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Colleges count on Web for growth

Some students never set foot in a classroom

By HANNAH WOLFSON
News staff writer

Connie Wong Chow may be the future of education at the University of Alabama.

Chow lives in Huntsville, but she's earning her master's degree in library studies from UA. In her first semester of the two-year program, she spent a grand total of four days on campus in Tuscaloosa.

The rest of her coursework was completed online.

"It's pretty much like going to regular class except you can do it at home," said Chow, 29, who also works full time at the Huntsville Public Library.

UA and other schools around the state are banking on telecommuting students like Chow to help them keep increasing enrollments even in tough economic times. This fall, UA President Robert Witt called online classes "very, very important" to the university's growth strategy.

"We anticipate that online course enrollments will continue to increase because as the job market tightens, people will be looking to position themselves for advancement," said Rebecca Pow, associate dean for academic outreach at UA's College of Continuing Studies. "They will want to return to school to enhance current skills or learn new skills."

UA offers five bachelor's degrees, nine master's degrees and one Ph.D. program entirely online, plus dozens of other courses.

Online enrollment at the university has grown from 3,908 in 2006 to 6,038 this fall. Of those, 1,277 students this fall took no courses on campus, compared with 718 two years ago.

UA's not the only school experiencing growth online. Troy University offers 19 online degrees and figures about 6,000 of its 28,000 students, 21 percent, are taking classes solely online.

"It used to be that you'd quit work and go back for your degree," said Deb Gearhart, the director of Troy's eCampus. "You can't afford to



NEWS STAFF/FRANK COUCH

An inmate sands a small table inside a workshop at Draper Correctional Facility in Elmore. The Alabama Department of Corrections has inmates making furniture that is sold to municipalities and other state agencies.

Inmates build respect, furniture in program

By KELLI HEWETT TAYLOR
News staff writer

When it came time to furnish the new Hoover Fire Station No. 9 in the Greystone Legacy community, Battalion Chief Ben Allison knew what he wanted: cabinets and furniture made by state prison inmates.

Allison is among the fans of the lower-cost, custom-made furniture produced at Draper Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Elmore near Montgomery. Inmates also produce standard furniture at a maximum-security prison in Springville.

"The quality of the furniture, especially the custom work, is almost better than you can get commercially made," Allison said. "They use real wood, and it's solid and well-made, like you used to be able to get. I think it's great."

The Alabama Correctional Industries program, a part of the state Department of Correc-

State prisoners learn skills, ease anxiety while producing popular tables, chairs



Hoover Fire Station No. 9, which recently opened in the Greystone Legacy community, is filled with

Pollution levels high in Jeffco

Airborne toxins notable in poor neighborhoods

By THOMAS SPENCER
News staff writer

Pollution monitors in Jefferson County show elevated levels of toxic chemicals such as arsenic, benzene and formaldehyde, according to a report being released today by The Conservation Alabama Foundation.

The highest levels were detected at monitors in industrial sections north of downtown Birmingham. The neighborhoods adjacent to the monitors are predominately black and have high rates

of poverty.

"We have excessive amounts of cancer-causing toxins in the air around these monitoring sites," said Adam Snyder, Conservation Alabama's executive director. "In the Birmingham area, it's clear a high minority population is going to be most affected."

Earlier this month, USA Today published a report that used industry-reported toxic releases and a system of modeling to predict pollution levels at schools across the country. Lewis Elementary, Hudson K-8, Kirby Middle, Norwood Elementary and Phillips Academy all ranked in the first percentile nationwide

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President-elect Barack Obama's report is likely to focus on interaction between Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, left, and his staff and Rahm Emanuel, right, about a successor to Obama's Senate seat.

Obama set to unveil Blagojevich report

Expected to show staff's contacts

By BRETT J. BLACKLEDGE
and PHILIP ELLIOTT
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Barack Obama will offer details early this week about his transition staff's contact with Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who is facing federal charges of plotting to swap appointment of Obama's Senate successor for cash or a job.

One Democratic official said Sunday an internal report Obama ordered would be released no later than Tuesday.

The official, who requested anonymity because the report is not yet public, said transition aides were eager to make public their findings about discussions with Blagojevich's office and move past the distraction that the governor's scandal had become.

The report is expected to disclose details about contacts

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Air toxins elevated in poor Jefferson neighborhoods

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"We have excessive amounts of cancer-causing toxins in the air around these monitoring sites," said Adam Snyder, Conservation Alabama's executive director. "In the Birmingham area, it's clear a high minority population is going to be most affected."

Earlier this month, USA Today published a report that used industry-reported toxic releases and a system of modeling to predict pollution levels at schools across the country. Lewis Elementary, Hudson K-8, Kirby Middle, Norwood Elementary and Phillips Academy all ranked in the first percentile nationwide for bad air. Those schools also are near air monitors that registered the highest readings in Conservation Alabama's report.

Conservation Alabama's report drew from measurements of pollutants collected during the past seven years at five air monitors around the state operated by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and monitors operated by the Jefferson County Department of Public Health.

Conservation Alabama also compared the concentrations of 15 chemicals measured in the air with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's maximum safe level for chronic exposure to those 15 chemicals. In many cases, the concentrations detected far exceeded the safe exposure limits. High levels of exposure to the chemicals are believed to cause cancer or other health effects.

However, health officials who reviewed Conservation Alabama's findings cautioned that there is a great deal of uncertainty about the levels at which the various chemicals become dangerous.

"It is a good report, but it is somewhat limited in being able to determine whether the air quality is truly unhealthy or not," said Jefferson County Health Department senior air pollution control officer Corey Masuca.

Masuca said the Health Department plans to issue a report on the same data in January. "Tentative results indicate that most individual pollutants are at concentrations that do not warrant additional actions," Masuca said.

However, some of the concentrations detected will lead to further study and further efforts to reduce emissions, he said.

Scott Hughes, a spokesman for the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, said the department will be studying the report.

"We are certainly going to investigate those allegations and will work with the Environmental Management Commission to make sure proper actions are taken," he said.

Ed Postlethwait, the chairman of the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said the findings call for more study, but people shouldn't panic. These pollutants

have been present for years, and probably in greater quantities in the past, he said.

"Should people be concerned? I think the answer is yes. The magnitude of concern, that is a gray area." he said. "It is not a desirable thing, but it is unclear whether or not that can be definitely equated to a health impact."

For certain pollutants such as ozone, the EPA sets limits on permissible levels in the atmosphere and requires an areawide effort to keep those pollutants below harmful levels. But airborne toxins are regulated differently.

Industries are legally permitted to release certain levels of toxic chemicals into the air, and over the years environmental regulators have required the installation of better technology to cut toxic emissions.

However, regulations don't account for the concentration of pollutants that can come from multiple polluters that are close to each other.

"State and local agencies are basing regulations on EPA rules that don't require the protection of public health," said David Ludder, an environmental lawyer who prepared the report for Conservation Alabama. "If the public is to be protected, the regulatory system has to change. These air monitors are showing that people living around these monitoring stations are breathing toxic air."

Industrial plants ring the neighborhoods north of downtown such as Collegeville and Harriman Park.

At the Harriman Park Community Center, residents said pollution in their neighborhood has been a long-running concern. The recreation center is just up the street from one of the air monitors that recorded the highest level of airborne toxins. Residents complained of the steady accumulation of fine dust that leaves a film of grime on windows and cars and often seeps inside houses.

"I wear a mask when I'm outside working in the yard," said 61-year-old Catherine Monday. Monday, who has lived in the neighborhood all her life, has developed respiratory problems and sometimes has to breathe from an oxygen tank.

Joyce Ray, 68, said she believes the neighborhood has higher than normal rates of respiratory and sinus problems. "We don't know what causes it, but we suspect it has to do with the pollution," she said.

Pollution is by no means confined to inner-city neighborhoods. A monitoring station in rural west Jefferson County also shows levels of a host of chemicals that exceed the safe chronic exposure levels. That monitoring station in Providence showed elevated levels of formaldehyde and acrolein in the air.

Some chemicals such as arsenic, chloroform, carbon tetrachloride and ethylene dichloride are believed to come primarily from industrial sources and coal-fired power plants. But automobiles also are significant contributors of some airborne toxins.

Anne Turner Henson, a professor in UAB's School of Nursing, has been working with inner-city communities to make them more aware of air quality issues. She's worked with Head Start centers, which now monitor daily air quality forecasts and keep kids inside when pollutants are expected to reach unhealthy levels.

While it is important for communities to advocate for cleaner air, it's also important to give people tangible suggestions on how they can limit their exposure, she said.

Many people living in the area inherited their homes from parents who worked in the surrounding industries. They own their homes, but they wouldn't get enough selling them to move elsewhere. "If you live in Collegeville, you may not be able to move," she said.

Coming up with regulations to clean up the air would be complicated considering the variety of sources and technology available. "It's not an easy fix," she said.

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