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Banner Competition Begins (pg. 1)
Staff Council Report (pg. 5)
Fake Russian (pg. 9)
The Living Dead (pg. 11)
Two Exciting Talks

Scott Johnson
Development of Object Perception: Multiple Phenomena, Multiple Mechanisms
Monday, November 6
12:00-1:30 p.m. (Rm 336B)

Kelly Mix
Number Development: The View from Close-Up
Monday, November 13
4:30-6:00 p.m. (Rm A53)

PLB Banner Competition

PLB Reader Marcel Just has noticed that there’s a lot of wall space available in the hallway between Bob Siegler’s and Marlene Behrman’s old office, and he proposes a challenge: submit a design that could be printed on a banner and hung on the wall.

The banner should be vaguely related to the psychology department, and aesthetically pleasing. Submit your designs to CMUPLB@hotmail.com, and we’ll have a vote in one of our next issues.
Sheldon Cohen most highly evolved organism in department?

Based on their research published in *Science* magazine, biologists Santiago Elena and Rafael Sanjuan argue that Sheldon Cohen is the most highly evolved member of the department of psychology.

In their article, published in 2003, they state that “adaptation to a particular niche should constrain a population’s ability to survive in other niches. Elena and Sanjuan... provide evidence that as a bacterial population becomes a niche specialist, it is less able to adapt to other niches.”

Unlike many other members of the department and Pittsburghers in general, Cohen can only prosper in environments where the temperature remains between 73 and 77 degrees Fahrenheit. Based on this observation, Elena and Sanjuan speculate that Cohen is highly adapted to a particular environmental niche, likely San Diego or LA.

How Cohen came to be so highly adapted to Southern California, when his family hails from Michigan, remains an evolutionary mystery. Representatives from the Kansas state government have suggested that Intelligent Design could probably explain it.

Professor from Oregon not really that outdoorsy

Although Erik Thiessen repeatedly alludes to the fact that he is from Oregon, a state known for its rustic nature, various friends and associates reported recently that Thiessen is not really all that skilled at navigating in the wild.

“Whenver it starts raining, or we need to hike somewhere, Erik makes a point of mentioning he’s from Oregon,” noted his wife, Jill Roxberg. “But I’ve never seen him demonstrate any useful outdoor abilities that would save us from, say, being eaten by a bear. He did once mention that he could start a fire by rubbing two pieces of wood together. But I’m pretty sure one of those pieces of wood would have to be a lit match.”

Brooke Feeney concurred. “When we were out kayaking, one of the graduate students asked us where we were. Erik figured he could determine our location from looking at where moss was growing on the trees on the banks. So he paddled up to one, stared at it for a while, and then announced that the moss had allowed him to determine that we were definitely outside of the tree.”

Thiessen did not respond to these accusations with a statement to the media. Instead, he vowed to demonstrate his outdoor skills by navigating to Tijuana and picking up a huge batch of cheap tequila, using only the position of the sun and a pack of sled dogs. He was last seen headed toward Canada.
The PLB Presents
Cute Kitty Pictures

Just Because. Does the PLB really need a reason?

DON’T LOOK

INVISIBLE BIKE

PLB Shouts-Out

Ken Kotovsky says: Here is a depiction of Erin who led the team cleanup of the coke closet!!!

If you don’t visit the 335 corridor to often, then you haven’t noticed the big change: we have a ceiling now. Before, there was no insulation between the ventilation system and our offices, so the entire corridor sounded a bit like a jet engine. But thanks to the efforts of Pam Snyder and Shellie Sherman...

The hall is quiet! Also, the scaffolding in the hall was finally removed, which was nice, because I was constantly tripping over it and swearing like a sailor. Fortunately, back in those days the hall was so loud no one could hear me. These days, I need to be a bit more careful.
Over the last few years, the PLB has developed a reputation as a cutting edge journal that includes informative articles (e.g., how to grill marinated squirrels by Ken Kotovsky), hot topics (e.g., how to abuse graduate students by Brooke Feeney), and local facts (e.g., the two interesting places to visit in Pittsburgh by Marcel Just). Under the helm of the previous editor, Lori Holt, the citation impact of the journal jumped to a remarkable 0.003, and it was even mentioned once on the local cable network during a story on “How to create a PDF file.” All in all, impressive.

Recent editions of the PLB have started, however, to reveal a disturbing trend. Stories have been published that seem to have little, if any, basis in fact. The individuals named in these stories have no knowledge of events that are alleged to have taken place, and sometimes it seems the individuals themselves appear not to exist. Anna Fisher, for example, who the PLB claims made saucy comments over lunch one day claims that she “never said anything about sex at any time to anyone.” Similarly, Lori Holt sobbed gently on this writer’s laptop as she said that she “has never drunk more than seven martinis in one night,” and “how dare the PLB state otherwise.” The libelous stories being published on a monthly basis by the PLB are not only false, they are ruining lives, breaking up families, and threatening any chance of democracy in the Middle East.

So where are these stories coming from? What evil lurks in the psychology department? Following a period of investigative journalism, mainly involving sleeping and watching Oprah, the truth has finally materialized. Be aware, it is as heartbreaking as it is shocking:

The PLB’s editor, a certain Dr. Thiessen, has been manufacturing stories out of his posterior.

“No, no,” you are surely muttering quietly under your breath as you sip on a mimosa, “How can it be? Erik Thiessen is a fine upstanding member of the 3rd floor men’s toilets, a true legend in his own lunchtime.” But alas dear reader, I am here to tell you that he is bounder and a cad and cannot be trusted.

In the last edition of this journal, for instance, it was suggested that a certain faculty member had stolen the last diet coke during faculty meeting and that Lori Holt and Sheldon Cohen, among others, were up in arms at this behavior. Not so, good reader. Dr. Holt, for instance rebutted the claims of the article when she recently stated that “I don’t know what the #!&$ Erik Thiessen thinks he is doing. How did he think he could get away with it? Everyone knows I would never talk to him under any circumstance.” Dr. Cohen likewise condemned Thiessen’s behavior when he said that “Erik has been corrupted by power. He asked me to call him Sir Erik from now on,” and concluded, somewhat profoundly, that “I really like hot chocolate most when we have marshmallows with it.”

Where does this leave us dear reader? With one simple rule that that you would wise to follow: Believe only half of what you hear, and none of what you see in the PLB. Don’t get me wrong: Erik Thiessen has done a sterling job in bringing the PLB into the 21st century by including color photos, competitions, and free XXX chat-line numbers. But he has also lead many to cast doubt on the very pillar of our department, and for that he must be chastised and punished at every turn. Next time you see him walking the corridors of Baker Hall, please, I urge you; pinch him hard where it hurts.
This month’s Staff Council meeting (10/18) was dominated by presentations about (1) a new written policy, the Controversial Speakers Policy, and (2) kickoff of the CMU Food Drive. Following tension-filled visits by controversial invited speakers in recent years, in 2005 President Cohon formed a committee to gather campus community input, consult the law as well as peer institutions, and create a written policy that’ll eventually be available both online and in print. Administrators, faculty, and students served on the committee.

The document Staff Council was shown is a work in progress and still quite vague. The paramount issues considered by the committee are both philosophical and practical: preserving/encouraging free speech and an open/diverse campus atmosphere; safety of campus dwellers; notifying people about potential disruptions in their workspace caused by speakers or protests; logistical issues like whether to require hiring security staff if you reserve a large room or expect a big turnout for an event. Michael Murphy (CMU Administrator & member of the committee) & colleagues’ goal today was to gain Staff Council’s input on the policy-in-progress. There were a few comments; we voted; it passed.

We also heard an inspiring presentation by Ms. Ivy Ero of the Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (in conjunction with the CMU Food Drive theme). The need at the Food Bank is greater than ever, because grocery stores have improved their inventorying technology so much in the last few years that they no longer drop off truckloads of unsold goods. Or, unsold or cosmetically damaged goods are increasingly being sold to dollar stores instead of brought to the Food Bank. If you prefer to donate time instead of money or food, you can do that, too, by contacting a Food Bank facility and going there to, for example, repackage bulk items into family-sized packaging.

And did you think that you could only put food in those bins all over campus this year? WRONG! You can also drop off smaller or child-sized backpacks (gently used or new, any color). The new Backpack Program gives a needy child a backpack full of nutritionist-approved, snack-sized foods each Friday to tide over the child on weekends when he/she has no access to the School Lunch Program (the child returns the backpack on Monday). Because the backpacks can be any color, the child isn’t stigmatized or picked on by other students. Are your kids growing out of their mini-backpacks? Consider the Food Bank bins this year. Or, if you’d like to choose the Food Bank as your United Way contribution this year, their code is 361. The food drive began on October 30th, and runs until November 10th.

At our monthly meeting, we also briefly discussed, voted on & passed a modification to our Constitution, enabling us to have as few as 10 meetings per year, instead of a mandatory 12. The reason for this modification was the chronic difficulty achieving quorum at the December and (usually) July meetings.

I went to both President Cohon’s Address to Staff (Oct. 9) and the Health Benefits Open Forum (Oct. 5). The President’s Address didn’t result in any earth-shattering news. We heard about the progress of the Gates Center (so far, on time and on budget; preparing the ground and pouring the concrete foundation will take up this winter and into the spring). We got a mini-refresher course on the growing inventory of international campuses (Australia, Qatar, etc.). Dr. Cohon commented on the increasingly sparkling reputation of CMU internationally, and spoke a bit about attempts to fundraise from international alumni. Attendance was respectable; the room was about half-full. (continued on next page!)
The Health Benefits forum, on the other hand, was livelier. It was standing-room-only, and participants were quite animated with their questioning for 2 CMU HR reps (Barbara Smith, Lori Bell) about proposed changes in the healthcare plans for next year. Most of the questions & comments were about restrictions or problems with drug plans, and many of those were issues unique to the questioner’s individual circumstances. One issue that seemed to come up more than once was what to do if the drug plan pressures you to use mail order for a 90 day supply of maintenance drugs, but your doctor frequently changes the brand or dose to better treat your health condition. For example, if you have to switch midway through the 90 day period, you are forced to throw away medication, lose money, or both. (You are allowed to go to the drugstore a few times before they start penalizing you for not doing a 90 day mail order; however, this still isn’t workable for some people.)

Although this year wasn’t supposed to be a vision plan year, due to feedback (i.e., complaints), we can switch to a brand-new (to CMU) vision plan provider, Vision Benefits of America. THE GOOD: they don’t issue member cards, so you won’t forget to bring your card to your appointment. THE BAD: Instead of forgetting to bring a card, we’ll forget to bring a claim form to our appointments: VBA will require you to obtain a claim form in advance of an appointment (the precise definition of “in advance” wasn’t provided at the forum.) To better guard against identity theft, the pharmacy plan many of us have (Pharmacare) is eliminating your SSN as an ID number; in fact, you should already have received your new card. And United Concordia (dental plan) will eventually do the same. Open enrollment is 10/30-11/10.

The Health Benefits Fair is Thursday, 11/2, and offers free flu shots—assuming nothing goes wrong with the flu shot supply between now and then. Free flu shots will be given to employees who have their ID+ card and a completed Flu Shot Authorization form. To access the form go to http://hr.web.cmu.edu/forms/FluForm.pdf. If demand exceeds supply, attendees can sign up to receive the shot when additional vaccine is received.

Any CMU staff member is welcome to attend Staff Council meetings. They’re held at noon once a month, usually the 3rd Thursday of each month, usually somewhere in the UC. A calendar of when & where is at http://www.cmu.edu/staff-council (click on “Meeting Dates”). Alternatively, if you have a question or concern about an issue important to you, that you think may also be relevant to others, feel free to drop by my office (Baker 335-C), call (x5691) or e-mail (conser@andrew.cmu.edu). If you like, I can pass your concern on to Staff Council leadership for consideration and possible action. This happens regularly, is easy, can be done anonymously, so don’t be bashful!

Sheldon Cohen explains Personality

An old friend of mine (and famous personality psychologist) from my years in Oregon asked me if I could generate a title for an award talk he is invited to give. He wanted something very general so when the talk came around he could say anything he wanted. So I suggested “The Truth About Personality”. He liked this and asked if I outline the truths for him. So I provided the following:

1. It is important
2. Everyone has one
3. It is hard to measure
4. No one agrees exactly what it is
5. Undergraduates study it
6. Many text books are sold about it
7. I take it back, not everyone has one
8. There are 3 or maybe 5 or maybe more types
9. We can all recognize the types, except for some of us
10. It may be inherited, or it may not be
Caption Contest!

Last Month’s Photo

Suggested Captions

Whaddya mean, I can’t have any more??
-- Bobby Kltazky

You’re all invited to our 3rd wedding!

There was a mixup at the second wedding and Alejandro got pregnant.
-- Mary MacWhinney

Remember, send your suggested captions to rakison@andrew.cmu.edu

This Month’s Photo

(note Jared in background)
Faculty Senate Takes Bold Action on FCEs*

After 4 semesters of declining response rates on the new online FCE form (see Table, right), the Faculty Senate voted to recommend that the University continue to administer FCEs online, but using a much shorter form.

If the University adopts the Senate’s recommendation, future FCEs would feature only three questions:
1) How much did you like the course (1-5)
2) How much did you like the professor (1-5)
3) Do you have any additional comments?

No change will be made to the FCE forms this semester or next semester, but a new form is likely to be unveiled for the Fall 2008 semester.

* To the extent, that is, that you count “voting to recommend” as bold action. If you don’t, I’m afraid there’s nothing the Faculty Senate will ever do that could possibly satisfy your definition of “bold action.”

Online FCE Response Rates

Since the change to the new online form, FCE response rates have been dramatically lower. Below, the PLB presents average response rates across 7 large courses* in the last 4 semesters using the paper FCE form, and the 4 semesters using the new online FCE form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FCE Classic</th>
<th>New FCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 02: 62.7%</td>
<td>Fall 04: 42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 03: 70.6%</td>
<td>Spring 05: 36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 03: 65.3%</td>
<td>Fall 05: 35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 04: 64.6%</td>
<td>Spring 06: 32.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*85-100, 85-102, 85-211, 85-214, 85-221, 85-241, and 85-261
Sure she has the accent, but does she really speak Russian? The department leadership has shown serious concern about the possibility that new assistant professor Anna Fisher has misrepresented herself as a native of Russia, fluent in the language. Instead (it is whispered in the halls) that she is really from a small town in Wisconsin and developed the accent to appear sophisticated and worldly.

Questions about Fisher’s background grew when a student spoke to her in Russian and she had no idea what he was saying. On being asked to speak a few words of Russian to a selected group of faculty, she refused providing no real excuse. (Not that the selected group would have know if she was speaking Russian or not). Further evidence was provided by native Wisconsonian Lori Holt who said “she looks like a lot of women in Wisconsin.”

At any rate, the department head has appointed a committee to investigate. If Fisher is found not be fluent, penalties can include being transferred to the Pitt Psychology Department, being moved to the 2nd floor wing, and/or 30 years of hard labor cleaning the developmental labs.

Fisher Replies

Recently, a number of concerns have been raised about my ability to speak Russian, which, I assure you, I do quite fluently. To demonstrate, I have picked 6 words completely at random from a Russian dictionary, and translated them into English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banan</td>
<td>Banana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>Cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giraffe</td>
<td>Giraffe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UCF professor drives scientific stake into the heart of ghost, vampire myths

As the weather cools and Halloween approaches, chilling creaks in the stairs, bloodcurdling screams from the attic and other paranormal activity become more believable -- but not to UCF physics professor Costas Efthimiou.

The laws of physics and math debunk popular myths about ghosts and vampires, according to a paper published by Efthimiou and Sohang Gandhi, a UCF graduate now studying at Cornell University.

Using Isaac Newton’s Laws of Motion, Efthimiou demonstrates that ghosts would not be able to walk and pass through walls. Basic math disproves the legend of humans turning into vampires after they are bitten, Efthimiou explains, because the entire human population in 1600 would have been wiped out in less than three years.

“These popular myths make for a lot of Halloween fun and great movies with special effects, but they just don’t hold up to the strict tests of science,” Efthimiou said.

In movies such as “Ghost,” starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore, ghosts often walk like humans, pass through walls and pick up objects. But that portrayal cannot be accurate, Efthimiou says. For ghosts to have the ability to walk like humans, they would need to put a force upon the floor, which would exert an equal and opposite force in return. But ghosts’ ability to pass through walls and have humans walk right through them demonstrates that they cannot apply any force.

Movies such as “Blade,” featuring Wesley Snipes, suggest that vampires feed on human blood and that once a human has been bitten, he or she turns into a vampire and begins feeding on other humans. To disprove the existence of vampires, Efthimiou relied on a basic math principle known as geometric progression.

Efthimiou supposed that the first vampire arrived Jan. 1, 1600, when the human population was 536,870,911. Assuming that the vampire fed once a month and the victim turned into a vampire, there would be two vampires and 536,870,910 humans on Feb. 1. There would be four vampires on March 1 and eight on April 1. If this trend continued, all of the original humans would become vampires within two and a half years and the vampires’ food source would disappear.

Fantasy Football Update

Brooke Feeney has the best record in the Department’s Fantasy Football League, and has almost clinched a playoff spot with 6 games remaining. Thanks to TabbyCats (coach: Jill Roxberg) who beat Miriam Rosenberg-Lee’s team, Brooke Feeney stands alone in first place. To celebrate, Feeney released the following statement via her PR agent:

Brooke Feeney is tremendously excited to have a better record than any of the other 7 teams in the league. Brooke Feeney is so excited that she will refer to herself in the third person for the remainder of the season. And Brooke Feeney feels that the league’s name, “Baker4Ever,” does not adequately reflect Brooke’s dominance. Brooke suggests the league be renamed “Snow Feeney and the Seven Dwarves.” But Brooke would also accept “Brooke White.”

ZOMBIES ARE PEOPLE TOO...ALTHOUGH WITH RESTRICTED LANGUAGE SKILLS

Pittsburgh (PLB News) -- Pittsburgh is famous for its large zombie community, many of whom live out by the Monroeville Mall. In fact, several movies on zombie culture have been filmed in Pittsburgh. CMU psychologists studying zombies have found that they are slower in learning second languages than nonzombies. In trying to understand these restrictions, leading fMRI researcher Marcel Just imaged the brains of the zombies and nonzombie controls matched on age, and height (before death). Just reports that the brains of the zombies were different than those of the controls. Just hypothesizes that being dead for awhile might have altered the brain architecture causing restricted blood flow.

LIVING DEAD ARE A PROBLEM FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCHERS

Pittsburgh (PLB News) -- The National Institutes of Health now require principal investigators to justify the exclusion of zombies (a prominent Pittsburgh minority) in NIH funded studies. When asked how he dealt with this issue, Dr. Sheldon Cohen, a health psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University, indicated that on the one hand he understood the importance of including zombies in our studies, but on the other hand he had some basic problems in defining health in the dead. “There has been quite a bit of interest in the eating habits of the living dead”, Cohen said. “There are also interesting questions to be raised about their perceptual and motor systems. However, studies of longevity are particularly difficult in this population.” Dr. Kenneth Kotovsky of CMU seemed less concerned. “Well, they are generally less problematic than squirrels,” Kotovsky said. “I’ve never caught a zombie eating from my pear tree or living in my attic!” Dr. Lori Holt has seriously considered teaching zombies Japanese. “The problem is they are nocturnal,” Holt said. “My graduate students need to drive over to the cemetery at midnight, wake them up, and drive them back to the lab. It is just too much effort. And then you have to feed them. I lost two graduate students in the first week of pilots.”
November’s Graduate Student of the Month is Aldo Zombie. We talk with A. Zombie about a wide variety of topics, including his love of brains and Pittsburgh’s zombie heritage.

PLB: So, tell us a little bit about yourself. AZ: Well, I did my undergraduate work at Pitt, in neuropsychology. I’ve always been fascinated by brains.

PLB: Have you always been, a, er... zombie? Do you mind that term? AZ: I have no problem with it, although many members of the community do prefer “living-impaired.” And actually, no, I wasn’t always living-impaired. It happened right around the time I became a graduate student. Graduate students often complain that they work so hard that they have no life. In my case, it’s literally true that I have no life.

PLB: What drew you to CMU? AZ: Obviously, the location in Pittsburgh was a draw. It’s such a center of zombie culture. And of course, the tremendous faculty at CMU was a draw. So many intelligent people, with such large, lovely, succulent brains. Mmmm... brains....

PLB: Can you tell us a little about your research? AZ: I’m interested in the effects of experience on brain development. In particular, I’m trying to discover what kind of experiences lead to larger, denser brains. Obviously, early experience is very important, but can we even intervene with adults and cause their brains to gain mass? I’m so very hungry, and small brains just can’t sate my appetite. So hungry... so hungry for brains...

[Sound of horrible wet chewing and smacking noises]

PLB: Oh, I’m sorry -- it’s pretty rude of me to eat my lunch while you’re so hungry. Why don’t we move on to the three tough questions. What, for you, is the big question you want to answer with your research? AZ: Really, it’s the big one: how does learning affect the brain, and how, in turn, does brain development affect flavor.

PLB: Good answer. Question number 2: who, from the department, would you most want to be stranded on a desert island with? AZ: Wow. Gee, that’s a tough question. Um... I don’t know if I can answer that without being rude. Let’s just say that it would be the person in the department with the biggest brain. I have my ways of knowing who that is.

PLB: OK. Very diplomatic. Final question: brain for eat, or brain for think? AZ: This is hard! I am in a pickle! I could go either way on this one.

Stay Tuned

Next month the PLB returns with live graduate students. Who will be the next GSotM? It could be YOU!

If you’re a graduate student.
Halloween Pictures!
Is there some subtext to these pictures of a heroic graduate student battling a villainous faculty member? The PLB, despite being a recognized leader in the field of subtext, is not certain.