

# Keeping Them in College

East Carolina University's efforts to improve retention and graduation rates

Photos by Tom Cogill for CrossTalk

By Don Campbell

GREENVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

**N**EARLY A THOUSAND incoming freshmen and anxious parents are crammed into East Carolina University's Wright Auditorium on a steamy hot morning in late June.

Don Joyner, ECU's associate vice chancellor for admissions and advising, is pacing from one end of the stage to the other, microphone in hand, doing a dead-on imitation of a fire-and-brimstone television minister exhorting the faithful in a high-pitched twang.

He's deep into a well-practiced recitation of what it takes to succeed in college—get involved in campus activities, use the library, learn some basic study skills, have realistic expectations—beginning with commandment number one: “Go to class.”

“Let me tell you what's going to happen to some of you,” Joyner shouts. “You're going to break up with your boyfriend or your girlfriend, and all of a sudden, you think your life is over! Well let me tell you something else: You've got to get over your depression! You can't use that as an excuse...because this place can be unforgiving!”

Wide-eyed parents and students are cackling one moment and nodding their heads solemnly the next, mesmerized by a popular and locally famous ritual that Joyner performs in orientation sessions seven times each summer. His tough-love message for new students is just one weapon in an innovative arsenal that East Carolina uses to keep them in college and get them through graduation.

**Increased awareness of the dropout problem is leading to demands for increased accountability in higher education across the nation.**

Retention and graduation are two of the hottest topics in higher education these days, as governing boards, accrediting agencies, and state and federal lawmakers demand more accountability and bang for the buck from college administrators. College dropout rates are not declining noticeably—and are rising in some cases—despite a wide array of programs aimed

at keeping students enrolled.

The traditional standard of only four years in college is mostly a relic; today's measure of an acceptable completion rate, except in the most elite institutions, is six years, and some prominent education experts think the standard should be eight or ten years.



**East Carolina University tries to involve new students like track and field athlete Valeria Moore in as many non-classroom activities as possible in their first few weeks on campus.**

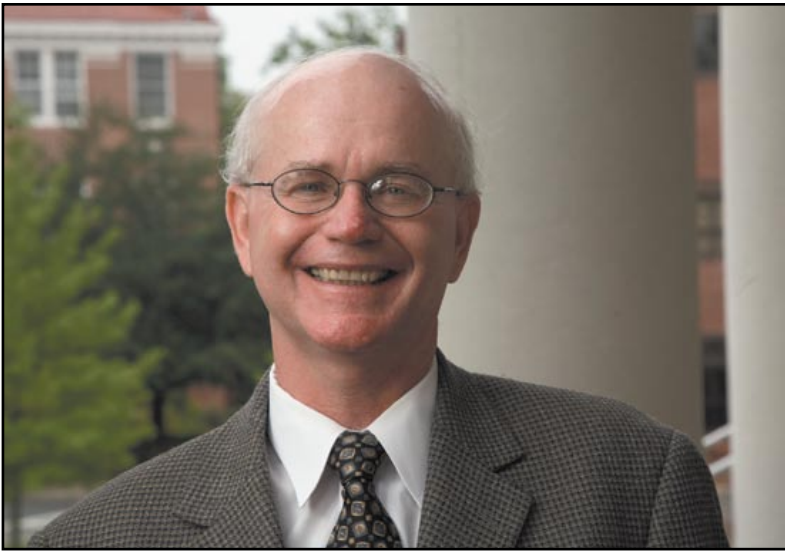
Assessing the problem is difficult because national statistics on retention and graduation rates are unreliable. Because students often transfer to other institutions, there is no dependable way to track retention and graduation beyond state borders. Rates for both vary wildly from the Ivy League schools to lower-tier schools in public university systems.

But ECU, despite drawing heavily from a rural eastern North Carolina population that includes sizeable numbers of first-generation college students, has managed to hold its own—and even excel in one area—when compared with peer institutions within the state and nationally.

Its six-year graduation rate of 54 percent compares favorably with other institutions in the University of North Carolina system, except UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University. Its freshman retention rate is six percentage points better than those at 13 peer institutions across the country. And it compares favorably to 85 “moderately selective” public institutions nationally on both retention and graduation rates for four, five and six years.

Most notable, however, is its success in retaining and graduating African American students. Not only is the percentage of ECU's black student population higher than at most public colleges in North Carolina, its six-year graduation rate for blacks is nearly five percentage points higher than that of the UNC system as a whole.

A study by The Education Trust found that East Carolina University's six-year graduation rate of 60 percent for African American students was nearly double that of “competitive” doctoral-degree granting institutions in its peer group.



***"We know you need to tie them into the university in those first six to eight weeks," says Don Joyner, associate vice chancellor for admissions and advising at East Carolina University.***

And yet the hurdles that must be overcome to keep students from dropping out or "stopping out" at ECU are the same that face most public institutions. They start with personal problems that often are most acute in the first six to eight weeks of the first semester, ranging from homesickness to a death or financial crisis in the family to breaking up with one's high school sweetheart. Some new students find that they just don't fit in, or can't make friends, which is not surprising on a campus where the university population alone may be many times that of the community in which they grew up.

Some have no idea how to manage their time, while others arrive poorly prepared, with the mistaken assumption that college is just high school writ large. "One thing we hear a lot is, 'I didn't have to study in high school,'" said Shelly Myers, director of ECU's Academic Enrichment Center. That notion starts to fade with midterm exams and is dispelled completely for some when D's and F's start showing up at the end of the first semester.

Moreover, surviving the first semester on the 23,500-student campus doesn't guarantee long-term persistence or timely graduation. Growing debt prompts some students to give up, and others to "stop out" for a semester or more to earn tuition money. While most administrators here believe that working ten to 12 hours a week helps give structure to a student's life, the problem comes when they try to work 20 to 30 hours a week and carry full class loads of 15 or 16 hours. "That's mutually exclusive, and I tell students that," said Joyner.

Still other students get bored with their professors or the field of study they've chosen and opt to switch majors, a move that is almost guaranteed to cost them an extra year in school. Some just decide that the community college back home is the place they should be.

Whatever the reasons, increased awareness of the dropout problem, fueled in part by better record-keeping

and more accessible data, is leading to demands for increased accountability in higher education here in North Carolina and across the nation. And the debate over who is responsible for students dropping out—the students themselves who are, after all, adults, or the institutions—seems to be losing steam.

"We've always assumed that it was all about students," said Kati Haycock, executive director of The Education Trust. "All that universities were responsible for was to make their treasures available, and if students take advantage of that, fine, and if not, fine. I think what folks are saying now, especially when it's clear that it's not all about the students, is that you cannot blame your low graduation rates on more poor students, and them having to work more jobs, because when you look at comparable institutions, you find wildly different success rates."

Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst is less sanguine. He said that while universities are doing better at assessing the dropout problem and providing data that documents the scope of the problem, "there's still no accountability in higher education. While there are people bemoaning this, there are no sanctions and incentives for these results."

But there are signs of change. The new president of the University of North Carolina system, Erskine Bowles, declared in his inaugural address earlier this year that retention rates at the state's 16 four-year colleges and universities are "wholly unacceptable." Some administrators here at ECU took that to mean that targets or quotas for retention will be imposed.

In Georgia, the university system's board of regents recently adopted a plan that freezes tuition for four years for incoming freshmen, an incentive for students to get their degree in four years or face a sharp tuition increase in the fifth year. A similar program at Western Illinois University since 1999 has resulted in a four-percent increase in the four-year graduation rate.

In New York, Governor George Pataki has proposed that the state give its public institutions a \$500 bonus for each student who graduates in four years. At the University of Houston, students can get tuition rebates if they successfully complete enough credit hours at the end of their first, second and third years.

The demand for more accountability, when backed by the threat of losing state funds, is likely to force colleges and universities to try new programs and abandon old ones.

One expert, Syracuse University education professor Vincent Tinto, argues that a program of incentives and disincentives will benefit schools populated by full-time students who already have the opportunity and the means to finish on time. Other schools, he said, will try to solve the problem by adding courses, hiring consultants, creating new offices.

The real answer, Tinto said, is to establish the right conditions and settings in which students, particularly new students, are expected to exist. The research shows, Tinto said, that students are more likely to stay in school and graduate in settings where advising is taken seriously, where there is a broad palette of support—academic, social and personal—that connects students to other aspects of the collegiate experience, and where there is frequent, high-quality contact among faculty, staff and students. One contributing factor to the

**At East Carolina University, the focus on freshmen is unrelenting, beginning with summer orientation and a "Weeks of Welcome" program.**

current situation, Tinto said, is that colleges depend too much on adjunct faculty and graduate students to teach first-year courses, when it should be assigning its most experienced professors to those classes.

“Simply put,” Tinto said, “involvement matters, and at no point does it matter more than the first year, when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak.”

Here at East Carolina University, the focus on freshmen is unrelenting, beginning with summer orientation and a “Weeks of Welcome” program aimed at the first weeks on campus.

Said Joyner: “We have to create—in order to retain students—a sense of belonging, a sense of competence and a sense of progression. You’ve also got to have good quality advisers, and you’ve got to have a clear career direction. Those are the indices.”

“The first six weeks are critical,” said Kris Smith, director of institutional research and testing. “The students come in and they are so worried about fitting in... about the social aspect. And then about four weeks into the semester we start giving tests, and they are, like, ‘Oh, my god,’ because they have no clue what it means to take a test at this level, and have to cover so much material.”

“We know you need to tie them into the university in those first six to eight weeks,” said Joyner. “So we have all kinds of academic activities, out-of-class learning experience, engagement with faculty—all that outside the classroom during those weeks. And we know that someone in Student Life is coordinating that for a sense of belonging.”

Valeria Moore, a freshman track and field athlete from Newark, Delaware, had that experience in her first week this year.

“When mom and dad left I was happy,” she said. “And then a couple days later it hit me. I woke up in the morning and I was sad. I was, like, ‘I’m not in my bed! I’m used to going to

my mom in the morning and harassing her. I felt it in the morning when I woke up, and I felt it at night when I went to bed.”

But within two weeks, she said, she found plenty of things to keep her occupied. “You just have to be willing to go out and get involved in it,” she said. “It’s there, but you have to go and get involved.”

The university has set up a collaborative of professional advisers to help students with their career direction. And it created the Academic Enrichment Center for students who find themselves in academic difficulty, offering workshops that train them on basic study skills, explain academic rules and regulations, and identify other resources on campus that will be helpful. About 500 students attend these workshops in the fall, and as many as three times that number attend in the spring. It also provides tutoring for students falling behind in the “D and F” courses like chemistry, math, physics and biology.

The center, whose motto is “Let your efforts rise above your excuses,” also offers an array of brochures, with titles like “Test Anxiety—Tips for Success,” “Making the Grade as a Freshman Who Lives Off-Campus,” and “Learn about Getting Organized.”

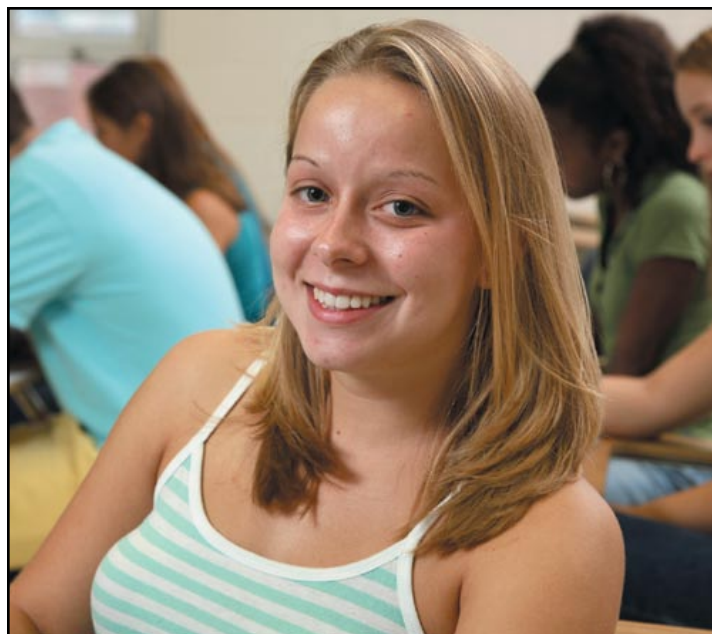
The centerpiece of the East Carolina retention effort, however, is the freshman seminar, a one-hour-credit course offered in the fall and spring that typically draws more than a third of ECU’s 3,600 freshmen. Admission is by self-selection, and the course is taught by instructors who apply for the job. Most sections of the course are offered to all freshmen, but one is designed for first-generation students, and some are reserved for freshmen who live off-campus nearby or who commute from home.

ECU, which has a waiting list of students who want to move on campus, long ago concluded that living off-campus was another possible impediment to retention. “Students who live off-campus are the first to say, ‘We aren’t plugged in like the kids on campus,’” said Kris Smith. “There’s a whole socialization that happens in residence halls that doesn’t happen off campus.”

Topics in the freshman seminar include understanding the transition from high school to college, motivation, goal-setting, learning styles, memory development, listening and note-taking,



**Many entering freshmen are not prepared for rigorous college work, says Jayne Geissler, director of East Carolina’s Academic Advising and Support Center, which tries to help students survive the difficult first weeks.**



**Faculty and staff advisors, as well as student friends, helped East Carolina sophomore Lauren Moscar deal with the breakup of a long relationship with her boyfriend in Stem, North Carolina, her home town.**

**Some freshmen arrive poorly prepared, with the mistaken assumption that college is just high school writ large.**

test-taking, critical-thinking skills and career development.

According to Smith, students who take the course in the fall are seven percent more likely to return to ECU the following fall, and those who take it in the spring are 13 percent more likely to return. Freshmen in summer orientation classes are also given a survey in which they are asked to list which

social organizations or interest groups they might want to join, giving administrators another avenue for getting the students engaged when they arrive for the fall semester.

The Academic Enrichment Center is also hiring a new staffer this year who will meet with students who want to withdraw from the university. “We want to get a sense not only of why they’re leaving, but also if they need to be one of those “stop-out” people, so we can make it easier for them to get back in,” director Shelly Myers said.

Residence hall coordinators and resident advisers are trained to spot students who may not be fitting in. They tend to be students who are constantly on the phone to their parents, “loners” who sit by themselves in the cafeteria or in dormitory lounges, and students who do not decorate their rooms.

Some efforts at retention are more spontaneous and unstructured. Jayne Geissler, director of the Academic Advising and Support Center, relates a story of a student who

arrived on campus in August and announced after less than a week that he was homesick and ready to quit.

“I asked him what one thing would make him feel better,” Geissler said. “He was a football player in high school and missed that terribly.” So, the young man’s freshman seminar class, taught by Geissler, organized a flag football team and made the young man the coach. “It was the first time that I saw a smile on his face!” said Geissler. “So for me, the challenge of any freshman seminar class is to find the one thing that can make a difference in a student adjusting and thriving in college. Even if it’s a football game.”

The challenge of retaining students, while acute in the first weeks, doesn’t get much easier down the road. When she first took her position three years ago, Geissler was immediately confronted with students who were having difficulty academically. “They would come in and say ‘I had three D’s and two F’s last semester.’ And my first question would be, ‘Well, what do you think happened?’ Ninety-nine percent of the time, their response would be, ‘I didn’t realize college would be so different from high school.’ Freshmen know it’s going to be different, but they don’t have a clue.”

Geissler’s office also faces a steady stream of students who can’t decide on a major, or who have been suspended academically and have returned to campus, or who have to reconsider their major or career goals because they can’t meet the requirements.

ECU, which has medical and nursing schools, and soon will have a dental school, attracts numerous students who find out after a couple of years that they can’t meet the grade

**UPDATE**  
**East Carolina University**  
**July 2008**

**E**NROLLMENT at East Carolina University continues to grow, and efforts to improve retention and graduation rates are still producing measurable results. “We have not increased as much as we would have hoped, but to change those rates takes multiple years,” said Judy Bailey, executive director of enrollment management at ECU. “You would expect to see that over a four- or five-year span,” she added, noting that *National CrossTalk’s* article about ECU had been published just two years earlier, in fall 2006.

Bailey served as president of Northern Michigan University and Western Michigan University for a total of nine years, before establishing a consulting firm in 2007. “ECU hired me to give a broad overview, an assessment of what they needed to do in terms of enrollment management,” she explained.

Following Bailey’s report in May 2007, which recommended several changes in policy, she was asked to “pull together a holistic approach across the campus, and lead a campus conversation on strategic enrollment management,” she said. “Chancellor Ballard asked me to come and begin working with them on looking at a broader understanding of how we accommodate the kind of growth we are seeing.”

Bailey described the growth as “phenomenal,” and said that enrollment at ECU in fall 2008 was expected to be the largest ever, close to 27,000. “We are estimating that our first-time full-time freshmen will

number around 4,700, compared to 4,222 last year,” she said.

The summer “tough love” sessions for incoming freshmen and their parents are still popular, boasting record attendance. An eighth session was added in summer 2008 to satisfy the demand. “It’s an outstanding program,” Bailey said. “It’s an academic as well as a social setting. They want to know that they will belong, and be a part of this exciting community. And of course the parents want to know about costs.” When the orientation is completed, each student has a schedule and an advisor.

ECU’s Academic Enrichment Center, which had just been established at the time of the 2006 article, has been expanded and

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renamed the Center for Academic Enrichment and Allied Health. “When the center was brand new, our mission was working with academic skill development and the pre-health and pre-law programs,” said Shelly Myers, director of the center.

“Over that last couple of years we found such a need in the pre-professional areas, and we found that we couldn’t do all the things in our original mission,” Myers said. In response, a new tutoring center was opened to satisfy the demand. “The Pirate Center (named for the school mascot) is a campus-wide service that was developed to take on that component—to help all students with their academic skills, and offer workshops in note-taking and test-taking, that kind of academic

point average required for admission to those schools. “Some of them wanted to be a nurse all their lives,” said Geissler, “and they usually come to us pretty devastated.”

The pressure to increase retention and graduation numbers prompts an assortment of debates. Setting quotas for both, which some officials predict will happen in the North Carolina system, appeals to education experts like Haycock of The Education Trust. “It’s absolutely a good idea,” she said. “While it would have been hard years ago to say what’s a reasonable target for institutions, it doesn’t seem to be now. That is, if you look at an institution compared to institutions just like it, and if you look at what the top-performing institutions in that category are doing as a starting place, a goal that has a campus seeking to stretch out to the sort of best-in-class makes a lot of sense.

“Hopefully,” she added, “that will lead to something better than what we have, which is four in ten graduating after four years. That’s just crazy.”

But measuring requires reliable numbers. Right now, no one is able, with any confidence, to track students who move between institutions, especially if they move to another state.

The U.S. Department of Education and some private organizations, including The Education Trust, support the creation of a national database that would track students’ progress from admission to graduation, no matter how many institutions they attended.

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities vigorously opposes such a database as an invasion of privacy, and produced a poll last summer that



**East Carolina’s Academic Enrichment Center, directed by Shelly Myers, assists many freshmen in making the difficult transition from high school to college.**

found that 62 percent of the American people are similarly opposed. Haycock called that “the most evil poll” and added, “I’m worried, because if you want people to take graduation seriously, you have to have good data.”

Measuring graduation rates also leads to a debate over what constitutes a realistic timeframe, and whether programs

support.” A new director was hired to manage the Pirate Center, which began offering full-service tutoring in 2008.

Institutional involvement is critical to success, according to Kati Haycock, executive director of The Education Trust. “I think it’s fair to say that in the last couple of years there has been an increasing willingness on the part of leaders in higher education to assume some responsibility for improving student success,” she said, adding that the prevailing view still tends to blame student preparation for problems with retention and degree completion.

Haycock pointed out, however, that comparable institutions—serving the same types of students, in terms of preparation and program—do not reliably produce similar results. “You get very different graduation rates, even for institutions that serve the same types of students,” she said. “There’s a lot of finger pointing. Educational institutions at every level have wanted to make this about the students, or their parents, or preparation. But overwhelming boatloads of

**“Evidence shows that what institutions do matters hugely to student success. Institutions must recognize the value of their own contribution.”**

**—Kati Haycock, executive director of The Education Trust**

evidence shows that what institutions do matters hugely to student success. Institutions must recognize the value of their own contribution.”

ECU is a good example. “Their graduation rates have continued to climb, when you look at them over time,” Haycock said. “In 1999 they had a six-year rate of 50.2 percent; today it’s 56.4 percent, which is pretty substantial!” Comparable institutions have graduation rates ranging from 40 to 70 percent. “Where ECU drew our attention was for its success with African Americans,” Haycock said. “They had little or no gap between black and white students, and that is very unusual.”

Haycock does take issue with the idea that it should take six or more years to complete a degree. “There is a general belief that if we just lengthen the time to eight or ten years, the graduation data will look better,” she said. “Frankly, most parents are horrified that colleges are talking about six years. Most people are not saving enough money for six years. We are creeping longer and longer, and it’s not good for students. It is still true that the ones who are most likely to succeed are the ones who go full-time right out of high school.”

Regardless of whether students need six years or more to earn a degree, Shelly Myers is convinced that ECU’s outreach effort has yielded results. “Students are getting better service, in terms of the questions they have about academics,” she said. “Is that tied to retention? I would think so. The advisors that I work with here are so connected to their students. We follow up on grades, and we take note if faculty have a concern about a student. It’s much more of a personal touch, and I think that helps them in school. I really believe that we have made a difference to the students.”

—Todd Sallo



**An ambitious program of visits to high schools has been organized by Al Smith, director of student development at East Carolina (shown with members of the university's student government). "You've got to get a dialogue going with the high schools," Smith says.**

that reward progress will have the unintended effect of leaving students in lower economic classes behind. College populations are changing so rapidly that only the top-level schools attract students with the preparation, motivation and wherewithal to finish in four years.

Indeed, some educators, most notably Stanford's Michael Kirst, believe that even six years is too short a time to expect students to graduate.

"Forty-six percent of our students (in California) start in community colleges," said Kirst. "So finishing from there in six years is a dream. I think ten (years) is better. And how you arrange an accountability system with that kind of timeline and movement is difficult—because you want to be fair to these institutions"

Some dismiss the longer time frame. Haycock calls it "a crazy idea" because, she said, "If your career begins with a bachelor's degree at 22 or 23, you have an enormously different earnings trajectory than you do if you get a B.A. at 32 or 36. You don't want to signal to institutions, 'Oh, don't worry, slow it down.' Those students who are taking more time are taking up seats. And we're in a time in some institutions where we don't have enough seats to go around. Universities have made a virtue out of multiple paths to graduation, with stop outs, and so forth, and the fact of the matter is those are not equal paths."

That said, there is growing evidence, as noted in a recent *New York Times* report, that students entering community colleges—more often coming from lower-income backgrounds—are unprepared and need extensive remediation. This can have a snowball effect, as it extends the time required to graduate from the two-year college and move on to a four-year institution.

The macro issue becomes how to make higher education a

more seamless transition from high school to college, a K-16 process.

At East Carolina University, another new initiative is to send admissions counselors and other advisors into area high schools. Said Al Smith, ECU's director of student development, "You've got to get a dialogue going that says to the high schools, 'This is what we're seeing. This is what we're looking for. This is why students are not making it in math, English, whatever.' This is definitely a huge issue."

The solution, echoes Kirst, is to get K-12 and higher education working together on remediation and to jointly fund that effort. "You can't solve this with those two levels working separately," said Kirst. "You've got to look at joint products and pay them for joint outcomes."

Elaborate programs aside, nothing beats the personal touch for keeping students on campus. The story of Lauren Moscar, an ECU sophomore from the little town of Stem, North Carolina, demonstrates that fact and makes Don Joyner's welcoming address for freshmen prophetic.

Months into her freshman year, Moscar broke up with her high school sweetheart. "Four and a half years dating somebody," she recalled. "You come back from Christmas break and they're not there anymore. That support system you have is gone. It was almost enough for me to consider, you know, 'What am I doing here? I'm all by myself now, and I have no idea where to go from here.'"

Moscar credits friends she hardly knew she had, and advisor Jayne Geissler, for coming to her rescue. "A lot of people who were kind of in the background stepped forward, and I think that's what college is about—finding people that you didn't know were there.

"Actually, Dr. Geissler was a really big help. I'd go to her office and sit down. I was supposed to go to sign up for a class and I'd end up there two hours talking about my ex-boyfriend and what else was going on in my life. So those two things pretty much are what kept me here and pulled me through."

Moscar, who enrolled in ECU intending to transfer to UNC-Chapel Hill, has since changed those plans. "I'm going to stay here," she said. "I love it; I love the atmosphere here. And I have no doubt I'll finish on time." ♦

**Growing debt prompts some students to give up, and others to "stop out" for a semester or more to earn tuition money.**

Don Campbell is a freelance writer and a lecturer in journalism at Emory University.