Psycho? Logical? Bulletin!
May 2008

This allusion to one of history’s most famous collisions ends up being a uniquely appropriate cover

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How did the psychology department celebrate Carnival? The PLB is glad you asked!

Maybe the biggest news is that Psi Chi created a booth for the first time ever. It got a thumbs-up!

But Ken and Emilie made sure to check out a bunch of the other booths, too.
For many of the grad students, and Charles Kemp, this was their first exposure to funnel cake. Verdict: delicious.

Erik and Brooke took a ride together. Notice that Brooke is sitting on the outside. This allowed Brooke to learn an important lesson about centrifugal force.

Some people say that stuff at Carnival is a bit overpriced. But if you know how to work the angles, you can get free stuff from the alumni booth like Ken.
We appreciated the graduate students on a sunny day a few weeks ago, with a great view from the deck on the second floor of Doc’s in Shadyside.

There was pizza. And, as you can see, Charles Kemp takes his role as Assistant Professor very seriously, assisting here with pizza.

It may surprise you to learn this, but there were some people in attendance who ate more pizza than Charles.

Emilie, as you can see, was shocked that anyone smokes cigars. It’s a bad habit.

Note: do not look too closely at page 7.
Most people enjoyed their drinks. But we tried a bunch of different brews, and not every one of them was a winner.

As you can see, a good time was had by all!
For more pictures, visit click this link.

By popular demand, the lyrics of the grad student appreciation song, as well as I can remember them.

O grad students  
We appreciate you  
For all that you do  
Because you are so cool  
We wouldn’t trade you  
Not even for wool.

I mean, that’s fairly appreciative!
According to research performed at the University of Chicago, cortisol levels affect how quickly squirrels learn. In particular, squirrels with moderately elevated levels of cortisol learn to run mazes and play frisbee more quickly than squirrels with lower, or excessively high, levels of cortisol. These findings were reported in the article “Inverted-U shape relationship between cortisol and learning in ground squirrels” (link to description of the article).

Cortisol is a hormone involved in response to stress. The PLB turned to Sheldon Cohen, an expert on stress-related cortisol response, to provide insight on the methodology and theoretical implications of these results. “Social support can play a powerful role in buffering people (and squirrels!) from the biological consequences of stress,” he said. As such, in order to produce squirrels with lowered levels of cortisol, the authors may have provided them with social support, as illustrated below.

Conversely, when squirrels are exposed to stressful stimuli, their cortisol levels are likely to rise. Here is one example of a manipulation that will produce squirrels with moderate, and high levels of cortisol.

Thus, the authors’ conclude that stimuli that cause squirrels to feel moderate levels of stress facilitate squirrel learning. Therefore, visual sightings of Ken at a distance lead to very fast-learning squirrels. This may suggest why Ken has been unable to rid his Squirrel Hill residence of Squirrels. Squirrels in his neighborhood are constantly being stimulated by exposure to Ken at a reasonable distance, leading to a population of super-intelligent squirrels.
As many of you know, former grad student Gary Lupyan’s research was featured in a long article in the New York Times (in which Carnegie Mellon University was prominently mentioned).

You can click here to read all about it!

If Gary keeps it up, he’ll eventually be as well-known as resident celebrity Sheldon Cohen. Cohen, fresh off of his appearance on the Today show, turned down an opportunity to be a commercial spokesman for a Vitamin C cold remedy. In a statement to the press, Sheldon said that the “Gig doesn’t pay enough cash money.”

In other news, people have begun to refer to Sheldon’s office as his “dressing room.”

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PLB Shout-Outs

One of this month’s Shout-Outs goes to Emilie Rendulic. Emilie has been organizing happy hours, helping out with the research methods poster session, and basically working hard to give the department some esprit de corps. And opportunities to drink. The PLB tried to organize a happy hour once, so we know it’s hard work. So thanks, Emilie, for putting in all the effort to help make the department a fun place!

Roofers scared a squirrel resting in a gutter to fall down into a downspout. He ended up in the sewer drainpipe. The roofers took off the downspout and put long sticks in there to help the squirrel get out but he is scared (they have work to do and are not leaving).

When you have a problem of a possible dying squirrel about to clogger your sewer system, who do you call? Squirrel Busters! I have Ken’s phone number memorized and I knew he was the man to call, not the guy who called the roofers in the first place ...

Ken suggested peanut butter as a great lure and it worked (so far). The squirrel stuck his head out of the opening to the sewer pipe but I don’t think he will actually leave there until the workers are gone and Sonny is not around (Sonny and I are staying inside for the moment).

A shout out too to the PLB. Without those stories I would not have known what to do in this emergency.

Ken, of course, has a great recipe for squirrel with peanut butter, but I do not think we should print that.

- Lynne Reder
The faculty member sprinted past second, rounded third, and decided to slide head first to home plate (which was, in fact, a paper plate). Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one who wanted to occupy that particular space at that particular time. Following the impact there were tears and the police and EMS soon arrived at the scene.

But I get ahead of myself...

On Friday 25th April, the faculty were invited by Psi Chi (are they a “group”? an “order”? or something more mysterious?) to the first annual kickball match. Things didn’t start well for the faculty, mainly because nobody knew the location of Donner Ditch, the location for the afternoon’s festivities. Ken Kotovsky tried to convince his kickball colleagues that it was a private drinking room in PHI but thankfully, and as usual, nobody took him seriously. When the faculty finally arrived they were greeted by a group of enthusiastic Psi Chi’ers, a burning grill with burgers and hot dogs, and more diet coke than even Bobby Klatzky could drink. After an hour or so of these frivolities, and after much vigorous stretching and semi-friendly banter, it was time for the big event.

Although the students claimed it would be a sociable game, they made numerous comments about the faculty team’s age and decalcifying bones along the lines of “you’re so old you probably remember the time before gravity.” Thankfully, the faculty had brought in a few ringers for the game. Erin Donahoe, or “thighs of steel” as she’s now known, was drafted in and Nick Yeung flew 4000 miles from Oxford to take his rightful place in the team. But nobody was more surprised than Charles Kemp than Charles Kemp to find himself high up the kicking order and with the weight of the department on his shoulders. Also in the faculty team were Ken, Erik Thiessen, Theresa Kurutz, Brooke “toes of power” Feeney, and David Rakison. Lori Holt was the team’s mascot/cheerleader/tactician.

As you probably are aware, the ability to master a sport is dependent on hours of practice and a deep understanding of the game. However, after a brief discussion among the faculty team it soon became clear not only that most of us had never played the game before but that we had no idea of the rules or even if there were any. The students won the toss – Rakison stupidly calling “tails” rather than “heads” – and elected to kick. And things started well for them, mainly because Theresa Kurutz was taking a while to find her pitching rhythm and Ken was taking a while to find his pulse. After a few misfields, the Psi Chi team, lead by Jen Fillo, stormed into a 3-0 lead.
The faculty responded in kind, with Charles Kemp kicking a huger homer (is that the appropriate term for it?), and after one inning the score was 4-3. The second inning saw a remarkable turnaround, with pretty much everyone on the faculty team kicking and fielding like people hoping to be drafted by the Pirates. By the end of the second inning they lead 9-4. And things looked good at the bottom of the 3rd with the score at 11-4 and only one out. But then disaster struck.

And that disaster’s name was Erik Thiessen. For some reason that nobody can fathom, he decided to slide for home plate as he ran in following a beautiful punt from Nick Yeung. A young Psi Chi member, whose name must be kept secret for her own protection and prior to the court case (but it starts with J and ends with essica Jankowitsch), was standing on home plate at the time. There was a collision – think Holyfield meets Tyson - and the student went down hard, rolled several times in the spring blossoms, and then started to call for immediate medical attention and the sacking of the Dr. Thiessen. The police and medics were called, the game was over, and the poor Psi Chi student went to hospital where she was diagnosed with a sprained knee and severe and permanent emotional scarring.

Perhaps we will never know why Erik Thiessen did what he did. Did the student chastise him for not being burly enough? Did the student speak up too much in class? Or not enough? Or is Dr. Thiessen just a crazed, do-anything-to-win, kind of guy? We can only wonder whether Psi Chi will want to play again next year; they took quite a beating both in terms of the score and their young, previously unscarred knees. Regardless, next time you see Erik coming toward you along the Baker Hall corridor I suggest you protect your knees, or anything else that you value below the waist.

Typically, the PLB includes a legal disclaimer indicating that no animals or students were harmed in the making of the PLB. I’m planning to stay away from animals for the foreseeable future, so I can hopefully maintain 50%.
Jeffrey Horenstein won the department’s NCAA pool. Congratulations to Jeffrey on the momentous accomplishment. It is consistent with this data (right) that the grad students forwarded to me recently.

Perhaps it’s fortunate for Jeffrey that he made his tournament picks before he earned his Ph.D., and became a former graduate student.

At our April meeting, each SC member received an appreciation certificate for their contributions over the last year to Staff Council. It was a really nice part of the meeting. We also agreed that revisions to the wording of the Constitution amendment regarding member suspension or removal (described in previous PLBs) were satisfactory.

Thank you to everyone who took a few minutes to think about our elections and vote. I struggled with whether it was proper to campaign for myself, but in the end I believe it’s really an issue of whether you feel it is important to have our Department be represented in Staff Council.

Healthy Campus 2010 / Smoking policy
Anita Barkin (Director, Student Health Services) outlined the work she and others involved with the Healthy Campus 2010 initiative have been doing to adjust the campuswide smoking policies. Discussion focused around issues such as:
--Enforcement of current policy is lax/nonexistent. Will that change?
--Exactly where will nonsmoking areas be situated? Will there be covered shelters?
--Will designated smoking areas be lit up at night and/or safe?

If you’re interested, here are two Powerpoint files filled with related details. The designated smoking sites aren’t decided yet. We voted on whether we agreed in principle with moving forward with this plan. The vote passed “nearly unanimously”. The ‘nearly’ was because of me (and possibly a couple other reps scattered around the room). I needed to vote my conscience on this issue. When asked, Ms. Barkin reported that about 250 colleges and universities to date have already completely banned smoking from their campuses. I feel strongly that because CMU is such a compact campus in terms of land area and usage, and for the usual anti-secondhand smoke and butt-pollution sorts of reasons, that smoking should be banned entirely on campus. One of the most poignant scenes I’ve come across recently on campus was on the Cut. One day, the sun was shining brilliantly, it was warm, I was walking to the UC, and I saw a group of very young children wearing plastic gloves and picking up cigarette butts near the sidewalk. (On my return trip from the UC, they had barely made a dent in the mess. Not for lack of enthusiasm, though!) There is something wrong with this picture.

Just a reminder, opinions expressed here are solely my own, not those of Staff Council (clearly, as the vote described above shows!)
Graduate Student of the Month

May’s Graduate Student of the month is Matthew Walsh. Matt and I talked about the advice he’d pass on to young graduate students, the joys of coffee, Deadliest Catch, and several other topics that were on the mind of the department’s only (to the PLB’s knowledge) former landscape architecture major.

PLB: Tell us about your past.
MW: I’m from Long Island, originally, and moved to Connecticut, New Jersey, so I’ve been around the east coast. I have three brothers. My mother always wanted a daughter, so we got her a dog. I went to Penn State, so I’m a Nittany Lion; still get back there quite frequently.

PLB: Were you a psychology major at PSU?
MW: Yeah, well, I was a variety of majors at Penn State. I started in musical performance. Then I switched to landscape architecture. Then, when I was a sophomore, I finally settled into psychology.

PLB: What lead you to psychology?
MW: I guess it was just inevitable. I look back, and I think I always had a sense that I was going to end up in psychology.

PLB: After PSU, what drew you to CMU?
MW: Well, there were some practical constraints. I’m still in the Air Force, and my unit is at Penn State, so I have to go back there once a month. But the fine city of Pittsburgh drew me in. Seriously, though, it was John [Anderson] mainly. It certainly wasn’t Carnegie Mellon football.

PLB: Has being in the Air Force given you any skills that helped you adjust to grad school?
MW: I’m an intelligence analyst in the Air Force, which entails taking information, reading it, and compressing it into a briefing. That’s mainly what I do for the Air Force; give these Powerpoint presentations. So I do have a unique working knowledge of the intricacies of Powerpoint. Also, I stay in a lot of hotels for the Air Force, so I’m good at haggling.

PLB: Now that you’re just about done with your first year, what have you learned about being a grad student? What advice would you have for new grads?
MW: I would tell them to communicate with their advisers before they come, during the months leading up to the start of the first year, so they can have some direction when they arrive. I’d tell them to try and get a key to some open space, some hidden nook in the building, so they don’t need to hang out in the first year office.

PLB: What theoretical or practical lessons did you take away from your first year project?
MW: I learned that participants are more responsive when you pay them. Well, one of the products of that work was a bit more knowledge about the methodology; we had people working at a computer, and we recorded their mouse cursor movement. It worked out well; the cursor movements give a rich measure of people’s intentions, what they’re thinking as they move through the space. One of the lessons learned is that people often start a problem without a clear idea of how they’re going to proceed, and then they’ll change their minds or continue with the initial direction.

PLB: That sounds like a metaphor.
MW: Yeah, that’s how I feel as a graduate student. You just have to stay flexible, and be willing to adjust and change. A life lesson that also applies to decisions made in 500 milliseconds.
PLB: Where do you want to take your research in the future?
MW: I’ve been transitioning from looking at small paradigms to thinking on a broader scale, get more theoretical basis to my research. I just joined the CNBC, so that will hopefully allow me to move from just behavioral work to neuroscience, in the coming years.

PLB: When you’re not researching, what do you do to entertain yourself?
MW: Well, I play a lot of racquetball. I run. A bit of physical activity. Besides that, I enjoy watching movies. When I was at Penn State, we had an independent film channel, foreign films and non-mainstream films, and I actually acquired a bit of taste for that sort of movie. It leaves me feeling sophisticated.

PLB: Anything else? Any restaurants or any local hotspots you like to visit?
MW: I find myself over on the South Side quite a bit. And I like Thai food. There’s no shortage of good Thai restaurants in this area. Especially Bangkok Balcony. Besides that, I spend hours on end in Starbucks and Coffee Tree. I’m on a first name basis with all of the baristas.

PLB: Well then, let’s start the Three Tough Questions. The first is: for you, what is the big question you want to answer with your career?
MW: How do people decide how to solve problems. I am interested in the process by which a strategy is selected, as well as the factors that play into that process. More short-term, I’m interested in seeing whether this work warrants a Ph.D! Besides the theoretical motivation, my work has a pretty clear applied goal. If we can understand why and where people are failing in this selection process, we can come up with training materials and task representations to improve performance.

PLB: What does your beverage of choice [Matt was drinking black coffee] signify about you as a person?
MW: Mmmm. I guess I’m stingy. Coffee is a very cheap source of caffeine. Hmmm. No, maybe I won’t say that. Resourceful. Yes, resourceful. The only drawback of coffee is that it leaves stains when you get it on your shirt. I guess that also speaks to my personality.

PLB: Finally, if you weren’t a graduate student, what would you be doing with your life?
MW: Oh. I’ll tell you, I watch the Discovery Channel, and I think if I wasn’t in psychology, I’d like to be an Alaskan King Crab fisherman. Deadliest Catch stuff. I’d work on the Northwest, with Sig Hansen. I could do that. When I was in high school, my guidance counselor asked me what I wanted to do. I was totally serious with her, and said I’d like to be a surveyor. She thought I was joking, she just laughed. So I went into academics. But a return to manual labor would be all right.
Last meeting of the faculty senate featured a lively discussion of the proposed changes to the campus smoking policy. The existing policy prohibits smoking within 20 feet of building entrances. Faculty senate was informed that this policy is not enforced and is routinely violated. The proposed changes to the existing policy were outlined in an e-mail sent to the members of the campus community on April 11th. In case you immediately deleted this e-mail, here is the gist:

The revised policy provides that smoking will only be permitted in designated smoking areas; individuals smoking outside the areas and/or throwing cigarette butts on the grounds will be issued a citation or $25 fine through the University Police Department; the policy being advanced is based on the evidence of its effectiveness in reducing initiation of smoking in new college students.

The lively discussion that ensued at the last faculty senate meeting was focused on location and desired characteristics of the designated smoking areas. Anita Barkin, Director of the CMU Health Services, promised that all suggestions voiced by the senators will be taken into account. As a result, designated smoking areas will be: off the beaten track but easily accessible and convenient to smokers, sheltered (to protect from rain), and well lit (to protect from danger). I have a suspicion that meeting these (and many other) demands/suggestions may prove impossible.

The Faculty Senate will vote on the proposed changes to the smoking policy at the next meeting. Along with a few other senators I am uncomfortable voting for an imaginary map of designated smoking areas, therefore I currently plan to vote against the proposed changes. However, as all senators, I can be bribed or talked into changing my mind. Therefore, I am open to your comments, suggestions, cash, or personal checks.

As you may remember, this was the last PLB I planned for the school year, because I’m going to spend most of the summer away from the PLB’s World Headquarters on the South Side.

However, don’t despair, gentle readers. I am in negotiations to provide at least one guest-edited version of the PLB during the long, hot summer.

And, even if those negotiations fall through, I guarantee that the PLB will be back in September, ready to print all of the news (or imaginative news-like substance) that is fit to print.