Psycho? Logical? Bulletin!

Inside...

The Blues!
Holiday Party Pictures!
Latest Squirrel Updates!
Reportage of Questionable Accuracy!
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA - J. David Creswell, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, one of the world’s leading psychology departments, is a self-described “blues nut.”

With his collection of albums featuring the likes of B.B. King, Aretha Franklin, and Johnny Lang, and a Pandora station tuned to contemporary blues artists like Keb’ Mo’, J. David has been a “huge fan of the blues” for over a decade.

But the new assistant professor is not merely a “blues-lover;” with his October 2008 assignment of midterm grades, his frequent use of hard exams, and his expected grade distribution for his research methods class, students report that he is also one of CMU’s great “blues-causers.”

“My favorite new blues artist is Keb’ Mo’, his work is really smoking,” J. David said. “But I also appreciate a lot of the older greats. That’s why I love the Blues Brothers movie. Akroyd really did right to get so many of them involved.”

Creswell is so committed to causing the blues that in mid-September, he refused to give his students any extra credit points after an especially difficult pop quiz, causing additional heartache among his students.

“Teaching a class isn’t easy. You sometimes have to make tough decisions about whether to be soft with your students or show them some tough love,” Creswell said. “But when you do have to make a painful decision for their own good, a Robert Cray record goes a long way toward soothing your soul.”

While the average assistant professor would rather go out to the opera or tell jokes about frogs than listen to Susan Tedeschi, Creswell is happiest jamming in his office to his Pandora blues station, as students in adjacent classrooms know.

Creswell says he has no plans to ever stop loving - or causing - the blues. “The blues certainly isn’t the only music I listen to, but it’s what I always come back to,” Creswell said. “Other kinds of music may come and go, but the blues are forever.

“Blues music is all about pain. It’s about failing a test, flunking your class, and getting kicked out of school,” he continued. “Listening to the blues, I can kind of imagine what it would be like to experience one of those things.”
December’s Graduate Student of the Month is Crista Crittenden, who talked with the PLB about her hard-living rugby youth, her history in television, and her aesthetic appreciation of Matt Lauer. Curious? Then read on!

David: Please tell me a little bit about yourself, where do you hail from?
Crista: I’m from Rochester, New York. I went to the University of Rochester, majored in Brain and Cognitive Science, it took me six years, but it was worth it. I then worked full time as a research assistant for another six years, and during that time I got my Masters in Public Health at the University of Rochester.

David: Did you like it at Rochester?
Crista: Actually, as a freshmen I went to SUNY Albany, and I ended up partying my freshman year away. I then decided to transfer to Rochester, which was much better for me because it was much more academically oriented.

David: What does “partying” mean exactly?
Crista: Well the classes I took were pretty easy and I played rugby, and rugby is a pastime for people who drink a lot of beer.

David: What made you decide to come to CMU?
Crista: Ultimately, I really liked the program and I really liked Sheldon’s work. In particular, I was interested in asthma research, and the social aspects of chronic diseases. When it came down to deciding after interviews, I just really liked the people here and I liked the sense of humor in the department, like the PLB.

David: So Erik Thiessen’s sense of humor was the real pull for you? That’s shocking. What has your CMU experience been like so far?
Crista: It’s been good. It’s been hard transitioning from working full time, with every hour of my day scheduled, to having a lot of my own time to study and write and things like that, but slowly I’m getting better at managing my time more effectively. I don’t think I was using it too productively at the beginning of the year.
David: What do you do for fun?
Crista: I like to read, that’s what I’ve been doing lately. But normally I like to do things outdoors-- I like to kayak, cross-country ski, and stuff like that.

David: I have a couple of big questions for you. First, what’s the big question that you hope to answer in your research career?
Crista: I think what interests me the most, and something I read a lot of papers on during my MPH, was the effects of chronic diseases in childhood and how this can lead to psycho-pathologies in later adulthood. It’s interesting to me how the earlier you have these illnesses in life, the more likely you are to have these problems later in life. For example, children with diabetes or asthma have a greater likelihood of suicidal ideation when they get older. My interests are in trying to figure out if this is something psychological, social, or biological in terms of the illness that is making one more apt to having these later life problems, and to develop interventions to reduce these problems.

David: You know, many of us have wondered what goes on in the hotel in those studies. Okay, my last question. Sheldon Cohen is often considered a man of mystery. If you could ask him any question, what would it be?
Crista: First, I would like to know if Matt Lauer is as good looking in person as he is on TV. But more importantly, a lot of what I know about Sheldon is from the PI I worked for, and he thinks Sheldon is a genius, but a very quiet and reserved one. I am not so sure about that, is he quiet or is there some other side to him?

David: Oh, I can answer that. He’s a partier, he’s wild.
For those of you who had to miss out on the Department’s Holiday Party, here’s a quick recap.

Mike got the party started with his annual address. Theme: CMU Psychology is Number 1! Or, in some cases, number 2-7. But definitely in the top 10!

There was much excitement when Mike finished, because it meant everyone could go get more food.

And then the Pub Quiz began! The rules were simple: answer lots of questions to win exciting prizes.

Although it turned out there was a footnote to the rules. You have to answer the questions CORRECTLY. That tripped up a lot of teams.

But in any case, tension and excitement mounted as teams began to form and Drs. Rakison and Holt started the first round.

Tension and excitement personified. Also pictured: napping personified and ‘irritation at having my photo taken’ personified.
Many of the social/health psychologists got together to form a super team, the Super B Snowmen.

The Sassy Spin-sters were also a formidable group. Unfortunately, their strategy (hoping for a round of questions concerning the collected works of Sheldon Cohen and Bob Siegler) did not pay off in the end.

After several rounds of fierce competition, the Middle Earthers (a collection of various hobbits, elves, wizards and MacWhinneys) took second place to a team composed largely of members of the Center for Cognitive Brain Imaging.

But even though the quiz ended, discussion of the contest continued in the subsequent week. On the next page, the PLB samples some of the positive, and negative, sentiments that people have expressed about the quiz.
After our holiday party quiz, there was a demand from graduate students for a class that would prepare them for next year. Although no one stepped forward to teach such a class, the PB has decided to provide monthly articles providing facts that could be useful in next year’s quiz. Because all of the teams this year displayed an appalling lack of knowledge of our neighboring state, I decided to write the first article to provide some basic facts about Ohio. My hope is that fellow faculty will write articles in the coming months to meet this educational need.

-Sheldon Cohen

Ohio ranks seventh among the 50 states in population. Ohio has an area of 40,948.38 square miles. It ranks 34th in state size. Columbus is the state capital and Ohio’s largest city. Columbus does not have an NFL team, although Cleveland and Cincinnati do. 50% of the United States population lives within a 500 mile radius of Columbus. Ohio contains 88 counties. There are 277.3 persons per square mile. 83 percent of the population are high school graduates. 21.1 percent have earned a bachelor’s degree. 22 minutes is the average travel time to work for commuters in the Buckeye State. There were approximately 80,000 farms in the state in 2001. Seven United States presidents were born in Ohio (this sounds to me like a likely question): Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, William H. Taft, and Warren G. Harding.
Ken Kotovsky to collaborate on squirrel birth-control study at UC-Davis?  

BY J. DAVID CRESWELL

UC Davis officials announced a new birth-control research study to curb the campus explosion of non-native tree squirrels (Sciurus niger). The doctoral student running the project at UC Davis said, “In seven years, we went from having no squirrels on the campus to having more than 400, and there is currently no sign that their reproduction is slowing down”. The Davis project consists of capturing campus squirrels, marking them with non-toxic dyes according to treatment condition, and then vaccinating them with a potent vaccine, called DeSexTheSquirrels (trade name: GonaCon) or placebo. This vaccine works on both males and females, and one shot leaves the animal sterile for two years.

Ken Kotovsky and his research associates have taken a strong interest in this work, and rumor has it that his lab may collaborate on the project. Ken has been known to describe his relationship with squirrels as fundamentally antagonistic, sometimes calling them “little terrorists.” Ken indicates that he has been conducting “squirrel population control” experiments for years. He would not comment on the specifics of this top-secret work, but he implied that squirrel labor camps outside the city limits may have advantages over squirrel birth-control methods.

The UC Davis project has been lauded by wildlife professionals as a major step forward in controlling urban wildlife problems. In contrast, Ken is currently being investigated by the US Wildlife and Gaming Commission. Please stay tuned for exciting developments in this area.

PLB Shout-Out

This Month’s PLB Shout-Out goes out to everyone in the PLB’s fantasy football league. It’s been a good season. And now that the playoffs are about to start, I wanted to thank you all in advance for letting me win!
Job Classification Revisions
Barbara Smith (HR) spoke about HR’s current project, examination/rewriting of job classifications, which is the numerical grade level of each CMU staffperson’s job. The grade structure has been expanded to reflect a greater variety of job descriptions nowadays (the old classifications were about 15 years old, and somewhat inflexible or unreflective of what a person really does at their job). New grades will go from Grade 1 through Grade 73. For example, old grade levels 1-15 will become new grade levels 1-15 plus newly added levels of 50-73. Currently under examination are old grade levels 7-9. Roughly translated, old grades 7-9 are event planners, editors, writers, some computer staff and such. In the near future, HR will rethink levels 2 thru 6, and 10 and higher. When making hiring decisions, HR will benchmark new levels 50-57 with the local market (Pittsburgh & vicinity); new levels 58-68 with the regional market (e.g., Western PA); and new levels 69 and higher with the national market. For example, for a job opening with a new job classification of 70, HR will seek candidates from across the US.

Comments from SC reps included that the changes are being poorly communicated to staff (or not at all), that staff weren’t told that this process is underway, and as a result staff have no input and no idea what it means for them, how it’ll affect their paychecks, or their relative chances in successfully applying for other positions at CMU.

Food Drive Results
The SC Food Drive committee had initially been quite anxious that donations would drop precipitously this year due to the recession. Quite surprisingly, however, CMU faculty, staff and students stepped up to the plate in a big way, donating 500+ pounds MORE than last year. They also collected more cash this year. This year, a dropoff bin was placed in the Department of Psychology. Thanks to Psy staffers who helped with that. Next year, remember you can also drop off items when you go to get your flu shot at the Health Fair in November (and register for a raffle by doing so). The Cans Across the Cut event resulted in 400+ food items, cash, and participation by 7 teams, despite very low student participation and assistance this year.

SC Tagline contest
Staff Council will be launching a tagline/motto contest in January, which will run through roughly the end of February. Prizes are involved (TBA). 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 and for a copy of the constitution, email Alan Becer at ab8g@andrew.cmu.edu
You may also contact Audrey Portis with questions about the contest aportis@andrew.cmu.edu

Notes from President’s Address to Staff
I attended the Nov. 24 President Cohon’s Address to Staff. Download them here (MS Word).

Upcoming Events
Next issue of SC Newsletter, the Scoop, comes out on December 15th. Take your Sons and Daughters to Work Day is tentatively scheduled for April 16. My next Notes column will be at the end of January or early Feb. (there is no meeting in December)... Happy holidays, everyone!
 Psi Chi Induction  

On November 4th, the CMU Chapter of Psi Chi inducted 9 new members.

The new members (mostly pictured here) are Claire Andrzejewski, Rosanna Breaux, Christine Chen, Elizabeth Cutrone, Kirsti Fung, Janelle Higa, Kunja Modi, Matt Siffert, and Jaclyn Wainer.

Erik Thiessen spoke at the induction; students had quite a mixed reaction to his address.

The culinary highlight of the reception was the plaid brain cake.

Just like the number of cakes I could eat right now. mmm. Cake.
REGIME CHANGE AT PLB WORLD HEADQUARTERS

As many of you already know, I’m stepping down as PLB Editor, effective immediately.

Well, effective in like two pages.

We’ve had some fun times together, but it’s time for someone else to make up report the news. So I thought this would be an appropriate time to take stock of where the PLB started from, where it is now, and to make some predictions about where it’s going in the future.

Comments on the Thiessen-Era PLB

I always appreciated the fact that the PLB never published an article about how I was misquoted in The Tartan saying that ‘faking it’ was okay in a relationship. Wait. Are you going to put that in now?

I’m just tremendously glad that there aren’t any other Charleseeses in the department, so that the PLB didn’t need to give me some terrible nickname like Chuck or Chaz or Chuckles.

After years, I think I finally managed to convince the PLB that I’m really Russian. Rushin’ home to read the PLB, that is!

[still too bitter about getting assigned nickname ‘Davey’ to comment]

I don’t really even like the blues. One of the highest priorities of the next editor should be to make sure that the PLB’s J. David Creswell coverage is more accurate.

I have a whole top 10 list of my favorite things about Erik’s work as PLB Editor. At least 9 of them relate to the fact that him doing it meant I didn’t have to anymore.
Trend Analysis of the PLB

The PLB has had two editors in the course of its semillustrious history. How has the PLB changed during their stewardship, and what does that predict about its future?

At this rate, we’d expect the next editor to produce 35 or 36 issues, averaging around 19 pages an issue, up from 9 in the Holt era, and 13 on my watch.

You only get to found the PLB once. But the new editor could make up some new recurring features (like Graduate Student of the Month). Judging from the accuracy trends, the new features may have titles like ‘Outright Fiction’ or ‘Scurrilous Lies.’

I like to think that Squirrel-Centrism is an enduring trait of the PLB that no future editor will change.

Look for the next issue of the PLB some time in February. So long!

- Erik Thiessen
newest editor emeritus

Footnotes

1. To be drafted in the next issue, published by the Secret Social Committee. Stay tuned!

2. Number only an estimate. I lost count after, like, the fourth issue

3. The decision to use bar graph format for this comparison is (like most things in the PLB) only moderately appropriate.