

A Special Compass Report:

Administrators face variety of challenges in effort to attract and retain students

by Angela Burrus

When Chancellor Mickey L. Burnim took office last year, he made no secret what the first priority of his new administration would be—to reverse the downward spiraling enrollment.

Burnim's aggressive approach to reverse the trend and attract more students certainly paid off this year. In the fall of 1996, the University recruited 556 new and transfer students—the highest number since 1993.

But although ECSU has won a significant battle, much more needs to be accomplished before the Chancellor can achieve his goal of a 3,500-student campus by the millennium.

Moreover, the campus is already feeling the effects of the last year's decline in enrollment. Since the state legislature appropriates money to campuses based on their enrollment less students means less money for the University to operate.

Last year's shortfall resulted in \$860,000 cut from the University's operating budget, most of it from the Academic Affairs division, according to Chancellor Mickey L. Burnim.

"This means less money for photocopying, less money for materials for faculty members to use in preparing things for classes, less money for faculty members to go to professional meetings to read papers or have papers read," said Burnim.

The budget shortfall also meant the University had to eliminate seven faculty positions. "This means students that would have normally taken classes from those instructors are either in larger classes or sections. Or the classes weren't offered at all."

Larger classes can also often mean that professors have less time and energy to devote to students, which further erodes the quality of education.

What are the causes of ECSU's enrollment decline?

Part of the problem can be attributed to demographics.

UNC system officials say there are fewer students graduating from high school, and that many campuses must compete with other universities for a small overall pool of students.

Burnim said the University needs to do a better job of marketing.

"There are things the University could have done in the past to attract more students," he said. This includes more effective advertising, to "let people know what we have to offer."

Still another factor in overall declining enrollment is retention. More than

Some students have also expressed disappointment at the inability of administrators and or recruiters to deliver on promises they have made.

300 students, about 15 percent of the campus, left the school last year.

However, ECSU's retention rate still exceeds the average rate of the entire UNC-system. The first year retention rate for all students within the system was 80.5 percent, according to Worthington.

According to a sophomore survey of all 16 schools in the UNC system, a relatively high number of students were less than satisfied with the overall quality of instruction offered at ECSU. In 50 percent of the survey questions, ECSU was last or near the bottom compared to other schools in the system. Only 37 percent of the sophomores said they would choose ECSU again if given the opportunity. Most of the other universities scored much higher, near 70 percent.

Burnim said that the University needs to do "better jobs of serving our students in the classroom and outside the classroom."

The Chancellor and his staff have drawn up a list of areas to focus on—improving academic advisement and the overall treatment of students, streamlining registration, adding more updated textbooks to courses, and introducing more technology in the classroom.

Burnim has appointed a task force for retention to study what needs to be done to improve the likelihood that students will stay at ECSU.

In the past, retention hasn't been the first priority, he said. Instead the University has focused more on trying to attract freshmen and transfer students.

"The task force has the job of looking at data, figuring out what factors are causing people not to continue, and then making recommendations as to what the University can do to keep them," Burnim said.

Why do students leave the University?

Some students say they are leaving to take advantage of academic programs either not offered at ECSU, or which have more developed programs at other colleges—speech and communications, for example.

Other students cite general disap-

pointment with their treatment or with the quality of instruction. Some students may be transferring to larger, predominantly white institutions. Nearly 30 percent of the 975 students who did not reenroll during the fall '97 season were white, according Nancy Lee, assistant director of ECSU's Planning and Institutional Studies.

Some students have also expressed disappointment at the inability of administrators and or recruiters to deliver on promises they have made.

"They said the Fine Arts Building was supposed to be built in 1994, and it is still not up," said ECSU senior Tiffany Newell. "That was one of the reasons why I came to ECSU."

Burnim has said he will continue to emphasize marketing and public relations in an effort to attract new students. Marsha McLean, Director of University Relations, is working hard to implement this plan, he said.

"Everything Ms. McLean does is from a marketing angle," said Burnim, "whether it's the way the radio station

broadcasts, or the kinds of things you read in the paper. In addition we are very conscious of stories printed in local papers."

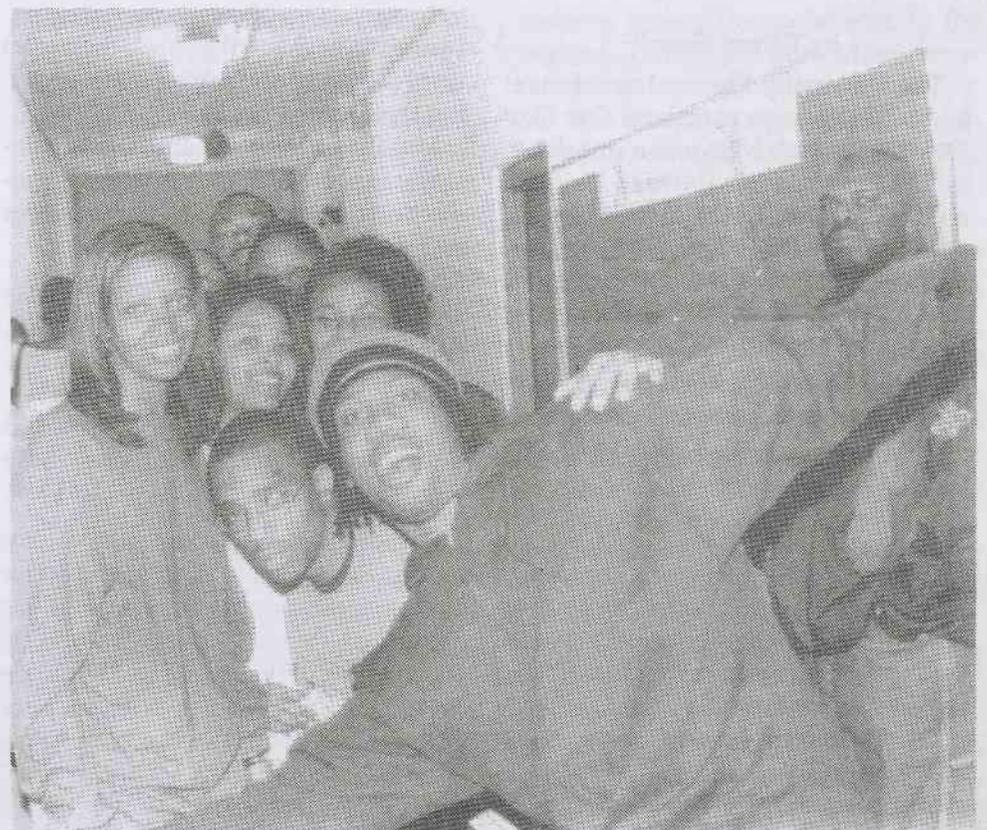
ECSU's counterpart, College of the Albemarle, a two year community college had enrollment increase of 2,080 this fall from 2,006 students enrolling in the fall of 1996.

Jeff Zeigler, director of COA's Public Relations and Communications, said COA's increased enrollment is due to its strong marketing and advertising strategies despite its tight budget. The college runs newspapers and radio ads a month before registration, said Zeigler. COA also mails a list of its class schedule to 65,000 homes direct two weeks before registration, he added.

Zeigler suggested ECSU could boost enrollment by focusing more on the Incentive Scholarship Program.

Although in the past, ECSU has not always been able to find students for all of the scholarships assigned, this year the program has awarded the largest percentage of scholarships to students in the last eight years, according to Dennis Brown, director of the program.

The University awarded incentive scholarships to 591 students, according to Brown, and 274 were new recipients. Only about "25 or 26" incentive scholarships were not used, Brown said.



Viking fans pose with KRS-1 while waiting for autographs after the Homecoming Concert.

Frank G. Scott photo