Psycho? Logical? Bulletin

December 2006

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David Rakison completes prestigious double news sweep: First page of both official CMU website and the PLB.

In the Mind of a Child

Research Reveals Early Signs of Autism

Children are fascinating to watch, from the first sneeze all the way to the first step. But what interests Carnegie Mellon psychologist David Rakison most is what they’re thinking.

"Studying babies is like studying the Big Bang of cognition," said Rakison. "You start to see the building blocks of cognition coming into being and taking shape."

Armed with the knowledge of how healthy children develop, Rakison observed autistic 3-year-olds at play hoping to determine early signs of the disorder. The study revealed that preschoolers with autism lag behind their peers in distinguishing between living and non-living objects.

Rakison is one of the first researchers to study these conceptual differences in very young...
Last month, PLB reader MARCEL JUST challenged Baker Hall denizens to come up with a banner to fill some of the empty wall space on the third floor. The PLB’s inbox has not, however, been flooded with suggestions. Not even doused. Nor even sprinkled, really. In fact, what you see below is the only thing we’ve received. And frankly, our staff isn’t sure what to make of it.

Although the PLB can imagine why Lori and Brooke, who submitted this, would be pleased to have the studs of psychology hanging in the corridor, as large as life, it seems unlikely that this was what Marcel had in mind.

Think you can do better? I certainly hope so.

If you have a banner idea, e-mail it to CMUPLB@hotmail.com
Departmental Jolliness: Funded from a fungible source?

Carnegie Mellon’s tightening budget, which has been responsible for less generous wages, higher tuition, and increased health care costs for employees, may soon have an even more unpopular effect: reducing the psychology department’s holiday jolliness.

“Right now,” reports Department Head Mike Scheier, “central administration just hasn’t ponied up enough money to let us celebrate the holidays in the manner to which we’ve become accustomed in the past. For example, our budget for printing ink has been drastically reduced. We literally couldn’t afford to print a ‘Ho Ho Ho!’ banner for the main office. Right now, we can only afford one Ho, or maybe two. I’ve asked central to kick in some increased funding to help us get that third Ho, but who knows what they’ll say.”

It is unclear why the university is unwilling to commit funds for holiday jolliness commensurate with past levels. Some speculate that the university is still reeling from poor stock performance in 2001-2002. Others suggest that the debt from the Gates Building is cramping the university’s style. One of the more outlandish theories is that University President Jared Cohon’s heart may, in fact, be two sizes too small. See the startling evidence for yourself in this photo:

Join the PLB at the Department Holiday Party:

Wednesday, December 13th, 4 to 5:30 PM
In the Rangos Room of the UC
Good luck Kim Murray!

After 16 years in the department of Psychology, Kim Murray is moving on to a newly formed department overseeing undergraduate life: everything from dining services to the post office. Her new office will be on Penn Avenue.

Even though she was sad to be leaving us, and going a bit off campus, she’s sure she’ll see us around still. She told the PLB the story of her trip to Greece, where, on her last day, she ran into Erin Ingvalson. If she bumps into us in Greece, she’ll surely bump into us around campus!

Kim tries to hide from the press behind her plaid brain t-shirt
It’s that time again! Time to find out what people are saying about the PLB. Time for...

**Reader Comments!**

**Lori Holt**

(Beloved PLB Editor Erik) Thiessen has an amazing ability to misquote me. Nothing in the PLB is accurate.

**Theresa Kurutz**

It’s the best newsletter in the department. Unless there’s another one.

**Anna Fisher**

The PLB is my second favorite thing to read ever. The only thing I like more is one of the many English translations of “The Brothers Karamazov.”

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**Faculty Senate Report**

The Faculty Senate approved the Policy on Freedom of Expression. To summarize: any student organization can invite anybody onto campus to give a talk.

We also received a Gates Building update. To summarize: it is being built. My understanding is that they’ll start erecting beams and such next semester.

We then discussed the Language Technologies Institute’s submission of a 50 million dollar grant to the Department of Defense, which would involve doing some classified research, and whether this would be equivalent to research on napalm. No conclusion was reached.

Finally, Dave Dzombak (Faculty Senate Chair) has put together a committee to get input from the campus community about President Jared Cohon’s potential re-appointment. One of the 12 members is none other than our own Lynne Reder! So if you have an opinion about President Cohon, it’ll be very easy for you to share it.
Erik Thiessen’s term in the Faculty Senate will end in May, and the incumbent senator is campaigning hard to avoid re-election. He is opposed in this effort by likely replacement Anna Fisher, who has been campaigning just as hard to ensure that Thiessen receives a second term in the Senate. The early months of the campaign, while hard-fought, were amicable, but observers have been alarmed by a recent surge in negative advertising from the Thiessen campaign. The senator has used his large incumbent’s war chest to flood television stations with attack ads, as indicated in the image below.

The most notorious of these ads begins with a stern male voiceover that says “Erik Thiessen is running for re-election, but can we really trust him?” while ominous music plays in the background. The voice continues, “Let’s examine Thiessen’s record. Not once during his term in Faculty Senate has he voted to increase funding to America’s brave troops,” while fatigued soldiers march across the desert on the screen. “As Faculty Senator, Thiessen has never voted in favor of increasing health care for the elderly or stronger polluting regulations, and he has also never ONCE opposed stealing food from orphans.” As the narrator speaks, brief images appear of an elderly woman in a dilapidated hospital, dead fish floating at the top of a lake, and hungry children wearing ragged clothing. Then the ad finishes with the following image (see next page).

Note who paid for the ad.
Independent watchdog groups have condemned these ads as inflammatory, and praised Anna Fisher’s refusal to use attack ads. All of the commercials paid for by the Fisher campaign are positive. For example, in one of the Fisher television spots, viewers watch a young girl skipping across a field of daisies while a puppy and a kitten trail at her feet on a sunny day. An upbeat female narrator declares, “Erik Thiessen likes puppies and kittens and children. He’s a pretty good guy. Why not give him another term as Faculty Senator!”

Another of Fisher’s commercials shows an actor portraying Thiessen standing atop a mountain with a flag fluttering in the breeze behind him and a bald eagle perched on his arm, while the narrator says “Remember: you can’t spell ‘America’ without Erik.” Thiessen’s campaign responded gleefully to this slogan, agreeing that their candidate would, indeed, support “Spelling Amerika with a K.”

Despite many voters’ claims that they dislike negative campaigning, recent polling results indicate that Thiessen’s attack ads may have had the desired result. While Department Head Mike Scheier has refused to comment publicly about whether he’ll appoint Thiessen or Fisher as Faculty Senator, polls indicate that his approval rating of Thiessen has dropped a whopping 78 points since he saw the crying eagle commercial.
Fantasy Football League Update

The top 4 teams in the league make the playoff, and with only 2 weeks left in the (fantasy) season, it’s becoming pretty clear who most of those teams will be. So the PLB presents this preview of the playoffs:

Brooke Feeney

**Team:** Cavaliers (11-1)

**Motto:** I will crush your skull, like a sea otter crushing a clam on its tummy!

**Stars:** Terrell Owens, Donovan McNabb, Baltimore Defense

**Season summary:** Brooke’s team varies between unstoppable and invincible, so she’s been tough to beat this season.

**Playoff outlook:** Good. The Cavaliers have already locked up the top seed. But Donovan McNabb is out for the season, so there may be a slight chink in their armor.

Miriam Rosenberg-Lee

**Team:** I heart Hines (8-4)

**Motto:** I’ll beat you handsomely!

**Stars:** Hines Ward, Tom Brady, Brian Westbrook

**Season summary:** Miriam’s team got out to a hot start despite not being all that good. Now her team has come together and is very good, but she’s losing more often.

**Playoff outlook:** Unpredictable. The playoffs will be the ultimate test of Miriam’s strategy of drafting players based on how attractive they are, a technique that is still controversial among fantasy football experts.

Jill Roxberg

**Team:** TabbyCats (7-5)

**Motto:** If I drafted them, they are hurt!

**Stars:** Drew Brees, Marques Colston

**Season summary:** Jill’s team started out ravaged by injuries; then it got worse. The NFL players association has sent her a cease and desist notice to keep her from adding any new players to her team, after she picked up Dallas Clark who was lost for the season three plays later. Jill’s one bit of good fortune, though, was to pick up rookie Marques Colston. Due to a glitch, Colston is listed as a tight end, even though he’s actually a wide receiver. Jill keeps sticking him in at tight end every week. For those of you who aren’t football buffs, wide receivers score lots more points than tight ends. Allowing Colston to count as a tight end is akin to playing in a pee-wee hockey league, and being allowed to have one of the Penguins defenders on your team, high sticking 8 year olds and terrorizing them across the ice.

**Playoff outlook:** With Shaun Alexander coming back from injury, there’s a possibility the TabbyCats could pull an upset.

Jason Ralph

**Team:** Dark Star (7-5)

**Motto:** You’re listening to radio station KLRJ – All Larry Johnson, all the time!

**Stars:** Larry Johnson… and, um, did I mention, Larry Johnson?

**Season summary:** for the first half of the season, Dark Star was unimpressive. Then the Kansas City Chiefs decided to simplify their playbook to two plays: hand the ball off to Larry Johnson, or fake a pass and hand the ball off to Larry Johnson. Since then, LJ has scored about a gazillion points, and Dark Star has ridden him to the playoffs.

**Playoff outlook:** If Larry Johnson’s legs don’t fall off, Dark Star has a fighting chance, although he’ll likely face a tough matchup with the Cavaliers in the first round.
Fantasy Football League Update

In an 8 team league, not everyone can be in the top 4. For those other teams, there’s a “special” playoff. That is, in a sense, everyone can be a winner! In another, more accurate sense, these teams are not winners.

Erik Thiessen
Team: Headhunters (6-6)
Motto: I’m not mathematically eliminated yet! Oh, wait, yes I am.
Stars: Does Jon Kitna count?
Season summary: Close your eyes and think of a player with high expectations going into the season, who has been massively disappointing this year. Now open your eyes and look at this team’s roster. There they are! Unless they’re a Steeler – we’ll get to them in a bit.
Playoff outlook: In the special playoffs, the Headhunters have a fighting chance!

Mike Scheier and Karen Matthews
Team: Robinhood Mashers (4-8)
Motto: I want my own team next year! (Karen Matthews)
Stars: LaDainian Tomlinson, Mike Vick, Chicago Defense
Season summary: Second highest scoring team in the league, with the best player in football (LaDainian Tomlinson) as their running back. Bizarrely bad luck, however, has left them in the lower division playoffs.
Playoff outlook: Despite the poor record, the Mashers are the odds on favorite to be crowned “best of the not-all-that-good”

Erin Donahoe
Team: Steel Town (1-11)
Motto: Just like the real-life Steelers!
Stars: Carson Palmer, Rudi Johnson
Season summary: Steel Town, as you might expect, is chock-full of Steelers. It turns out, that wasn’t such a good strategy this year.
Playoff outlook: About as good as the Steelers’
OIL CITY, Pa. (AP) — Letter carriers occasionally have to deal with angry dogs or maybe even a spider’s nest in a mailbox, but a mean squirrel? Barb Dougherty, a 30-year Postal Service employee, said she was attacked and bitten on November 1st by a squirrel while delivering mail in Oil City, about 75 miles north of Pittsburgh.

“It was a freak thing. It was traumatic,” Dougherty told The Derrick in Oil City. “I saw it there on the porch, put the mail in the box and turned to walk away and it jumped on me.”

The animal ran up her leg and onto her back, she said.

“I eventually got a hold of the tail and pulled it off me,” Dougherty said. “No one was home at the house where I was delivering the mail, but the neighbor lady heard me screaming and came over.”

Postal officials said the attack is extraordinary.

“In about 230 years of postal history, I bet it is not the first, but I’ve personally never heard of another squirrel biting,” said Steve Kochersperger, spokesman for the Erie district.

Squirrels do not frequently bite people, said Regis Senko, who works for the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Steve Jolley, a Postal Service manager in Oil City, said, “We are not issuing a squirrel alert, but everyone is aware of the incident.”

PLB Shout-Out

Do YOU have someone you want to nominate for a Shout-Out? Someone who has made your life better or easier?

It’s easy! Just e-mail your nomination to CMUPLB@hotmail.com. If your nominee is selected, you both win a free year-long PLB subscription!

This month, the PLB is shouting out Ginger Placone. I’m on the social search committee, and frankly, I can’t even keep track of my own schedule. But somehow Ginger does, and finds times when all of us can meet. And she makes sure we all have copies of papers to read (they’re in my mailbox before I turn around) and keeps track of who applied, and when. Thanks to Ginger, the parts of being on a search committee OTHER than getting free dinners can be good times, too!
December’s Graduate student of the month is Alex Persoskie, who is a student in the SDS department hoping to officially become a joint student soon. Until then, he’s taking the cognitive core course and talking with the PLB.

PLB: Tell us a little about yourself. You sound Canadian. Are you Canadian?
AP: Uh, no. I’m actually local. That’s part of the reason I ended up at CMU. I live northeast of here, about an hour, born and raised in the country. During one summer where I didn’t have anything to do, I started working with Coty Gonzalez. That worked out.

PLB: Was that when you were an undergraduate?
AP: Right. So I went to undergraduate, my first year, at the University of Pittsburgh. And then after that I went to Allegheny College, which is a few hours north of here, almost up to Erie.

PLB: What was your major?
AP: Psychology, and I had an interdisciplinary minor combining economics, philosophy, women’s studies… it was called Values, Ethics, and Social Action.

PLB: So you started during the middle of the year, last year? Is that right?
AP: Yes, this semester is the 2nd half of my first year in the SDS program. I started mid-year because, after I graduated, I traveled in China for 4 months, studied Chinese and did some research that is not related in any fundamental way to what I do now. But I wanted to do something a little different for a while before I started graduate school!

PLB: What kind of research do you do now?
AP: Most of the projects I’ve been thinking about are still in the planning phase, but the one that’s closest to fruition is exploring the role of working memory in dynamic decision-making tasks. The task we chose is the Beer Game, which is a model of managerial decision making. People act as one facility in a supply chain. They make orders to a factory to satisfy orders they receive from the person downstream in the supply chain. There’s an interesting and costly problem that happens in the real world, called the Bullwhip Effect. It’s when you overshoot your goal state: ordering too much from your supplier, and then ordering too little, so your situation continuously oscillates between backorders and overstocked inventories. The reason that happens is because there’s feedback delays between when one places an order and when they receive what they’ve ordered. Even after they’ve ordered enough, they’re not aware that they’ve ordered enough, so they keep ordering. Then they start receiving it, and receiving it, and they panic and order less, and go too far in that direction. We’ve seen previously that people who are high in working memory are less prone to making that mistake. Now we’re trying to supplement that correlational analysis with some experimental results. We’re trying to deplete people’s working memory capacity, and see if that has the effects it should.

PLB: When you’re not researching, what do you do for fun?
AP: I like to play ping-pong, bird-watch, watch zombie movies – I’ve been glad to see that the PLB is a good source of zombie news – and kick the shuttle-cock.
PLB: Kick the what now?
AP: You know hackeysack, right? It’s a Chinese version of hackeysack, very similar, but with a shuttle-cock. I’ve never seen one person doing it at CMU, but I’m going to bring mine to campus one day. It’s got a few metal rings at the bottom, and then feathers.

PLB: what sort of things do you enjoy doing in Pittsburgh?
AP: Well, I’m lucky because my friends and family live around here, so that’s my favorite thing to do.

PLB: Well, you’ve almost made it. But you still need to answer the PLB’s traditional Three Tough Questions. The first of which is: what, for you, is the big question you want to answer with your research? When you retire, what do you want to say you’ve done or learned that will make you happy with your career?
AP: I’ll need to think about that for a second. OK. I’ve got it. Have I provided practical means to improve decision making that cannot be manipulated by financial interests.

PLB: Interesting question! Onto Number 2, then. If you weren’t a graduate student, what would you be doing right now?
AP: I don’t know, because there’s a few very different things that I like equally. One of them is wilderness-y sort of things. And the other is living in China.

PLB: That’s far afield from being a graduate student. I don’t know if it pays as well.
AP: Ha! Yeah, it is. We tend to define people by their occupations, you know, we say “What are you,” referring to people’s occupations. Being in the wilderness, and being in China, those are just two things that I really enjoy.

PLB: So, the last of the three tough questions looms ahead. Are you ready?
AP: It would have been easier if you had sent me these questions in advance!

PLB: Yes, but that wouldn’t be as much fun for me, which is what’s really important here. Number 3: Who here would you most like to be stranded on a desert island with, and why?
AP: Oh. Er. I think I need to think about this one for a while, too. (Pause). OK. I’m going to go with Paul Litvak. I think we’d enjoy sitting on a beach all day and talking about somewhat irrelevant philosophical topics.
The agenda was full for November’s meeting; we received informational presentations about a new whistleblowing hotline, and about a CMU committee’s work to someday reduce smoking on campus. We also voted on & passed 2 minor amendments to our constitution (10 meetings/yr. instead of 12 to better accommodate December holidays & summer vacations; modify the date on which voting for S.C. officers takes place).

**WHISTLEBLOWING HOTLINE**

Mr. Everett Tademy (Director, Equal Opportunity Programs) told us about a soon-to-be-installed confidential reporting (AKA whistleblowing) hotline, the operation of which will be outsourced to a company called Report It Solutions. Whistleblowers will be able to contact them via phone or web. Perceived slights, injustices, or malfeasances can be in any of the following categories: Health & Campus Safety; Financial Matters; Research; Human Resources; Information Systems; and Academic & Student Life. Report It Solutions claims they don’t collect IP addresses, nor do they have Caller ID, ergo our gripes can be ‘anonymous’ if we desire. No word on any cash rewards to whistleblowers, but the service will cost CMU somewhere between $5-$10,000/yr. (I didn’t write it down).

**HEALTHY CAMPUS EVENTUALLY TASK FORCE**

Anita Barkin of Student Health Services summarized the work a CMU committee (the Healthy Campus 2010 Task Force) has done in crafting updates to an existing CMU policy about smoking behavior on campus. The committee is composed of faculty, staff & students and has given presentations to Faculty Council, Staff Council, student groups, and others in an attempt to boost awareness and get feedback. Their ultimate stated goal is a “smoke free campus community by 2010”.

**My Own Opinion**

The Healthy Campus 2010 Task Force’s own report (link) states that “There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure; even brief exposure can adversely affect the cardiovascular and respiratory system.” You read that right: “There is NO risk-free level.”

With that in mind, I wonder why we need to wait until 2010 for a smoke free campus. I believe the Task Force’s intentions are good, and they’ve certainly worked hard and done a lot of thinking about the issues at hand; but I happen to feel the pace is too glacial, given current data that no level of exposure is a safe level. Hotels and restaurants use smoke-free facilities as selling points; why not CMU?

At the meeting, I voiced one other suggestion: Offering healthcare insurance premium discounts to nonsmokers or those who quit, since non-smokers or quitters lower an employer’s health-care costs (link). The answer I received from Ms. Barkin was that there are no current plans to do so.

So now you know where I stand on the smoking issue. But I’m not just on Staff Council to represent myself. I’m there to represent all of you! And I can’t do that if you don’t tell me how you feel about these things. So if you want to talk with me about your opinions in the Healthy Campus initiative (or anything else!), that’d be great. My e-mail is conser@andrew.cmu.edu, and you can always find me in my office (335C). Thanks for reading!
Even when flying on vacation, Mike Scheier is diligently at work. Let this be a lesson to you, people: never agree to do any work. It’ll ruin your vacations.

The PLB needed to include this glacier shot to convince you that Mike actually went to Alaska. The weather in the shots on the next page looks so good you’d never have believed it otherwise.
After much effort, Mike was able to make contact with one of the area’s indigenous species. Subsequent attempts to communicate met with limited success, however...
Upon releasing his homemade slingshot, Jared immediately realized that his Halloween prank had gone too far.
-Paul Kiefabber