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Vets sought for Gulf War study
By Michael Abramowitz
Tuesday, July 31, 2012

Hundreds of thousands of veterans arrived home after the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq and Kuwait with the victory they expected — and a debilitating neurological illness they didn’t.

More than 20 years later, with no known effective treatments, an East Carolina University medical toxicologist is leading a team of biomedical scientists in a study of new medicines to treat Gulf War Illness. That is the name given to the chronic fatigue and pain as well as difficulty with mental tasks suffered by some who served in the war and its aftermath, said Dr. William Meggs, the study leader.

Meggs is a board-certified toxicologist, professor of emergency medicine at ECU and chief of toxicology at Vidant Medical Center in Greenville.

The illness, also known as Gulf War Syndrome, apparently affects about one-third of the nearly 700,000 veterans of the 1991 conflict, ECU officials said.

The Department of Defense is sponsoring the $1.1 million, three-year study. Meggs hopes to recruit 60 veterans who developed Gulf War Illness to participate in the research of generic drugs that control inflammation in the brain that may have been triggered by neurotoxin exposures.

“The illness has had a very checkered history,” Meggs said. “It was originally dismissed as post-traumatic stress disorder by medical staff of the U.S. Veterans Administration because (the symptoms) are so prevalent after
warfare. But this particular illness was from a ground war that was over in days, with only (258 U.S.) combat casualties.”

Continued investigation and review by the Institute of Medicine, a branch of the National Academy of Sciences, led to the conclusion that illness was a psychological condition, Meggs said. That was significant because the academy advises Congress, which appropriates funds for care and treatment by VA staff.

**Toxic substances**

As more data came in, attention was drawn to soldiers’ exposure to toxic substances while in the theater of war, including Sarin gas, a chemical warfare agent, and sulphur mustard.

One of the major vehicles for exposure was at ammunition and military ordnance dumps that were blown up by allied military after seizure, releasing clouds of chemicals, Meggs said. There also were 47 Iraqi Scud missile attacks into Saudi Arabia that might have dispersed low-grade chemical agents into the air.

“It’s been known for a long time that these exposures can cause chronic illness. It’s a true physiological illness,” Meggs said.

In addition, Iraqi soldiers destroyed and set ablaze hundreds of oil wells, blackening the skies under petroleum clouds that rained on coalition forces for weeks.

Soldiers were treated with neurotoxic drugs intended to offset the potential effects of exposure to nerve gas, with the intention of later medicinally reversing the effects of the drug, Meggs said.

Other examples of chemical exposures include neurotoxic insecticides sprayed onto soldiers’ tents to deal with sand fleas and other insect pests.

As a result, Meggs and other medical biologists concluded, Gulf War veterans suffer from a variety of neurological problems, including difficulty with memory and concentration, sleep disturbances and headaches.

A number of studies have shown they suffer disturbances of the autonomic nervous system. They also suffer, to varying degrees, gastric and intestinal symptoms, respiratory symptoms and skin disorders.

If any of the veterans also suffer from psychological conditions, including PTSD, it is as much a result of the frustration of living 20 years with no
treatment for the variety of illnesses they have contracted than from the rigors of warfare, Meggs said.

 Facing the evidence
Meggs’ involvement as a toxicologist researching Gulf War Illness goes back to the 1990s when the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asked him to present a research statement at a conference held to look into the illness.

In 1998, he was asked by a journal to review an article on Gulf War Illness, in which he was highly critical of the researcher’s conclusions. When a research advisory committee was formed in 2002 to recommend research to the VA to understand the illness, Meggs already had been studying the illness, but the VA only could fund its own physicians.

Meggs found his way onto the committee through separate congressional funding. That is when the emphasis finally shifted from determining the causes to determining appropriate treatments, he said.

When faced with the accumulated evidence gathered through the years and presented in the later research reports, including 1,840 research publications on the topic reviewed by Meggs’ committee, the National Academy reversed its position on Gulf War illness, saying the emphasis should now be on treatment, Meggs said.

The double-blind study Meggs is leading will use safe generic medications purchased with grant money and known to regulate brain inflammation.

“Our hypothesis is that the harmful chemicals produce some smoldering low-level inflammation of the brain,” he said. “There’s been a tremendous amount of money spent by both the U.S. government and the United Kingdom, whose personnel also suffer with the illness, leading to their own investigations. We now have a deeper understanding of this disease, but have no effective treatments. The research emphasis has shifted from what happened to these service men and women to getting them well.”

Gulf War veterans interested in the study can contact Meggs at 744-5568.

Contact Michael Abramowitz at mabramowitz@reflector.com or 252-329-9571.
ECU’s Dental School to Focus on Rural Needs

To show how much the new School of Dental Medicine at East Carolina University is dedicated to serving North Carolina, all 52 current students hail from the Tar Heel state and will spend a portion of their training in some of the state’s smaller communities.

These students still are a couple of years from being full-fledged dentists since the school opened just last year. But interim dean Dr. Gregory Chadwick says these up-and-coming dental practitioners will have a firm grip on what North Carolina’s rural population needs since they will have finished their training in facilities from Sylva to Thomasville to Elizabeth City.

“Our broader purpose is to improve the overall dental health of North Carolina, especially in our rural and underserved populations,” Chadwick says. “If you don’t have good dental health, you’re not healthy.”

University officials expect the school to help ease the statewide shortage of dentists, especially in Eastern North Carolina. Four counties–Gates, Tyrrell, Hyde and Camden–have no dentists.

Instead of being trained solely at ECU’s base in Greenville at a facility expected to be completed this year, dental students will study at community
service learning clinical centers. They will operate in 10 rural communities, such as Ahoskie, Spruce Pine, Thomasville and Lillington. The Ahoskie center is projected to open in August with another center in Elizabeth City expected to begin operations by the end of the year.

Chadwick says site selection was based on oral health and dental needs of the community, socioeconomic factors that will make the site educationally and financially viable, and input from dentists and dental leaders with knowledge of the areas being considered.

Each of these centers will have 16 dental chairs where four or five fourth-year dental students under the supervision of onsite residents and faculty will treat local residents at reduced charges. Plans call for each center to be staffed by two to three hygienists and five or six dental assistants. It’s expected that the hygienists and assistants will be hired locally. The faculty members assigned to each center will reside in those communities, too.

“It’s really taking the fourth floor of the dental school, cutting it into 10 pieces, wiring it, stretching those wires and moving it out into rural areas of the state,” Chadwick says. “The challenge is to get more dentists out to serve those rural communities. That’s the opportunity ECU has with our new dental school.”

ECU dental student Diana Luckhardt grew up in Summerfield in Guilford County. Luckhardt agrees that working in the centers will help broaden her dental education.

“If you don’t get out and experience it, you don’t see the need,” she says, adding that working in the centers will help teach students how to operate a dental practice.

North Carolina ranks 47th out of the 50 states in the number of dentists per capita, according to the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“The ECU approach—educating students and residents in our community service learning centers—could become a future model for dental education,” Chadwick says. “Community service learning centers are more than just dental clinics. They are an integral part of our dental school where our seniors will spend much of their fourth year.”
Dr. Pamela Hilbert, vice president of academic affairs at PCC, talks about the new construction and classrooms on the campus during a meeting with local government and ECU representatives at the community college Wednesday morning. (Rhett Butler/The Daily Reflector)

**Editorial: Town-gown discussions critical**

Tuesday, July 31, 2012

When members of the community’s Town-Gown Organization gather, as they did last week, the meetings are not meant as a formality or simply to exchange pleasantries. Rather those regular events intend to strengthen the lines of communication between key government and education leaders, and to forge consensus on issues with shared benefit for the community.

Without the continued growth of East Carolina University and Pitt Community College, residents of Greenville and Pitt County would find this a far poorer, more distressed and more troubled community. Those entities, along with Pitt County Schools, are the lifelines to socioeconomic improvement, making their vitality among the most important priorities here.

In a matter of weeks, students will pile into buses once again, heralding the start of the year for the county’s public schools. Similarly, thousands of students will begin the fall semesters at East Carolina and Pitt Community College, eradicating the sleepy summer landscape in place since May. The result will be a community where educational opportunity is nearly everywhere.

Yet these have been uncertain times for education in North Carolina. The sluggish economic recovery coupled with a Republican Legislature determined to slash spending meant less money for public schools and the state’s university system. For this community, that is worrisome given the tremendous dependence here on education jobs — through Pitt County Schools, East Carolina, the medical school or the community college.
Of course, the impact reaches far beyond a matter of employment. This is a place driven by education, where the future is inextricably tied to these institutions. Consider the 10th Street connector, for instance, or the proposed intermodal center, two projects that hinge on cooperation between local government and East Carolina. The student population — its needs and particular issues — weighs heavily on decisions made at City Hall.

So it is of critical importance that meetings like the Town-Gown Organization continue to prove productive. At the most recent gathering, education officials were able to discuss their concerns with area officials and express gratitude for continued support. Items for possible cooperation were discussed and tighter relationships were forged.

The end result intends to be a community that encourages an open exchange of ideas and seeks solutions with broad and common benefit. Given that a commitment to education has served Greenville and Pitt County well, all involved should be eager to ensure that meetings like this continue in the future.
A community advocacy group is joining the fight — and looking to take the lead — to keep no more than three unrelated people from living together in Greenville.

Greenville’s Neighborhood Advisory Board has asked the City Council to appoint a task force to “systematically address” the potentially negative effects of opening up city homes to four or more renters.

The request is one of many outlined in a strongly worded memo mailed last weekend, demanding the city “undertake a broader approach” to “preserving and enhancing the integrity” of local neighborhoods.

The letter marks the second time in the past week that a city board has opposed a change to local housing ordinances, which prohibit no more than three unrelated people from living together.

The Historic Preservation Commission on Friday sent out a resolution that said a change in the controversial no-more-than-three rule “would have a negative impact on many of the (city’s) historic homes and landscapes.”

“Before we can change anything, we need to address the existing problems,” Ann Maxwell, chairwoman of the Neighborhood Advisory Board, said Monday. “It’s not that people are against students, or even renters. The real issue is getting a handle on the group of landlords who do not take their responsibilities seriously and often prey on students and renters around the city.”

Maxwell said if the city set a standard among all landlords, the negative rental experiences that have become prevalent in neighborhoods around East Carolina University soon would begin to disappear.

The Neighborhood Advisory Board encouraged the city to “endorse” and “identify financing mechanisms” to carry out strategies that would improve the long-term health of all neighborhoods.

Maxwell’s solution may be among the first “concrete” alternatives made to the no-more-than-three rule.
Since last fall, representatives from several neighborhood associations have expressed concerns about the city changing its occupancy standards to allow more than three unrelated people to live together.

The concerns prompted Neighborhood Advisory Board members to follow the issue more closely.

But the more meetings they attended, the more they noticed that public forums and community questionnaires limited “constructive dialogue,” the letter says.

Residents only were allowed to ask questions, not voice concerns; city staff did not communicate how input from the questionnaires would be used, and the form’s questions assumed a change would occur, the board wrote.

The board said a solution lies beyond a change in occupancy standards.

More is needed to keep city streets and yards from becoming overrun with trash, noise and crime — a trifecta of influences many feel would further lead to a decline in neighborhood appearances and pride, if a change were made.

The Neighborhood Advisory Board, with its diverse representation and charge to preserve and strengthen city neighborhoods, offered to assist city staff by acting as the core group of the task force.

The council, though, should remain independent from the task force to keep its mission free of political influence, Maxwell said.

“Unless, we are allowed as a neighborhood board, as a group of people who are not connected in any way to the political money stream, to come up with a solution, it is going to be a worthless panel,” Maxwell said.

The City Council plans to resume discussions on the no-more-than-three rule in August, when they reconvene after a monthlong break.

“City staff, along with local citizens, can make positive change,” Maxwell said. “It doesn’t have to be about winners and losers.”

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Duke to have lead role in training nurses

By Lynn Bonner - lbonner@newsobserver.com

DURHAM–Duke University Hospital is one of five hospitals in the nation that will share in $200 million over four years to prepare more nursing students who want advanced training, an effort to fill gaps in clinics, doctors’ offices and hospitals that don’t have enough primary-care health professionals.

Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. Health and Human Services secretary, came to Duke’s nursing school Monday to announce the program, which is funded through the federal health care law.

The money will go to educate advanced practice registered nurses: nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, nurse anesthetists and nurse midwives.

The initiative is intended to make it easier for patients to find primary care, a goal of the federal law.

The other hospitals selected are in Philadelphia, Chicago, Houston and Scottsdale, Ariz.

“With today’s investments, we’ll put more nurses in communities across the country, shortening waiting lists for appointments in community health centers, decreasing delays in discharging patients from hospitals, and providing more time for patients and their health care providers to interact,” Sebelius said.

The pool of people with health insurance is expected to greatly expand in a few years. Starting in 2014, individuals and small businesses will be able to shop for plans on an insurance exchange.

States will have the option of expanding Medicaid – the state and federal insurance plan – to people who are not now eligible. In North Carolina the expansion would initially add about 525,000 people to the program.

That influx will come as the nation is dealing with a shortage of primary-care doctors. Training more advanced practice nurses is one of the strategies for increasing the pool of professionals who can provide primary care.
“We are proud to be a part of this important effort to help solve this problem,” said Dr. Victor J. Dzau, president and CEO of Duke University Health System.

**Advanced nursing benefits**

Duke officials said the money will allow them to expand by 216 students over four years. Duke estimates it will cost $49,000 a year to train each nurse practitioner.

One of the requirements for Duke and the other hospitals is to have half the clinical training for students occur in non-hospital settings. Students will work with specially trained instructors in clinics, doctors’ offices and community hospitals through a 14-county region that includes the Triangle.

“This will allow new nurses to practice in the heart of communities,” Sebelius said.

Sharon Elliott-Bynum, co-founder of a Durham clinic that provides free care to patients who don’t have health insurance, called news of the program “a great moment in the city of Durham.”

Healing with CAARE Inc., will be one of the places where nurse practitioners are trained.

The U.S. Supreme Court upheld most of the health care law’s provisions, but Congressional Republicans continue efforts to repeal it.

The Obama administration has increased funding for nurses with special training, expanded the reach of community health care centers, and provided incentives for doctors to deliver primary care and for health care professionals to work in under-served areas, Sebelius said.

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Retiring NCCU chancellor doesn't want to talk

Charlie Nelms, who abruptly announced his retirement as chancellor of N.C. Central University, was supposed to talk to the media this week about his departure.

But on Monday, an NCCU spokeswoman sent out a notice saying Nelms had canceled a planned conversation with the media.

Instead, the university sent out a two-sentence statement from Nelms: "I am grateful for the opportunity to have served as the 10th Chancellor of North Carolina Central University. I feel strongly and passionately about shifting the discussion from my retirement to the arrival of Interim Chancellor Charles Becton next week and his efforts to continue moving NCCU forward while focusing on the university's number one priority: student success."

Last week, Nelms, 65, stunned the top brass at NCCU when he announced his retirement effective Aug. 6. His departure comes a few weeks before a new semester begins. A search committee will look for a permanent successor, but that process is likely to take months.

First Lady to make campaign appearances in Greensboro, Raleigh on Wednesday

First Lady Michelle Obama will speak to Triad supporters Wednesday at a rally on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Just returned from the Olympics in London, she will make a speech at Fleming Gymnasium at 1:15. The event is free, although tickets from local Obama campaign offices are required.

Later in the afternoon, she will attend a fund raiser Raleigh Mariott City Center.
Saunders: Chancellor's exit from NCCU has us wondering what happened

By Barry Saunders - bsaunders@newsobserver.com

Good Lord, man. Even the fry cook at Quick’s Grill in Rockingham would give you at least two weeks’ notice before he split – if he wanted a good reference when he applied for another gig.

So how come when Charlie Nelms announced he was retiring as N.C. Central University chancellor a mere three weeks before school resumes, he barely gave two weeks’ notice?

Probably because he doesn’t plan to need another reference – or job. Nelms’ stated reason for retiring is that he hasn’t had a break in his extensive academic career, and he finally wants to take one.

Yeah, but three weeks before school starts?

C’mon, man. The dude seemed to care for NCCU too much – or he was a great actor – to leave so abruptly without a compelling reason.

Nelms was a hands-on administrator who actually helped students move their furnishings into dorms. A cynic could’ve called that a publicity stunt, but a few years ago, I watched from a distance as he did something that was not for publicity.

Nelms was walking across campus, resplendent as always in a navy or black pinstriped suit, and – instead of calling up groundskeeping and reaming somebody out – began picking up trash.

That simple act reminded me of a passage I’d read in Booker T. Washington’s autobiography in which he said he never saw a piece of litter on the ground that he didn’t want to pick up, or a fence that needed painting that he didn’t want to paint.

It also made me realize that Nelms viewed the university as more than just a warm-weather respite en route to retirement after a career spent in the cold, cold – did I mention cold? – Midwest.

In the lurch

So what’s the deal with leaving NCCU in the lurch?
Dwight Perry, chairman of the school’s board of trustees, insisted that Nelms did no such thing, even though he acknowledged that the board was caught off guard. He also said the “administrative team” knows what it’s supposed to do even if the chancellor isn’t there. Besides, he added, even though Nelms’ retirement takes effect Aug. 6, he “has agreed to stay on until Aug. 31 to help with the transition.”

In politics, when someone says they are leaving office to spend more time with their family or to stop and smell the roses, what they really mean is “the posse is on the front porch fixing to kick the door in.”

In higher education, tenure, contracts and tight budgets or popularity typically preclude you being forced out without a really good reason.

**Ready to retire? Really?**

Hmmm. You don’t reckon Nelms really does just want to enjoy retirement, do you? Perry thinks so. “There was absolutely no conflict with the board,” he said. “He was just ready to retire.”

NCCU is Nelms’ first stop at an historically black university. I’ve never run a black university, but as anyone who has ever attended one and tried to register for classes can attest – I’ve attended a couple and love’em to death – they can tax your last nerves.

Perhaps Nelms just got tired of dealing with other people’s young’uns.

Just a week ago, NCCU had a suspended football coach who brought negative attention to the campus after assaulting his wife – and it had an admired, committed chancellor.

Now, NCCU says the football coach has been cleared and is back.

And the chancellor is saying – too abruptly – “I’m outta here, yo.”

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Focusing on quality athletes - and academics - is best path for UNCW

Raising money will always be the top priority for the head of the UNCW athletic department.

That’s what athletic director Jimmy Bass recently told the StarNews.

Are we being naive in wishing he had said having accomplished student athletes would always be his top priority?

It’s been a bad run lately for UNCW’s flagship program -- the men’s basketball team – both on and off the court.

And this year, no matter how good the team is, it’s ineligible for any postseason play because of poor academic performance. And although UNCW won four CAA championships last school year, basketball is ultimately the driving force in keeping interest high and keeping the money coming in that ultimately helps fund the so-called non-revenue sports.

Bass is convinced he has the right man at the helm in Head Coach Buzz Peterson. Peterson inherited a program that was in disarray in many ways.

This is a critical year for UNCW. Both Bass and Peterson are still fairly new to the program and the coach has needed time to get his philosophy and expectations in place. What Bass wants are athletes who absolutely want to be at UNCW. Athletes who, as the Beach Boys said, are true to their school. That’s not necessarily been the case for the basketball team in recent years.

There is reason to believe that both Bass and Peterson are the right men for the top two jobs at UNCW. Both are well regarded by former colleagues and college sports community.

UNCW is not an athletic powerhouse. Probably never will be. But it has a history of producing top-flight student athletes in many sports. Meeting academic standards has rarely been a problem.

Those familiar with Bass say he stresses academic performance. But he also knows that scholarship money has to be raised to recruit those high quality student athletes. Where do top student athletes get recruited? Think Duke, Stanford. Notre Dame. Not exactly pauper schools.
“This is a year that if anyone is going to support this athletic department, this is the year to do it,” Bass said recently.

And this is the year, too, that Bass and Peterson have to prove to fans that the men’s basketball program is regaining its spot as a highly competitive team grounded in good character and academic success.

That should go a long way in helping Bass meet the fund-raising needs that, unfortunately, do have to be near the top of that list.
Why the NCAA can't get it right
By Noah Feldman - Bloomberg News

The problem with the NCAA’s sanctions against Penn State University isn’t that they punish student-athletes who had no role in the coverup of Jerry Sandusky’s sexual abuse of boys.

It’s not that they are meaningless, “reversing” past victories that took place on the field, or that they are too harsh, damaging Penn State’s football program even after the death of former coach Joe Paterno.

The problem is much more basic: The punishment bears no meaningful relationship to the crime.

Punishment is generally thought to have one or more of three purposes: retribution, deterrence and prevention. The NCAA’s sanctions don’t credibly accomplish any of these goals.

Retribution might not be the right job for the NCAA, which, despite its pretensions, is neither God nor an organ of the government. Suppose, however, that the true goal of the sanctions is to help right the moral wrong of the Sandusky coverup by punishing the malefactors. Because money doesn’t have that sort of profound weight, the moral piece of the sanctions must surely be the reversal of Penn State’s football wins since 1998.

The trouble is that it is almost impossible to say Penn State’s football victories were a result of the coverup. Had Paterno’s teams lost most of their games instead of winning them, Sandusky would have acted just as he did; and it is safe to presume that Paterno and the rest of the university would have shown just as much willful blindness to Sandusky’s wrongdoing. It is difficult to see how punishment could be morally satisfying when it is so disconnected from the action being punished.

At most one might say that the coverup was a product of a “win at all costs” philosophy. But when one considers Paterno’s relatively strong record of ensuring that his athletes graduated, and the relative absence of recruitment cheating in Penn State’s football history, it becomes clear that Paterno didn’t, in fact, believe in winning at all costs.
It is difficult to plumb the depths of his thinking in letting Sandusky continue his crimes. Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that Paterno allowed his subordinate to get away with it because Paterno himself wanted to avoid embarrassment – and perhaps because he didn’t want the shame to tarnish the reputation of the program. No doubt he felt shame himself; perhaps this contributed to his own moral error of denial and coverup.

Deterrence is quickly dispensed with, too. The $60 million fine represents about one year of football revenue. Once the money is recouped, Penn State football can be back in business. As my former teacher Stephen L. Carter points out, if deterrence were the goal, the sanctions should have been much greater.

That leaves prevention, and here the NCAA sanctions look even more inapposite. What, really, would prevent Penn State – or any other major college sports program – from finding itself in this situation again?

The answer is obvious: Change the power structure that makes a football or basketball coach the most important and influential person in the university.

At bottom, what allowed the Penn State scandal to occur wasn’t human frailty, but the de facto independence and control exercised by Paterno relative to the rest of the university. He didn’t report what was going on because, quite simply, he knew that he didn’t have to. If rumors reached the university’s administration, as it seems they did, Paterno knew the university could not and would not act against him.

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Could the NCAA change this power structure? You bet it could. It could require that coaches be paid no more than, say, the highest paid professor at the university. (Suppress your gasps, please. I know it sounds un-American.)

Wouldn’t that lead the best college coaches to go pro? Yes, it probably would – and that would be a good thing. In the corporate world of the National Football League and the National Basketball Association, the coach is just one important employee in the organization – and not the most important or the highest paid.

Make no mistake about it: The cult of the coach is the problem. It is heartwarming that, in the United States, the title “coach” has some of the same honorific qualities as “pastor,” “doctor” or “president.” But the most famous and prominent college coaches cannot be expected to behave responsibly when their institutional power is essentially absolute. When the university president is an unknown compared with his or her coach, is paid
far less and doesn’t enjoy the same charismatic authority in the eyes of the alumni, there is no realistic way for the president to supervise that coach or his (and it is almost always his) program. The corruption of the incorruptible Paterno is a story of the absence of any structural check on his authority.

So why doesn’t the NCAA change this? Because the coach’s cult is good for business. College athletes play for a maximum of four years, and the best football and basketball players generally don’t stay that long. This is barely enough time to get them nationally known.

Rivalries between colleges can be branded, of course – but as any marketer knows, personalities sell better than abstract brands. The coaches are a crucial part of the product. That is a part of why the coaches make the big bucks. And in America, a high salary is a part of celebrity. This vicious cycle should end. There are, of course, some cult coaches with sterling reputations. But remember: Until a year ago, Paterno was one of them.

Noah Feldman, a law professor at Harvard University, is a Bloomberg View columnist.
Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) discusses a Democratic staff investigation sharply critical of practices at for-profit colleges. Republicans called it biased. (J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press / July 30, 2012)

For-profit colleges slammed in Democratic Senate staff report
It says they are failing students and costing taxpayers too much. Republicans call the investigation biased.

By Jamie Goldberg, Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — For-profit colleges are failing their students and saddling taxpayers with an enormous bill, a two-year investigation by the Senate education panel's Democratic staff concluded.

The harsh report, released Monday by the committee's chairman, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), found that federal taxpayers spent $32 billion on for-profit colleges in 2009-10, while more than half of the students who enrolled in them dropped out without degrees after about four months in 2008-09.

"In this report, you will find overwhelming documentation of exorbitant tuition, aggressive recruiting practices, abysmal student outcomes, taxpayer dollars spent on marketing and pocketed as profit, and regulatory evasion and manipulation," Harkin said. "These practices are not the exception — they are the norm."

But Steve Gunderson, president of the Assn. of Private Sector Colleges and Universities and a former Republican congressman, said the report "twists
the facts to fit a narrative, proving that this is nothing more than continued political attacks on private sector colleges and universities."

Republicans on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which is controlled by Democrats, also criticized the report, saying it used biased information and failed to include Republican input, raising "substantial doubt about the accuracy of the information."

The report linked the high dropout rates with a lack of money spent on instruction at for-profit colleges, finding that in 2010 the 30 for-profit colleges that were examined employed 35,202 recruiters compared with 3,512 career services staffers. The companies examined in the report spent 42.1% of their revenue on marketing, recruiting and profits, while spending 17.2% on instruction.

More than 80% of the revenue at for-profit colleges came from federal financial aid, Harkin said.

"It's plain common sense that taxpayer dollars should not be used for lobbying," he added.

Gunderson said for-profit colleges deal with a constituency — mainly working adults, parents and veterans — that can be reached only through marketing and recruiting. To ban the use of revenue for lobbying would "result in the end of private sector colleges and universities," he said.

But many recruiters mislead prospective students about the cost of the program, the availability of federal aid, the job placement rate and the transferability of credits, the report said.

The Education Department estimates that 96% of students at for-profit colleges take out loans, a much higher percentage than students at community colleges, four-year public universities and nonprofit private colleges. Students at for-profit colleges account for 13% of the nation's college enrollment but 47% of all federal student loan defaults.

The report concluded that significant reforms were needed to ensure that for-profit colleges succeeded financially only when students also succeeded and that taxpayer dollars were used for educational purposes.

In early July, attempts by the Education Department to penalize for-profit colleges whose graduates ended up with huge debts and low job prospects were struck down by a federal judge.
For-profit colleges can still lose federal student aid if more than 90% of their revenue comes from federal sources or their students have high loan default rates in the three years after graduation.

Democratic members of the committee called for legislation to better regulate for-profit colleges, including adding new rules to the Higher Education Act, which is scheduled to be reauthorized next year.

"If nothing else this report has put the nation on notice that there is a problem here," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.).

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