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Diversity is Important
Erik Thiessen

In the next few months, the department will look to hire one or more new faculty members. Of course, we’ll be looking at candidates who continue the tradition of the department, teachers and researchers with an excellent track record and potential to shape their fields in the future. But we should also consider this as an opportunity to increase the diversity of the department.

Diversity has a number of benefits. Diversity can increase creativity by bringing in new viewpoints, and improve our ability to recruit and retain students from under-represented populations. These goals are important in and of themselves, but will also help us as we strive for federal funding in an era of tighter and tighter government budgets.

Because of these benefits, I think it is especially important that the department make every effort to hire new faculty members who are not named David, Dave, or Davey. We are already one of the world’s leading departments in terms of David-density. Faculty members from other parts of the country are beginning to wonder if this song (link) was written about our department.

Come on. Would it kill us to hire a couple of Eriks? Or an Eirik or an Eric? I could even go for an Erick in a pinch. If we work together, I know we can do it.

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I’ll tell you what’s important: Daverysity
J. David Creswell

As the newest faculty member here, I can say that I was drawn to CMU because this department is a virtual breeding ground of prolific Davids. But we are currently hurting on our Daversity, and this is quickly becoming something of a crisis. We have cognitive, developmental, and social Davids, but what about clinical Davids? What about Davids studying mainstream topics like addiction, attention, and perception? Well, my friends, we have no Davids studying any of these topics. Those Davids are out there making other schools great, but they need to be here where they belong. Don’t worry, I’ve been working on this and have some solutions for averting this crisis. After careful deliberation and several closed-door meetings with the other Davids, I have assembled a list of front-runners, listed in no particular order:

1. David Copperfield (cognitive, illusions)
2. David Buss (social, evolutionary psychology)
3. David Hasselhoff (clinical, celebrity drunk)
4. David Bowie (cognitive, sensation/perception)
5. David Hume (hard core empiricist)

These Davids were selected because they balance our Daversity across important areas, and because Baywatch is cool. Potential for strong theoretical impact in the field was also considered, but we decided against impact in favor of celebrities who would ensure higher teaching ratings. This list isn’t final yet and needs a little tweaking. David Hume is dead. David Buss is practically retired, and controversial. David Bowie could really improve our departmental holiday parties, but I’m worried his days of making impactful contributions ended after his 1981 hit “Under Pressure.” But the remaining candidates are real winners, think about it.
Until a few bold visionaries decided to move out onto the deck. There was some worry that it might rain...

But Mike wasn’t about to let a little rain stop him from having a good time!

Which was for the best, given Emilie’s position as Happy Hour Enforcer: she was ready to slap anyone not being happy.
Almost everyone had a good time. But it wasn’t all fun and games. People discussed important business, like whether an amaretto sour or a fuzzy navel is a girlier drink.

And notice the way J. David is on the job here, pulling out a chair for Mike. He takes the assisting part of “Assistant Professor” very seriously.

Brooke and Erik know how to put the “happy” in Happy Hour (hint: it involves alcohol).

Erik has a related skill: his students claim he knows how to put the “interminable” in a lecture hour.
The grad students are so cute at happy hour - it’s a bit like the kids table at Thanksgiving, except with more discussion about which faculty member deserves the most chili peppers.

Ken Koedinger - seen above - was kicked out of Happy Hour for cavorting with an underage woman: daughter Sasha. No one under the age of 18 (the PLB checked, and that’s actually 18 years, not 18 days) is allowed at Doc’s.

But don’t worry, Ken: the PLB knows a trick or two about how to get underage people into bars. Simply print out the image below, get it laminated, and boom! Sasha will have a driver’s license verifying that she’s 27 years old.
October’s Graduate Student of the month is Sung-joo Lim. We talked about what she learned during her first year as a graduate student, what she learned from her time as a Computer Science major, and why it’s hard to find good sushi in Pittsburgh.

PLB: Tell us a bit about yourself: where are you from, where did you go to school, and so forth.
SL: I’m from Korea. I moved to the U.S. for high school, in Richmond Virginia. I came to Carnegie Mellon for undergrad... I was a computer science major. I wasn’t thinking about psychology until my senior year. So I worked for two years in HCII (PSLC) to get some experience.

PLB: Why did you choose to come to CMU as an undergrad?
SL: I was deciding between two majors. One was computer science, and the other was psychology. I applied to lots of schools – some were strong in one, some were strong in the other. Then I decided to major in Computer Science in which Carnegie Mellon was really strong, and also good in psychology.

PLB: Did you enjoy your time as a CS major?
SL: Yeeeeaaaah. I’m a little hesitant to say ‘definitely I did,’ but it was good. It was quite hard. There were a lot of people who actually had a CS background; they’d been doing programming since elementary school. I was really new to all these things. That was somewhat stressful. But if a project goes well, I really enjoy having a sense of achievement. But some course like OS (building OS from scratch), well, I couldn’t sleep. I had to stay up all night, doing the project all night, almost every single night. But after finishing the projects, it was amazing how much I learned from it.

PLB: What skills did you pick up from your time as a CS major that are useful to you now?
SL: Right now, the project I do involves a bit of programming. I don’t have to learn the programming language, because I already know it. It’s easy for me to get into the code and fix whatever I want. And I can use it to help with my data processing, because it’s such a mass of data that I don’t want to do it manually. I write some code that makes it easy for me. Even interpreting other languages that I don’t know, such as Eprime scripts or simple MATLAB, programming skills somewhat make it easy. And when I took the PDP course last semester, some basic knowledge from undergrad on artificial neural network kept me from being overwhelmed.

PLB: And when you look at other grad students with a more traditional psychology background, what skills or bits of knowledge do they have that you might not yet?
SL: They already have a great base knowledge, a foundation to build on. And some of my cohort worked before, so they’re familiar with research. In class they relate findings from other fields well. I feel like I still need to know more of the actual foundation, the basic knowledge so that I can build specific knowledge for the particular interests that I have. Right now, I’ve been doing a lot of reading for my projects. But I feel like I need to read the core things a little bit, the basic findings. It’s a little overwhelming. To generate new ideas and new findings, it’s really helpful to know what’s been done before.

PLB: Speaking of projects, what was your first-year project about?
SL: It’s well known that native Japanese speakers cannot identify English /r/ and /l/ sounds. So we’re trying to train these people on this distinction by using a really unusual paradigm, a video game.
They’re not getting feedback, they’re just playing the game, and they just hear the distributions of sound categories associated with different characters. By the end of the training, we hope to see that they’ve actually learned the distinction better than people who didn’t receive the training.

PLB: As a second year, wise in the ways of grad work, what advice do you have for new grads?
SL: I don’t know if I’m in a position to give good advice yet! I guess I kind of enjoyed the first year thing where our cohort bonded. So that’s easy advice to give. And also: get involved a lot in discussion. That’s a little hard for me, because I’m little bit introvert. But that’s a really required skill. To do that, you have to read all the material before you come in! So I think it’s good to be engaged in classes. So what I did is I forced myself to try and talk, so hopefully it will become a habit later.

PLB: What do you do in your spare time?
SL: I go out with friends a lot. Not as much now, since all my undergrad friends left. I like to watch movies. I sometimes just watch movies on my computer - let’s say that I borrowed the DVDs. I went to a Pittsburgh Symphony concert last week. I like to go out and eat. I really enjoy going to D&B to play games – especially shooting games.

PLB: What are some of your favorite places or things to eat in Pittsburgh?
SL: I like Church Brew Works because it’s quite unique. Il Pizzaiollo in Mount Lebanon. Their food is great. I like Asian kinds of foods, especially Japanese and Korean. But they’re not so good here. I like sushi and sashimi, but Pittsburgh might be too far inland for great seafood.

PLB: Finally, what’s your favorite operating system?
SL: Well, I used Linux in the past (undergrad), but I don’t use it that much because I don’t need to run any simulations or extensive programming now. Unless I need to do programming, I would just use Windows. I know Blair might say Windows is “Blah, whatever,” that sort of engineering perspective because Linux is fast, and Windows has so many things going on that it crashes a lot. But so many programs are based on Windows. And I never owned Mac. I’m not even good at it as I am on others. So that’s out.
Marcel Just was recently featured in the Post-Gazette for what is - by the PLB’s count - the 102nd time in the last 4 years.

But this article (link) is even more exciting than usual, because it features exclusive Marcel Just audio recordings. You can find them at the link above, or listen to them here, here, or here.

Those links are to soundfiles in MP3 format, meaning you can download Marcel straight to your iPod. If that doesn’t liven up your next workout, the PLB doesn’t know what to tell you.

(Thanks to Kathy Majors for the links)

Overheard on Campus

The other day, the PLB was walking past the University Center, where GE had a booth set up recruiting students for internships and possible jobs.

An undergrad approached the booth and asked what kind of jobs she might find at GE. The GE rep asked her what her major was, and she replied that she was a psychology major.

After a pause, the GE rep said, “Hmmm. Well, psychology isn’t really a major that GE typically has any use for.”

Seems like a reasonable place to stop. Oh... wait...

Last month, the PLB reported that Sheldon Cohen had come into quite a bit of money, thanks to the fund transfer practices of several African governments. This month, the PLB suggests what Sheldon might do with that money: get a named building on campus.

Some courses that might be taught in the Sheldon Hall of Education
1) Health Psychology
   Relations between stress and disease

2) Recent Pirate History
   Why overpaying terrible players, and trading away good players for a bag of used baseballs, is a bad plan

3) Feline communication
   What do different meows tell you about your cat’s state of mind?
PITTSBURGH, PA (PLB News Wire). The United Kingdom is in the midst of a squirrel crisis. The native red squirrel population is falling dramatically due to an invasion of grey squirrels, originally imported from North America. Grey squirrels compete for the same food sources as red squirrels, and sometimes carry a virus that can be lethal to the smaller, native red squirrels. Really. The PLB isn’t making it up. Check out this article, or this one.

To combat the grey squirrel invasion, the British government contacted noted Squirrel Control expert Ken Kotovsky. They wanted him to thin the grey squirrel population, while leaving the reds alone. As incentive, the government offered a bounty for each grey squirrel, which Ken was eager to use to pay for a gigantic new sailboat.

However, only days after the negotiations were concluded, the British government voided the contract, stating that Kotovsky had not met the squirrel handling safety requirements they stipulated. The PLB’s crack investigative staff has the exclusive insight into how the agreement between Kotovsky and the British fell apart. And surprisingly, it wasn’t just due to the fact that Ken kept making jokes about British food.

According to Bobby Klatzky, the British government contacted her to administer a brief perceptual test to Kotovsky to ensure that he was adequately able to distinguish between red (native) squirrels and grey (non-native) squirrels. Klatzky conducted psychophysical testing using stimuli like those pictured below:

According to Klatzky, Ken was completely at chance discriminating between red and grey squirrels. This information was verified by Lori Holt, whom Ken approached for help in learning to make the distinction.

“We have some experience training people to make difficult perceptual distinctions, like helping native Japanese speakers hear the difference between English /r/ and /l/” said Holt. “Ken wanted us to use that expertise to help him discriminate between different kinds of squirrels.”

Kotovsky trained intensively for several days in Holt’s video game paradigm, based loosely on Space Invaders. The first few days were spent simply learning the mechanics, since the only video game with which Kotovsky was previously familiar was the 1972 Atari classic Pong. Even once he mastered the game, though, training went poorly.

“The point is to discriminate between good squirrels and bad squirrels, and shoot only the bad squirrels,” said Holt. “But Ken wanted to shoot all of them.”

Ken confirmed this; his only comment as of press time was “I don’t see why everyone’s upset. Red? Grey? They’re all just rats with fuzzy tails.”
PLB Shout-Out

This month’s PLB Shout-Out goes to Lynne Reder. Lynne donated her gently used digital camera to the PLB, vastly upgrading the Official Camera of the PLB. All of the Happy Hour pictures, for example, were taken with the new camera. Thanks to it’s higher resolution, and greater memory capacity, the PLB is even more ready than ever to document every member of the department in every awkward moment. Thanks, Lynne!

Soda Winner

Someone purchased the mystery prize can in the soda machine. The winner is Yuval Nardi, in the statistics department. His prize is a $25 gift certificate to Eat Unique. A new can has been inserted, so good luck to the next winner!

Belated Vacation Pics

Yes, yes, with the fall semester now in full swing, the idea of vacation seems hazy, or even impossible. But it really did happen! And here are some pictures to convince you.

Kathy Majors took her son Jacob on a trip to Disney World Florida this past July. Kathy says “This was one of our favorite rides. Jacob took me for a spin in the shown race car. He is very serious about driving.”
I found a random dairy education festival in the middle of the city where they taught children about the milk industry by giving out arm-length gloves and giving kids hands-on experience of how to milk a cow, using a fake plastic cow outfitted with realistic udders.

I was able to have one of the Sapporan styles of Ramen, Bada-Kon Ramen. It is ramen made with butter and corn (bada = butter, kon = corn)

The island of Hokkaido (where Sapporo is located) is for some reason known as the ‘Canada of Japan’. It is really agricultural there, and corn is hugely popular. It was in breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. Here is an AWESOME corn costume that I found. Oh my god, I wanted to have it so badly!
The conference had a party on the last day with an award ceremony at the Kirin Brewery. Sapporo is kind of like the Milwaukee of Japan in that it has lots of breweries. At the Kirin brewery, you drink as much as you can for 100 minutes. At the Kirin brewery they also serve a Sapporo cuisine specialty known as Ghengis Khan BBQ, which is basically grilling beef and seafood at your table. They give you a special bib/apron so you don’t wreck your clothes.

I did not expect to receive a Young Investigator Award, and so when they called my name I completely forgot to take my apron off!

After the conference, my husband Reed joined me for the weekend. We wandered around mostly desolate areas of Hokkaido and did not see another Westerner for days. We got this guy to grill us some squid in an abandoned fishing port in Shakotan.

Also, in Hakodate we stayed at a Ryokan, a Japanese style inn where they make you dinner and you go into their natural hot springs. A ryokan is like a “bed and breakfast”, but might be more aptly called a “floor and dinner” because you sleep on straw mats and they bring you a fabulous and huge meal at night.
Course 1 of 3! Holy crap it was a lot of food! It was almost entirely seafood. The area has especially good squid, scallops, and crab, and uni (sea urchin roe) was in EVERYTHING! There were also lots of unidentifiable but tasty semisolid objects.

3rd course was a whole fish, deep fried to perfection. Our personal attendant lady was proud to tell us “you can eat all”, so we did. I ate some fins, and Reed bit the face off. The face tasted better than the fins. It was extremely crunchy.

Erika’s Random Pictures of Japanese Strangeness

A sign outside the bathroom

Possibly some panty hose?

This is the anthropomorphized cartoon version of a popular souvenir in Hokkaido (little green moss balls in aquariums). I cannot answer any questions about his pants.

I don’t even know what to say about this.