.s Are On Food Stamps

by NPR Staff
May 15, 2012

With the economic troubles of the past few years, it's no surprise that the number of people using food stamps is soaring. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that an average of 44 million people were on food assistance last year; that's up from 17 million in 2000.

What might be surprising, though, is one subgroup that's taken a particularly hard hit.

The number of people with graduate degrees — master's degrees and doctorates — who have had to apply for food stamps, unemployment or other assistance more than tripled between 2007 and 2010, according to a report in The Chronicle of Higher Education.

In 2010, the report says, 360,000 of the 22 million Americans with graduate degrees received some kind of public assistance.

Chronicle reporter Stacey Patton spoke with Tell Me More host Michel Martin about why so many highly educated Americans have to rely on this type of aid.

One thing that is happening at universities, Patton says, is the overlap between graduate students and adjunct professors — "contingent" faculty who are working on contracts.

In an effort to cut costs, she says, universities increasingly rely on these instructors because unlike tenured faculty, they work part time, they don't have health benefits, and they can be fired or not have their contracts renewed.

"What we continue to do in graduate schools is encourage people to take master's degrees and Ph.D.s [to fill those positions]," Patton says. "But the economy has taken such a hit, and so has higher education, so they do their work and come out and don't have opportunities for jobs."

Many states have had to cut their higher education budgets, and Patton says universities defend their use of contingent faculty instead of hiring full-time faculty as a necessary way to cope.
Tony Yang received his Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Riverside in 2009. Since then, he's worked on and off as a history lecturer, but has had to depend on unemployment and food stamps to get by.

"One of the bravest things to do is to graduate into [the recession]," Yang tells NPR's Martin. "It's an incredibly difficult job market, and you're constantly hustling to try and get another job."

In his best year since getting his Ph.D., Yang says he made about $32,000; in his worst, about $10,000. He says there's a perception that if you have a doctorate, you automatically walk into a high-paying job.

"I have the prestige of holding a Ph.D., but that [isn't] paying the bills," he says.

While reporting her story, Patton says she heard a number of stories similar to Yang's, but many of those folks didn't want to go on the record for fear of shame.

"You go to graduate school, you get a master's degree [or] you get a Ph.D., it's a hard thing to embrace that you're also now on welfare," she says.

Though only a little more than 1 percent of graduate-degree holders are on government assistance, Patton says what worries her is that the number tripled in just three years.

"One has to wonder, is this trend going to continue to increase?" she says.
CDC: Higher Income and Education Levels Linked To Better Health

*People with more education are more likely to earn a decent living and enjoy better health, according to the government's annual health report.*

By Alexandra Sifferlin | @acsifferlin | May 16, 2012 |

More educated people who make more money have lower rates of several chronic diseases, including obesity, compared to people with lower education and income levels, according to Health, United States, 2011, a new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report.

In the government’s 35th annual comprehensive health report from the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), data from nearly 60 major data sources within the federal government and in the private sector provide a health-related snapshot of life in the U.S. The NCHS looks at data from the start of the study in 1975 through 2010. “We like to highlight different things we find interesting for readers,” says Amy Bernstein, a health services researcher at NCHS.

Among the report’s findings:

In 2007-2010, homes where the head of the household had a higher level of education resulted in lower obesity rates among boys and girls aged 2 to 19 years. In households where the head of the house had a bachelor’s degree or higher, 11% of boys were obese and 7% of girls were. Comparatively, in homes where the head of household had less than a high school education, 24% of boys and 22% of girls were obese.

Women age 25 and over with less than a bachelor’s degree were more likely to be obese than women with a bachelor’s degree or higher: up to 43% compared to 25%.

In 2010, half of adults 18 years old and over failed to meet federal physical activity recommendations for aerobic activity and muscle-strengthening.

In 2006, on average, men age 25 without a high school diploma had a life expectancy 9.3 years less than those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Women without a high school diploma had a life expectancy 8.6 years less than those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.
Between 2000-2010, the percentage of children with a family income below 200% of the poverty level who were uninsured decreased from 22% to about 13%. The percentage with a family income at 200% to 399% of the poverty level who were uninsured decreased from 9% to 7%, and children with a family income at 400% of the poverty level who were uninsured decreased from 3% to 2%.

The researchers also found that people with a high school diploma or less were more likely to be smokers than those with at least a bachelor’s degree.

“Highly educated persons are more likely to be employed and well-paid than the less educated. They have a higher sense of control over their health and lives and more social support,” the authors say in the report. “In addition, the well-educated are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and avoid unhealthy ones.”

Dr. Jim Levine, a researcher at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota is unaffiliated with the study but researches the link between poverty and obesity. According to Levine, there are several reasons poverty and chronic diseases like obesity go together. For instance, “in many poverty-dense regions, people are…unable to access affordable healthy food, even when funds avail.” Other studies have found people with lower incomes tend to have more sedentary living environments.

Bernstein says this association between poverty, lower education levels and poorer health has been relatively stable for years but remains concerning. “They are things you don’t necessarily think about, but these differences have persisted in the last decade and it’s a problem,” she says.