March Madness, Whip Cream, and Other Departmental Nonsense

Special points of interest:

- Emilie is winning the March Madness Pool?
- Sheldon, banjo player, in a band?
- People weigh in on how to cut dept costs and increase revenue
- Thiessen, whip cream, and inappropriate activities with his students
- Grad talk: domain general mechanisms, and Scheier attire
### Department March Madness Basketball Pool Results

#### The Sweet Sixteen!

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Team Name</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<th>Finals</th>
<th>Pts</th>
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**PLB Observations:**

1. Most original bracket name goes to Erik Thiessen, who will tase anyone who did not pick UNC to go all the way.

2. Team “Bite Me” is living up to it’s name, holds bottom spot.

3. Christian Lebiere and Emilie Rendulic gets PLB props for being somewhat original and interesting by picking a non-#1 seed to win. Everyone else will learn hard lesson when all #1 seeds fail to make final four.
A PLB exclusive!

Erik Thiessen volunteered to help raise money for the African American Engineering Society on campus. Students paid $5 per whip-cream pie to be able to wing pies at their favorite professors from close distance. This PLB editor witnessed one of Thiessen’s students verbally taunt him and then stuff him full of two pies. Thiessen’s reactions after the event, “I think this was a good cause… wait, why did I sign up for this? I think I misread the email invitation.”
PLB Editor David Creswell got the low-down on Blair:

DC: How does it feel to be the last second year graduate student to be interviewed? Do you think previous PLB editor Thiessen had something against you?

BA: Erik, shun me? Clearly he did, that (&@$%. I tried to convince myself that he was saving the best for last, but deep down I knew that was wishful thinking, or cognitive dissonance, or whatever... Oh, well. His influence over the PLB is now waning, and things are looking much brighter now. We may even be able to get through an edition without mentioning his legacy soon, and use that extra space to burn him more.

DC: Where are you from and what made you decide to come to CMU for your PhD?

BA: Originally, I’m a Scarberian (from Scarborough, Ontario, Canada), although Scarborough has since been assimilated into the Greater Toronto Area so Torontonian would be an equally applicable label now. I largely was only in Toronto while school was in session though, and spent a lot of time further north in the winter and on Lake Ontario during the summer. My photo above is an action shot of me out on the lake on Double Dose, my Hobie Cat. Oh, and hopefully the picture of my dogs made it in as well – in the back is Quinte and Riley is in the front. And I have a brother, not featured.

In terms of academics, before going to university I’d come to the conclusion that there were two main questions that interested me: the universe, and our role in it. And somehow that led me to psychology, in part because of some very neat work done by Ken Dion – a social psychologist who amongst other things was studying how interpersonal dynamics might play out on a long term human voyage to Mars. This changed however after spending a summer early in my undergrad working on connectionist models of semantic memory and I’ve been hooked to that general sphere of research ever since.

After completing my undergraduate degree in psychology, I started my PhD work with David Plaut while he was up in Toronto. When David left to come back to CMU, I followed. Connectionist models are cool and I think have massive untapped potential contributions I’m interested in. They’re also very cool to watch learn and fiddle with and provide a nice confluence of psychology, computer science and statistics, three of my favorite subjects. As the connectionist extraordinaire, following Dave was the logical choice to really understand these models, so that’s why I’m here. Life’s too short to not do what you’re passionate about. Although Dave’s presence was a sufficient reason alone to come though, I have developed a deep appreciation for the community at large here at CMU and its high level of expertise and devotion to so many fascinating issues. A convoluted path, but academically fortuitous.

DC: What do you study?

BA: Currently, I’m studying how individuals process the meaning of ambiguous words like river/money BANK. In particular, I’m investigating the nature of some apparently contradictory findings in the literature wherein the relatedness amongst a word’s meanings (e.g., words with multiple related meanings like printer/academic PAPER vs. BANK) sometimes leads to processing advantages or disadvantages relative to unambiguous words. Some researchers attribute these contradictions to the decision making system, but on my account these effects are due to the processing dynamics of orthographic-to-semantic coding. Of course, I’m using connectionist models to investigate this, complimented with some behavioral investigations.

DC: Who in the department would you want to be stranded on a desert island with, and why?

BA: I suppose the logical choice would be to take along one of the problem-solving researchers. They could thus solve all the problems of living on a desert island while I enjoy the good times. Depending on the island though there may not really be many problems to solve, in which case I think I’d have to pick Mike Scheier since he has such excellent Island Attire (although see Grad Talk this month for some shocking news in this regard).
Sheldon Cohen was a folk legend and banjo player in his youth. However, his subsequent accomplishments have overshadowed those of his band (Sheldon has been heard to claim that he is Ricky Martin to their Menudo). In fact, the name of Sheldon’s band has been almost entirely forgotten by history, and completely forgotten by Sheldon.

Fortunately, thanks to the PLB’s unrivaled budgetary resources, we have been able to put together some fairly compelling speculation as to the name of the band. The PLB’s crack investigate staff combed through several key historical documents: newsreel footage, diaries from pre-teen girls, newspaper articles, Nixon’s enemies list, and police arrest reports.

These sources were combined with analyses of the zeitgeist, growth curve modeling, and interviews with Sheldon himself.

After hours of painstaking research, the PLB presents the 10 likeliest possible names for Sheldon’s folk band:

1. Grand Folk Railroad
2. Earth Wind and Lyre
3. The New Cohen Minstrels
4. Three Cat Night
5. Shelly Shell and the Folky Bunch
6. Banjo Kazooie
7. Parliament Folkedelic
8. Phat Pholk Phive
9. Go Folk Yourself
10. Merry Sheldon’s Folkenstein

- Erik Thiessen
The faculty senate meeting on March 18th, 2009 was uncharacteristically short. The only two items on the agenda were retirement benefits and the Provost’s address. I found it difficult to pay attention to the former topic, probably because I am 35+ years away from retirement. To the best of my recollection, the university is trying to entice people into early retirement; however, the early retirement option is available only to faculty. I paid more attention to Mark Kamlet’s address, which discussed budget strategies for the next couple of years. Here is the most important nugget of information: salary raises of approximately 3% are expected next year!

In other news, my term as faculty senator is almost over: I have only one more senate meeting to attend! You might be wondering what I have accomplished. The list of my accomplishments is short but impressive (if I say so myself):

1. My activities in the role of a faculty senator were so impressive, that for the next two years the Psychology Department is getting not one but TWO spots on the faculty senate. How exciting! Now we can lay to rest the speculation of who will be the next faculty senator: Charles Kemp or David Creswell. They (probably) both will!
2. At the beginning of my term refreshments served following adjournment of the senate meetings did not include ANY dessert. No desserts at all: no cookies, no cakes, no chocolate, no pie, no pastry. I am proud to report that our new faculty senators will be able to enjoy brownies when they go to the faculty senate socials. *

* Addition of brownies to the menu might have come up at the expense of grilled shrimp, but this is not my fault: I only campaigned for adding brownies, not for taking away the shrimp.

- Anna Fisher

Prospective Graduate Students Visit CMU Psychology Department

The cognitive and developmental areas had a joint prospective grad visiting day on February 27th. All prospective students received a free copy of the March PLB at lunch. At which point, several students got up and left.

Lynne Reder seen here laying down the law
Staff Council Notes--- February 2009
By Ellen Conser, H&SS Staff Council Representative 2006-2010

Parking Changes / Open Enrollment
Michelle Porter updated us on parking open enrollment & took questions and feedback. Rate hikes are still TBA as of this writing. Discounts for infrequent campus parkers may be re-instituted (possibly loadable onto your Tartan ID card). The Gates center will add 150 new spots when done. CMU is considering starting to charge parkers after 5pm and on weekends to make more money. More wood painted lines designating parking spots won’t be re-painted until the lot is resurfaced. Clusters of smokers gathered on 4th floor of CIC garage may be asked to relocate once smoking zones (see below) come into enforcement.

Take Our Sons & Daughters to Work Day
Take Our Sons & Daughters to Work Day is coming up soon. In the morning, children accompany parents at their workplaces; then lunch (possibly a $3 cost), then children split into groups through about 4pm. Children ages 9-15 (including grandkids & nieces/nephews) can participate. Events include the Science Van. Staff Council is seeking volunteers who like working with kids; you help usher them around campus and need not commit to the entire day. Contact Audrey Portis (email below).

Staff Council Tagline Contest
If you’re interested in graphic art & design and would like to participate in an SC effort, please consider contacting Audrey Portis to lend your talents to the CMU SC Tagline Contest. Prizes are involved (dining coupons and an HP printer). Only CMU staff are eligible to participate. Your idea should reflect Staff Council’s mission statement or constitution. For the mission statement, see the SC website http://www.cmuee.edu/staff-council/ and for a copy of the constitution, email Alan Becker at ab8g@andrew.cmu.edu. The SC Executive Committee will pick the winner; submissions will be reviewed with no names attached to attempt impartiality. Contact Ms. Portis at aportis@andrew.cmu.edu to volunteer. The Benefits Committee is currently benchmarking CMU’s maternity leave & short-term disability policies with peer universities to ascertain competitiveness with them. CMU may or may not adopt a Flexible Healthcare Spending debit card as other universities have already done.

The smoking policy committee at CMU has been working on designating ~30 allowable smoking locations on campus & how to best educate campus dwellers about them. 2 SC reps are on this committee. Unfortunately there is no CMU money available for signs, benches etc.

The Qatar reps were again no-shows at the February meeting; it was not announced why. As mentioned last month, for Qatar reps Thursday is the equivalent of their Friday, and people would rather not be on campus after work. Also, while our meeting is at noon, theirs is at 8pm due to time zones.

Housekeeping
SC officer elections are coming up and SC members were asked to nominate folks for these posts.

President’s Forum (coming Mar. 23)
Please feel free to submit questions for Dr. Cohn to me via email (conser@) or anonymously if you’d prefer, on a slip of paper… My mailbox is on the 3rd floor of Baker Hall in the Kitchen/Lounge area mailboxes (anonymously) or online.

<table>
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<th>Events</th>
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<td>Submit your question in advance for the President’s Forum (see below)</td>
<td>By Thu. Mar. 19</td>
<td>Baker Hall 3rd Fl., Kitchen/Lounge area mailboxes (anonymously)</td>
<td>Ellen Conser <a href="mailto:conser@andrew.cmu.edu">conser@andrew.cmu.edu</a></td>
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<td>President’s Forum</td>
<td>Mon. March 23, noon</td>
<td>McConomy Auditorium, UC</td>
<td>Melanie Linn Guzikowski <a href="mailto:melaniar@andrew.cmu.edu">melaniar@andrew.cmu.edu</a></td>
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<td>Parking Open Enrollment</td>
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<td>SC Tagline Contest</td>
<td>Deadline for entries: Tues. April 7</td>
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<td>Take Our Sons &amp; Daughters to Work Day</td>
<td>Thurs. April 16, all day</td>
<td>Around campus</td>
<td>Audrey Portis <a href="mailto:aportis@andrew.cmu.edu">aportis@andrew.cmu.edu</a></td>
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Economic Crisis has the Department Looking to Cut Costs

It’s true, we are in tough times. Not only have Sheldon, Bob, and Michael’s retirement nest eggs taken major hits in recent months, but our departmental budget is running in the red.

Last month the PLB invited submissions on ways the department can cut costs, and several folks submitted their suggestions for how to trim the department budget.

We dedicate pages 8-9 in the PLB this month to these submissions. Please read them carefully and be ready to implement all recommended changes.

It’s time to come together in hard times. Cost sharing can be so easy if we commit to it.

If you have other ideas, please send them to me for next month’s PLB.

- David Creswell

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Kotovsky Farms

To reduce the costs of lunches at faculty meetings for meat eaters, I suggest a new entrée: free-range squirrel nuggets from Kotovsky Farms.

— Bobby

Bottle Your Water

There is a really straightforward way to cut the budget: people have to bring their own tap water to work. Imagine how much money goes literally down the sink every time someone washes their hands. It would also cut costs if people brought their own water for the toilet but some would say that’s a ludicrous idea.

- Rakison

Scheier Investments

I demand that Michael Scheier return 100% of bonuses received for his role in investing the university’s endowment with Westridge Capital Management.

- Christopher Dodd

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Kotovsky Attacks PLB, Picks on New PLB-editor

To save money in the dept, I suggest:

1. Get rid of the PLB

2. Having done that, get rid of the PLB editor

3. Having done that, use the resultant 342 space for a money-making purpose

   a. small grocery
   b. coffee shop
   c. spa
   d. bookstore
   3. small magnet...

Of course there's a downside to this......it would create much more foot traffic in the 3rd floor hall....

--Ken

Kotovsky, circa 1980
Department Phones are a Huge Money Sink

I understand that one aspect of the department budget that is way over the top is the amount of money necessary to support the telephone system in the department. As a service to the department budget, I have decided to forego my use of Alexander Graham Bell’s invention. I have worked hard to establish an alternative plan and at this stage am piloting several possible channels of communication.

Plan A:
I will adopt my natural communication system - the larynx. So, for example, when I need to talk to Tisha about submitting my Challenge grant to NIH in the next few weeks, I will simply stand in the passage and shout all the way up the corridor. When I want to reach one of my postdocs, because they are situated in fairly close proximity, I can shout in a moderate-intensity voice. People should also feel free to shout to me if they wish to talk. I am happy to talk with anyone about anything in this shout out mode.

Plan B:
I will establish a can and wire system. It is simple and I have built a prototype, which seems to be operating successfully (see Figure). The instructions for the two can and wire system can be found at ‘How stuff works’ (url to the left). Note also that to save money further, one can request cans from the graduate students from Psycoke and then, even better, there are no costs associated with the recycling of these cans (huge benefit for all).

Figure 1 shows prototype two wires and can system for use in Behrmann lab. We are also working on a multi-can system for conference calling. Check back with us in a few months for updates on this system.

Plan C:
A third possible option, which I am piloting is to have David Rakison shuttle messages around the department. Now that he has tenure and boundless time, Rakison can take messages from one faculty member to another, from grad students to each other etc etc. Moreover, you can summon Rakison either using Plan A (shout his name in the corridor; this has to be extra loud as his office is way at the end on the third floor) or Plan B (use your can to call him; this might be a better option).

You too can save the department money by thinking out of the box and speaking out against wasteful spending.

- Marlene Behrmann

We Need to Increase Department Revenues

Ideas not so much for cutting costs, but for increasing revenues:

1. Selling paid subscriptions to PLB
2. Charging faculty rent for office space.
3. Charging faculty for lunches at faculty meetings (already under consideration)
4. Raising the price of drinks in the Coke machine and levying a departmental tax.
5. Charging for the use of bathrooms (on a sliding scale). Hey, Ryanair is thinking about it.
6. Renting out lunch bag space in the departmental refrigerator. Usage charge for departmental toaster oven.
7. Charging for the use of projectors in classrooms. The remote costs extra.
8. Water fountains -- they’re not free either. (Maybe offer package deal with item 5 above).
9. You want to use the department condo in Florida? It will cost you. (Comes with mapquest directions).
10. Use the new MRI scanner to do clinical scans and make out like radiologists.

- Anonymous
March Dept Happy Hour at Walnut Grill

Various members of the department took advantage of the nice March weather and enjoyed a happy hour at Walnut Grill in Shadyside recently. Seen above are the usual suspects, Ken Kотовsky smoking his cigar, and Thiessen slamming some whiskey.

The picture below was taken later when Ken went to the bathroom. Thiessen, drunk, steals a couple of hits off of Ken’s cigar.

Do you have something you’d like to share with the PLB? Please send your news, stories, commentaries, and pictures to PLB-editor David Creswell (creswell@cmu.edu).
Grad Talk

Hallucinating about green ideas... furiously...

This week, we stray from our usual lighthearted and jocular tone on which the PLB thrives, and instead switch to a more serious character. We would like to touch on what we believe to be a very serious issue — explaining domain general mechanisms to non-CMU psychologists.

It has come to our attention that, despite their persuasive ability to argue their points, many faculty are concerned that they are losing loved ones to the domain specific theoretical viewpoint — Erik Thiessen even lamented in the hall that he no longer talks to his own mother because she espouses a domain-specific theoretical stance.1

To remedy this problem, we provide some practical advice for explaining the dominance of the domain general theory, so that loved ones can be kept close. We resort to an age-old fairy tale that was passed down from many a generation across the CMU lineage, and somehow slipped out of frequent recounting over the years. We hope this tale will help to influence those dear to you to favor a domain general ideology.

The Tale of Herbie, the Domain-General Wizard

Once upon a time, there lived a kingdom of magical wizards in a land called Cara-mello-negie — the wizards all possessed magical wands which gave them the ability to cast many powerful spells.

The wizards were all domain-specific wizards, that is, they believed that different wands were necessary to cast certain spells. For example, wands made of dragon tears could only cast charm spells and wands made of ogre hearts could only cast bravery spells, but never could a wand cast more that one type of spell. The leader of the domain-specific wizards was a very powerful wizard named Spell-Key — so-named because she wrote a book that told her what wand was used to cast a particular cast spell.

However, a lone wizard named Herbie, believed in domain general wandlore — that his wand could produce any spell he wanted — and he was much mocked for this. One day, Herbie had enough, and challenged Spell-Key to a duel — Spell-Key laughed at Herbie and of course accepted. The other wizards all bet their magic potions that Spell-Key was going to win.

However, when the duel came Spell-Key had to keep changing her wand to cast different spells, but Herbie could cast any spell from his wand and won because he was more parsimonious in his spell-use. Victorious, Herbie became known as the greatest wizard in all of Cara-mello-negie.

Under his reign, many things were created with the domain-general wandlore — for example, two all beef patties with special sauce lettuce and cheese, also known today as big mac’s, were magically invented, as well as Heinz ketchup. Thanks to Herbie and the domain general wandlore, Cara-mello-negie turned into the Pittsburgh we know today.

And now we live on, mostly in ignorance, of the amazing feats that gave rise to domain general thinking.

Oh, and he lived happily ever after.

— THE END —

Balanced Budget Wears Away at the Scheier Attire Budget

Department head Mike Scheier’s wardrobe line is known the world over for its innovative and trend setting appeal. Frequently cited as “bedazzling”, “fabulous” “epidermis covering” and “immediately commanding the respect of one’s underlings”, Scheier’s clothing line, Scheier Attire: Clothes any Department Chair should Wear has suffered greatly in the recent economic downturn. The state of affairs has even grown so dire that our chair has waved his own personal clothing research budget for the betterment of the other department members. Although not apparent in his always-cheerful demeanor, his internal optimism is waning!

Fortunately, the grad PLB editors may have found a way to boost his self-esteem. Using a fishing rod to troll an approved grant application through his office and down the hall, our operatives were able to infiltrate his computer and download his latest wardrobe research outline.

From these documents, we were able to determine that Scheier has most recently been working on a new spring wardrobe that provides slightly more warmth than shorts with increased “personal liberty”. In particular, he has been looking at extending his wardrobe line to include a kilt-like product similar to those provided by the UtahKilts company (http://www.utahkilts.com/) — pursuing the site is a great way to waste an afternoon, only his would be better of course. Because that’s what is expected of him.

A Scheier Lab Research Model Hard at Work

A Male Unbifurcated Garment (M.U.G.)! What a brilliant idea! Unfortunately, without increased funding his research models will not be able to continue perfecting this fantastic new product. To this end, we ask you — the loyal plb followers — to donate to the cause. Ken Kotovsky, eager to get his friend into a male dress as soon as possible, has agreed to match contributions to this cause dollar-for-dollar so please donate generously in support of this trend-setting research.

1Upon interviewing Mrs. Thiessen, she commented, “Erik can’t even learn to associate severe grounding with not cleaning his room, so how am I supposed to believe he learned language by picking up on statistical co-occurrence frequencies of phonemes?”