Investigation of lab explosion completed

By Janese Silvey

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Investigators have concluded that the premature introduction of hydrogen into a nitrogen-filled chamber caused the explosion at Schweitzer Hall on the University of Missouri campus last month.

The blast happened June 28 on the third floor of the building, blowing out 17 windows and destroying the lab. The rest of the building is structurally safe and has been accessible.

The explosion happened in biochemistry professor Judy Wall's lab during a routine setup of a microbiological anaerobic growth chamber. Wall and her team study bacteria that cannot live in the presence of oxygen, requiring scientists to create just the right environment. From now on, Wall said, the team will create that atmosphere using a premixed blend of hydrogen that includes 5 percent nitrogen.

But for nearly three decades, the practice has been to fill the roughly 2-cubic meter chamber with nitrogen then introduce hydrogen. Prior to the explosion, hydrogen was prematurely introduced and reached an explosive level, according to a statement from the university. Investigators concluded the gas was ignited by a source inside the chamber.

Wall said her research team has been mixing its own gases for 27 years without incident. That's mostly because premixed gas used to be cost prohibitive, she said. Costs have gone down, and "in hindsight, it's something I should have done years ago, change gases," she said, adding that the switch won't affect research results.

Additionally, Wall said, her researchers have already had special training in gas handling, and she anticipates additional training in the future.

"We are not going to let this happen again," she said.

Investigators gave the university a list of recommendations, which included replacing pure hydrogen with a mix and giving researchers refresher training. Spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken said those recommendations will apply to all MU labs.
"If any good came from the situation, it's first that no one was seriously injured, and second, hopefully we will be able, after studying this situation, to be able to implement these recommendations to ensure we have no other instances like this," she said.

Wall was in a nearby office at the time of the explosion. Those injured included a research scientist, two postdoctoral fellows and a graduate student. Three of them were released from University Hospital after being treated for minor to moderate injuries. The fourth person was taken to the hospital with more serious injuries but was released from the hospital the next day and is doing fine, the university said.

Banken said no one will be disciplined.

The third-floor lab will have to be replaced, an expense covered by university insurance, and Banken said it likely will reopen by spring semester.

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
MU lab blast caused by accidental gas mix

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS

University of Missouri officials on Friday released results of an investigation into a biochemistry laboratory explosion a week ago that left four people injured.

An accidental mix of hydrogen and nitrogen in a two-cubic-meter chamber caused the June 28 blast that blew out more than a dozen windows of Schweitzer Hall. Investigators with the university and the Columbia Fire Department concluded the gas was ignited by an unidentified source inside the chamber.

The injured “all are doing well,” the report said.

Researchers in biochemistry professor Judy Wall’s lab had been doing a routine setup of a microbiological anaerobic growth chamber to study bacteria that cannot live in the presence of oxygen.

The chamber is first filled with nitrogen, and then small amounts of hydrogen are introduced to remove the remaining oxygen. The valve for the hydrogen cylinder was accidentally left open.

The report noted a missing toggle switch in a “T-connection” that would have prevented nitrogen and hydrogen from simultaneously entering the chamber and reaching an explosive level.

Preventive changes include suspending the use of T-connections in such situations and the replacement of pure hydrogen with a 95-to-5 mixture of nitrogen and hydrogen, said MU spokesman Christian Basi.

Refresher training for all lab personnel is under way.
Blast at Mizzou ruled accidental

COLUMBIA, MO. • Fire investigators say the explosion last month in a University of Missouri chemistry lab was accidental.

Four people were injured in the blast June 28 on the third floor of the university's Schweitzer Hall.

Columbia Fire Department Battalion Chief Steve Sapp says the blast originated inside an anaerobic chamber into which hydrogen gas was allowed to seep. The chamber was used for research requiring an oxygen-free environment.

Sapp says there were several ignition sources inside the chamber, making it impossible to say which of them caused the explosion.

Schweitzer Hall reopened within a few days, but the lab will have to be rebuilt.
Researchers in the MU lab where an anaerobic chamber exploded June 28 weren't following the chamber manufacturer's instructions and mixed hydrogen and nitrogen gas themselves instead of using premixed gas.

Four people were injured, one requiring brief hospitalization.

Friday afternoon, the Columbia Fire Department and MU released the findings of their investigations into the explosion in MU biochemistry professor Judy Wall's Schweitzer Hall lab on June 28.

Both investigations found that the accidental explosion started after hydrogen gas was introduced into an anaerobic chamber and an ignition source inside the chamber ignited it.

But the real culprit was researchers' practice of mixing their own gases to save money instead of using premixed gases — a practice that will now cease, according to Wall and the university.

Researchers were washing the interior of the chamber with what they thought was pure nitrogen gas. But it was actually a mixture of hydrogen and nitrogen because a tank containing hydrogen gas was connected to the nitrogen gas and left open, resulting in a potentially explosive level of hydrogen collecting in the chamber. The chamber contained several potential ignition sources including a heater, a fan and a catalyst material that produces heat. Fire investigators were not able to determine the exact cause of ignition, according to the fire department release.
According a press release from the MU News Bureau, the standard operating procedures for removing the oxygen from the chamber call for using nitrogen to fill the chamber. Then a small amount of hydrogen is added to create a reaction with any remaining oxygen, or oxygen that seeps into the chamber, to create water.

Brian Coy of Coy Laboratory Products, the company that manufactured the chamber, said that the company recommends using only premixed gases. And, he added: "We never recommend using pure hydrogen."

The chambers are labeled with warnings against using flammable gases like hydrogen on the front and back. The labels also recommend using only premixed gases.

Wall said she was aware of the manufacturer's guidelines.

"We did not deliver gas to the chambers in accordance with the manufacturer's instruction because we were mixing our own and had for 27 years," she said.

Wall said that premixed gases are more expensive and that using them might result in her lab doing less work, "but we'll be doing it with mixed gases."

The MU release said the hydrogen was introduced into the chamber because the valve for the hydrogen cylinder was left open after a check for leaks in the hydrogen gas lines. Also, the laboratory was using a T-connection that had a toggle switch in order to prevent nitrogen and hydrogen from entering the chamber at the same time. At the time of the explosion, a T-connection without a toggle switch was being used. That allowed both nitrogen and hydrogen to enter the chamber.

Wall said her lab aimed for less than 5 percent hydrogen when they mixed their gases. She also said that no warning systems were in use at the time of the explosion.

Several years ago, the lab purchased an oxygen and hydrogen monitor, but it was damaged by a corrosive substance produced by the microbes she studies. That resulted in incorrect readings.

Now, oxygen and hydrogen sensors will be used during the setup of the chamber, she said.

The university recommended the following actions to prevent future accidents:
• Replace the use of pure hydrogen with a 95:5 mixture of nitrogen and hydrogen.
• Following a check of gas lines for leaks, all gas cylinders should be closed and only reopened as needed.
• Use of T-connections between gases should be eliminated.
• Investigate the possibility of using hydrogen and/or oxygen sensors that could withstand a corrosive atmospheric environment.
• Give refresher training to all laboratory personnel. (Some training has already occurred.)
• Review current training, guidance materials and inspection procedures.
• Review MU’s compressed gas cylinder storage area to ensure appropriate safety procedures are in place and look for improvements.

Wall said that she and her researchers have already completed a training session with Airgas, which is a specialty gas distributor. She also said that she and the lab staff are generating internal protocols to prevent future incidents.

Wall and her team were studying anaerobic bacteria that cannot live in the presence of oxygen. The bacteria converts toxic metals, such as uranium, to less toxic forms. Wall said that the bacteria are found in the soil that people walk across every day and did not pose an airborne danger after the explosion.

The MU News Bureau release said that the bacteria could be used by agencies that clean sites contaminated with radioactive materials or other toxic metals. Wall has already resumed her research, which is funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy.
MU boasts record figures of grant money for 2009

By Christina Stiehl
July 9, 2010 | 6:08 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Researchers at MU displayed record levels of expenditures and awards for fiscal year 2009.

MU spent more than $543 million in grant money during 2009 — an 11 percent increase from 2008 and 38 percent increase from five years ago. MU also attracted more than $573 million in awards, up from about $497 million in 2008, according to a news release from the MU News Bureau.

Throughout the fiscal year, MU applies for competitive grants from a variety of outside sources, including non-profit organizations such as the American Heart Association and federal organizations such as the National Institute of Health and the National Science Foundation. Funding also comes from for-profit organizations and state-sponsored programs.

Federal funding also came from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — the stimulus bill. By the end of 2009, MU had received roughly $35 million from awards related to the bill.

The awards figures represent money MU has available for use. Because some grants do not have a particular time limit, the figures include funds received during the past several years.

The expenditures figures refer to external grant money that was actually spent by MU for their grant-funded projects and contracts, according to the MU research report for 2009.

Robert Duncan, vice chancellor for research at MU, said he believes the faculty members at the university were a major contributor to the high level of incoming grants.
“The rapid increase in growth is due primarily to the outstanding faculty at MU and the willingness of others around the world to invest in their research,” Duncan said.

He said the funding is being used for academic projects in four main areas; instruction and public service, research, academic enterprise and student financial aid.

The grants are used for projects in specific disciplines as well as interdisciplinary research among departments. Duncan said he thinks this cross-utilization is an important aspect of MU’s research efforts and an indicator of the collaborative faculty.

“Sometimes the most exciting new opportunities will come between disciplines and lead to projects that no one has thought of before,” Duncan said.

In May, MU received $8.47 million from the National Institutes of Health’s National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to research the causes of cardiovascular diseases. According to the MU School of Medicine website, the grant will fund the exploration of the smallest blood vessels in the body, known as microcirculation.

The interdisciplinary project will involve more than 20 scientists across campus with nearly half the money going to the School of Medicine and the other half to researchers throughout the Dalton Center for Cardiovascular Research, Duncan said.

Along with research projects, Duncan said external funding is also important for supporting student financial aid and scholarships. Student financial aid has grown from less than $138 million in 2005 to more than $200 million in 2009, according to the MU research report.

The expenditures were also vital in improving the state economy through creating jobs, supporting staff salary and buying equipment from local distributors, Duncan said.

In March, the Missouri Division of Workforce gave MU more than $3 million of its stimulus money as part of a program to educate students on sustainable energy technology, according to another release from the MU News Bureau.

Moving research projects from the lab into the marketplace has also provided local economic benefit. In 2009, MU received more than $10 million from licensing income, and MU researchers filed 68 patent applications, according to the release.
Chris Fender, director of MU’s Office of Technology Management and Industry Relations, said developing and licensing these new technologies has greatly impacted the university overall.

“In addition to the financial benefit, it increases the notoriety of our scientists and allows them to better compete for grant funding in the future,” Fender said.

One of these licenses includes an organ printing technology MU licensed to a company called Organovo. Gabor Forgacs, George H. Vineyard professor of theoretical physics at MU, developed a 3-D printer that creates cells to form tissue structures. Researchers and scientists expect the technology to be a huge platform in tissue engineering.

While Duncan is aware of the hindrance the recession might have on future grants, he remains optimistic and said he thinks training excellent students at MU will be essential in creating such opportunities.

“One very important way to recover from an economic recession is through innovation and discovery,” Duncan said.
Officials discuss privatizing lab

RADIL receives interest locally.

By Janese Silvey

Saturday, July 10, 2010

Members of Columbia’s business community and University of Missouri officials have had talks about privatizing the university’s research animal lab, but the discussion appears to be at a standstill.

On the university’s side, administrators view the sale of the Research Animal Diagnostic Laboratory as a “discussable issue,” said spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken. “We know of a number of parties that may be interested in some type of deal,” she said.

On the flip side, a group of local investors say if MU does sell the laboratory, they want to keep it in Columbia.

RADIL, which has been at MU for more than 40 years, serves companies that care for and use animals in biomedical research, providing biological and genetic testing services.

Banken said the question of whether RADIL could be privatized has been a discussion topic for a number of years, but she stressed that there have been no formal negotiations. Before any such discussion, she said, administrators need to determine fair market value.

RADIL’s revenue last year was between $11 million and $12 million, much of which was used to support the operation. The lab returns $1 million to $2 million a year back to the university and the College of Veterinary Medicine.

Alex Labrunerie said he’s among a group of local businessmen who would be interested in purchasing the lab if MU were to put it on the market. “We don’t want to put pressure on the university,” he said, “but we want the university to know there’s a group of investors who have an interest in keeping it as a community-based business if they privatize it.”

The Tribune contacted a handful of local leaders about the deal. Most of them knew about it but declined to discuss it. Some think making it a private business would allow it to expand.

“I would hope in the best-case scenario, it frees up a private endeavor to grow as a business and hire more people, more quality scientists in the Columbia area,” Labrunerie said. “The project
has been out there for 40 years and has quite a great reputation in its field.” Now that the lab is located near ABC Labs, “it would help that whole life sciences corridor called Discovery Ridge expand further into biotechnology.”

Lela Riley, a researcher at RADIL and former director of the lab, said she was aware of local businesses interested in purchasing the lab and would support such a move.

“I believe it would be a win-win situation,” she said. “The university would win by acquiring money from the sale of RADIL at a time university finances are tight. It would be a win for RADIL in terms of the ability to expand and grow. And perhaps, most importantly, it would be a win for the community in maintaining and growing a business that would stimulate economic development for the city and the state.”

Leona Rubin, an associate professor of veterinary biomedical sciences and chairwoman of the MU Faculty Council, said she’s not sure whether she’d support such a deal because a small portion of the profits benefit other faculty in the College of Veterinary Medicine. The school started getting money from RADIL after faculty complained about the researchers there receiving six-figure bonuses as part of incentive packages.

“It really doesn’t affect me very much,” Rubin said. “It would be sad if we lose that source of income, but at the same time if they think they can be more productive, maybe the veterinary school could profit off the sale of RADIL.”

Rubin said the school’s enrollment continues to grow and needs to expand facilities. If sale proceeds could be used to build a new academic building for the veterinary school, she said, “I might not feel so bad about it.”

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Enrollment barometer is rising

Deposits go up in sciences, health.

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, July 11, 2010

Studies related to sciences and health care once again are seeing an increase in interest among students planning to attend the University of Missouri this fall.

As of July 1, 2,093 first-time freshmen paid deposits to the College of Arts and Science, an increase of 122 students from last year. Deposits are a reliable enrollment tracker because students are more likely to show up this fall if they’ve already paid. That number doesn’t include transfer student enrollment, which is more premature at this point in the summer, said Ann Korschgen, vice provost for enrollment management.

Enrollment choices within the College of Arts and Sciences’ 28 departments mirror last year’s numbers, said Dean Michael O’Brien. “Psychology, biological, political science — those are some of our huge majors and they’re growing,” he said. “Everything is growing.” The college can handle the increase, O’Brien said, in part because classes are starting to be offered later in the day.

But an increase in students pursuing some fields with the School of Health Professions is a double-edged sword. The school — which can expect 437 first-time freshmen, up 111 from last year — does not have capacity to serve those wanting to pursue advanced degrees in occupational or physical therapy. The programs are capped at 30 and 44 students, respectively, spokeswoman Cheri Ghan said.

“That is the sad thing,” she said. “We have an outstanding reputation, which is one reason why we have so many applicants, and employers want our graduates. … The problem is we can’t take all the students because of our facilities.”

Those who do make the cut, though, can expect jobs after they graduate. Ghan said the programs have a track record of placing every student who seeks employment after college.

“I think if you look at all of these data coming out on job trends and employment trends, everything points to health care,” she said. “There’s already a huge shortage of all of our disciplines out in the work force. Students recognize that and know this is a job career path that is fairly recession-proof.”
Enrollment at Trulaske College of Business is down for the second year in a row, although the decrease is not as significant as last year. As of July 1, 931 first-time freshman deposits were made to the college, down seven from 2009.

The Missouri School of Journalism saw the most significant decrease this year, with 16 fewer freshmen making deposits than in 2009.

The changes “depend upon a number of variables, such as the economy, the way professions are perceived socially and even the selectivity of the program,” Korschgen said. The journalism and business programs “are very selective. Students find that out and sometimes opt for other options.”

Other July 1 enrollment highlights:

• The incoming class of students is more diverse than previous classes, with 58 more deposits from black students and 51 more from Hispanic students. Students this year, for the first time, were given the choice of identifying themselves as multiracial, and 150 of those paying deposits did so.

• The number of students coming to MU with an ACT score of 28 or higher increased by 250 this year for a total of 1,864.

Asked if the scores mean the test is getting easier, Korschgen said “we hope that it means Mizzou is attracting more high ability students because of the quality of experience we have here.”

Overall, she said, “we’re very pleased with the composition of the incoming class. It has everything we want in a student profile: diversity in ethnicity and geographical background and more high ability students. You can’t get any better than that, especially with an increase.”

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Authors bite into appeal of 'Twilight'

Professors at MU give scholarly take.

By Janese Silvey

Friday, July 9, 2010

Jennifer Stevens Aubrey remembers settling down to read the latest book in the "Twilight" series only to be interrupted by her ill husband asking her to go buy some medicine. Edward Cullen, she informed him as she slammed down the book, would never need Nyquil.

Of course, Edward, the fictional hero in the books, doesn’t get sick — he’s a vampire and already dead. And that’s part of the reason women — not just teenage girls — are enthralled with "Twilight."

"Moms lose that romance and are forced to take care of other people," Aubrey said. "You don’t have to take care of him. He doesn’t eat or get sick."

Aubrey is an assistant professor of communications at the University of Missouri who teamed up with two colleagues to study why "Twilight" has taken hold of even the most informed media consumers. They’ve released their findings, along with similar studies from researchers around the globe, in a book titled "Bitten by Twilight."

The four-book "Twilight" saga by Stephenie Meyer revolves around Bella, a teen who falls for Edward so hard she’s willing to give up everything to join his fanged family. Complicating the romance are a werewolf, Jacob, who fights for Bella’s affection, and the fact that other vampires are trying to kill her.

"Bitten by Twilight" examines, among other things, how the characters and plot influence audiences. The authors ultimately conclude that fans, even young "Twihards," are smart enough to separate the fiction from reality. Give girls some credit, co-author and Assistant Professor Melissa Click said; they’re smarter than society realizes.

"Somehow the media thinks girls and women have been duped into this story," Click said. "No one worries about boys and gender issues in ‘Iron Man,’ " she said, referring to the man-turns-superhero action flick.
“Just because fans desire to live in a world where you are not responsible doesn’t mean you want to be taken care of, and it doesn’t mean you buy into the gender roles,” said co-author Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, assistant professor at MU. “Fans create meaning for themselves.”

Although researchers admit Bella isn’t the most empowering role model, they’re quick to point out that she’s also not most fans’ favorite character. Girls, they discovered, actually prefer Alice, Edward’s smart and powerful adopted sister.

Behm-Morawitz introduced her co-workers to the series when “Twilight” debuted on the big screen in 2008.

“I laughed at first, and then by the end, we were all like, ‘Hmmmm,’ ” Click recalled.

She also wondered how the women — all professionals in their 30s with families — could get hooked on “Twilight.”

“We’re mothers and feminists, so we wanted to study why we would fall so in love with the characters and the stories,” Behm-Morawitz said.

“Bitten by Twilight” includes multidisciplinary studies exploring not only a variety of gender issues but also race relations between the vampire clan and werewolf pack. Researchers also zoomed in on the book’s positive messages, mainly the fact that Edward won’t have sex with Bella until they’re married.

“Here we have a relationship where the boyfriend is not pressuring you to have sex,” Behm-Morawitz said. “He’s concerned with Bella’s virtue. It’s an old-fashioned idea and safe. Teens can experience feelings of love and lust without actually having the male wanting sex.”

Click said the authors don’t expect their scholarly book will help them cash in on the “Twilight” craze, but she does hope it helps fans better analyze the literature.

“We want fans to think beyond the story, to think about what it reflects and what it means,” Behm-Morawitz said. “This book allows them to do that.”

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COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU Summer Welcome wraps up after advising 5,600 incoming freshmen

By Hannah Wiese, Naomi Stevens
July 10, 2010 | 5:00 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Debi and Tom Kupferer live in Columbia within minutes of MU, but they got a new taste of campus when they attended Summer Welcome on July 2 with their oldest child, Kelsey, who will be a freshman this fall.

The Kupferers arrived in time for the tour but not in time for the free coffee — and Debi really wanted her coffee. Although her husband had attended MU, Debi had only been on campus for a few football games and didn’t know where she could grab a quick caffeine fix. She was pleasantly surprised by the personalized hospitality of the Summer Welcome leaders.

“They walk you from place to place," she said. "They even walked me to get a cup of coffee.”

The Kupferers were among the estimated 9,200 parents and guests and 5,600 soon-to-be freshmen who attended this year’s Summer Welcome, an orientation, advising and registration program for new students and their parents. Seventeen families interviewed by the Missourian during the final week of the program, which ended Thursday, felt pretty satisfied with the amount of information they got and topics covered, including campus safety, financial aid and ordering textbooks.

"I remember when I was in school here, if you didn't ask, nobody told you," said Scott Rohrs of Columbia, a 1993 graduate who was visiting with daughter Sara and wife, Gretchen, who he met at MU in choir class. Rohrs was talking about work opportunities on campus, which Summer Welcome attempts to address.

Gretchen Rohrs, who attended a Summer Welcome before she started college in 1987, said she noticed a greater focus on preventing violence and encouraging safety for
women.

"We've kind of been bombarded with information on how to stay safe on campus," she said.

"Which isn't a bad thing," Sara Rohrs added.

"No, no, and they're much more open about 'call these people if you need a ride, if you're not able to drive your own car,'" her mother said. "That sort of thing was just starting when I was on campus."

As director of New Student Programs, David Rielley oversees Summer Welcome and stressed that the program, which has been around for about 40 years, is much more than tours.

“Our goal is for students and their parents to learn about campus and what the resources are that are available to them,” Rielley said.

All the walking to and from tours, information sessions, dorms and the University Bookstore left some parents short of breath — and wishing for golf carts.

Starting in June, the parents and their children visited campus for two-day sessions; the July 2 session was a one-day event.

Courtney Doll, who plans to major in journalism, flew from Houston to St. Louis with her parents, Paul and Dayna Doll, and then rented a car for the two-hour ride to Columbia.

They thought the trip was worth it. Courtney Doll said she appreciated the opportunity the small group meetings gave her to meet other students. She liked having people she knew to sit with in large group sessions and looks forward to seeing many of them again in the fall.

“We’re going to Facebook each other as soon as we get home,” she said.

Her father said he was grateful for instruction on how to manage the accounts and bills online.
“It was very informative for the parents,” Paul Doll said.

Tiffany Reid and her mother came from Kansas City. Reid plans to major in biology with the hope of becoming an anesthesiologist.

Their favorite part of Summer Welcome was a presentation called "Professor's Perspective" in which a professor gives parents and students his or her take on college life. The speaker on the day the Reids visited was Jim Spain, vice provost for undergraduate students, who talked about studying, getting to class on time and the history of MU.

“There was not a dull moment during his presentation,” Jennifer Reid, Tiffany’s mother, said. "It’s difficult to talk about history and keep everyone interested."

“I liked how every now and again, he'd throw in a little joke about KU,” Tiffany Reid said.

At points throughout the first day of each session, students and parents were separated and then subdivided into smaller groups. Students were given a chance to talk with one another and ask their Summer Welcome leader questions about MU.

“We danced, and we sang, and we hooted and hollered and learned peoples’ names — most things people would never do in public,” said Kevin Botkin, who will come from Clinton, Iowa, to study vocal performance and music education.

Botkin was not put off by what seems like a lot of construction on campus this summer.

“It’s a little disruptive getting around, but it definitely shows that progress is being made,” he said. "It’s definitely better than seeing a bunch of rotting buildings."

MU schedules construction during the summer while fewer people are on campus. Most road construction is scheduled to be completed by freshmen move-in day on Aug. 18, according to a previous Missourian story.

Tim Collins, a father from Normal, Ill., had both praise and criticism for the Summer Welcome program. Although he found it well-organized and thorough, he was not convinced that the emphasis on school spirit was necessary.
“I think the rah-rah is fine, fun, but as far as my son, I want to see him get a job,” Collins said.

He said he wants his son, Ben, to know that fun is a bonus of college, not its focus.

“You’re here so that you don’t end up in my basement when you’re done,” Collins said he often tells his son when discussing college.

Collins said that during the information sessions on billing, he felt there was an assumption that the parents would be paying for the student’s education. He plans to help his son but will not pay the majority of the expense. He said he thinks students who pay for their own educations are more likely to act responsibly during college and find a job after graduating because it’s their money at stake.

“I could pay for it, but I don’t want to — for his benefit,” Collins said.

Jackie Turner accompanied her son, Jason, to Summer Welcome. She plans to go back to school herself after Jason starts at MU in the fall. With her two older children already out of the house, Turner wants to get her bachelor’s degree in health care management through the Program for Adult College Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Turner said she was impressed with the Summer Welcome leaders, especially when they gave out their contact information in case the parents or students had any questions or problems later. Leaders are current MU students who undergo a 17-day training course before the program starts.

After Turner’s lunch at the dining hall Plaza 900, she did have some trouble finding the University Bookstore — because of the construction.

“I think right after lunch, they could have people out directing people where to go like they did in the morning,” Turner suggested.

Ki Ha Chang and his father flew in from Michigan the night before their Summer Welcome session. Although disappointed that he missed an activities fair in Memorial Union because it conflicted with his advising session, Chang said the advising appointment, during which he picked out his classes, was the most helpful part of Summer Welcome.
"Getting your schedule done, it's kind of like the 'you're in college' moment," said Chang, who decided on MU because he wants to major in radio/TV journalism.

The visit was Chang's first time in Missouri.

"I think the people here are a lot nicer than in Michigan," he said. "In Michigan, everyone's a little crabby."
GoMizzou iPhone app coming in fall

By Janese Silvey

Sunday, July 11, 2010

Trying to figure out where the chemistry building is on the University of Missouri campus? There’s an app for that.

Or there will be when the fall semester starts. GoMizzou, the official MU iPhone application, is set to debut Aug. 23, the first day of classes.

“Everybody is going mobile now,” said Tim Noce, president of the Missouri Students Association. “This is a new form of communication, so we wanted to make sure Mizzou was on the cutting edge of that.”

GoMizzou has been more than a year in the making, with MSA coming up with the idea when a handful of other colleges came out with iPhone applications.

The MU version hit a snag, though, when student leaders discovered outside companies were charging some $50,000 a year to create and maintain the apps.

“We decided to do it in-house and worked on it, but we ran into some bureaucracy,” he said. “To make a long story short, it took a really long time to roll it out.”

That’s why version 1.0 will include, for now, only the most basic features, such as a campus map, calendar and links to university news.

Still, for freshmen coming to MU for the first time, the free application should be helpful, such as the GPS feature, Noce said.

“I see just about every incoming freshman bust out their maps on the first day of school,” he said. “Maybe this will make them look a little less freshmen-like.”

Kristen Reagan, who will be a junior this fall, said using a map on a mobile phone would have been handier than the map on the back of a folder that she relied on as a freshman.

“The folder was pretty bulky, so now that I think about it, that’s pretty smart,” she said.

As MSA upgrades the application, Reagan also suggests a link to campus menus.
“I always used to look up the menus at dining halls as a freshman, so that would be pretty handy for freshmen to have,” she said.

Noce said there are lots of possibilities for GoMizzou, including a button that would allow students to call STRIPES, the sober-driving program, with the touch of a finger.

“We’re going to look at the feedback we get and see what happens,” Noce said. “There are certainly a lot of options.”

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KU cancels study abroad trip to Mexico

By KEVIN HARDY

MU MENTION PAGE 2

Mexican drug cartels and violence have closed the doors to some study abroad opportunities for University of Kansas students.

A group trip by 18 students who signed up to study in Puebla, Mexico, was canceled by the university after the U.S. State Department issued a travel warning on unsafe conditions in Mexico. The warning, while for the entire country, pointed to violence in northern cities such as Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez.

Many of the students have been diverted to a program in Costa Rica, but the cancellation has raised questions about the policy.

KU policy doesn’t allow any university-sanctioned travel to countries with State Department travel warnings, said Sue Lorenz, director of the office of study abroad. That policy hasn’t been broken since its inception in 2004, she said, even if the warning is specific to one region. Puebla is hours south of violent border cities.

“The warning is for the entire country,” she said. “In that text, it may explain the areas where there are immediate problems. We do not pick and choose among the things in the text.”

But KU’s director of Latin American studies, Elizabeth Kuznesof, called this summer’s decision “a complete overreaction.”

“Our programs are in Pueblo, which is hundreds of miles away from the violence,” she said.

The university moved most students signed up for the Mexican trip to a comparable foreign language program in Costa Rica. Still, Kuznesof said, students are missing out. She said many students travel to Mexico to study indigenous cultures — something she said they won’t get in Costa Rica.

“Costa Rica will also give them a really important experience,” she said, “but it’s a different experience.”

KU’s policy appears more cautious than some other area universities.
Kansas State University didn’t have any programs planned in Mexico this summer. K-State’s policy restricts university-led trips to countries with travel warnings, but it does allow for independent travel.

**The University of Missouri system doesn’t support travel in areas under a State Department warning, but it allows each institution to grant allowances.**

The University of Missouri-Kansas City currently has 21 students studying in Xalapa, which is about 90 miles east of KU’s Puebla program. UMKC officials required those students to sign a special waiver noting the risks of traveling in Mexico, said Kate Wozniak, study abroad and exchange coordinator.

The University of Missouri in Columbia has one student studying in Guadalajara this summer. That city is hundreds of miles south of northern violence.

University spokesman Christian Basi said the university looks at the localization and intensity of any danger in a country before deciding what, if any, areas are safe.

“Security measures are something we can never have a single procedure for,” he said.

The University of California and the University of Texas systems each canceled study abroad trips to Mexico earlier this year. The University of Texas system even recalled students and staff from Mexico’s northern states in April. But those universities also allow exceptions on a case-by-case basis.
“Why aren’t we utilizing that entity to help create these videos?” she asked. “That serves a couple of purposes, including giving students not only technical training but also sort of a historical perspective.”

One faculty member was already doing similar work on campus. Last semester, professor Elaine Lawless tasked her graduate students to conduct field research by recording oral histories with veterans. She had been involved at the national level with the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project and wanted to see how it would work in the classroom.

“It was very successful,” Lawless said. “So it just represents one possibility of what can be done in Missouri.”

Last month, Lawless joined Kander, Schupp and Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia, and university representatives on the MU campus to discuss a future veterans’ video program for the state. The Missouri Veterans History Project Coalition is meeting again tomorrow to continue to hash out details of a new, non-political oral history program.

Committee members will have to determine how to implement oral histories into existing curricula on campus, how the equipment and supplies will be funded and whether to expand the histories to include interviews of younger veterans returning home with fresh memories.

Training also will be a key component, Lawless said. Her students sat through training on privacy laws and were armed with sample questions and release forms from the Veterans History Project before heading out with cameras to interview veterans. The preparation paid off.

“The feedback I got was that they felt like my students were thoughtful and good listeners and energetic about what they were doing,” Lawless said.

Although the program is in a preliminary stage, those involved in the endeavor agreed it’s worthwhile.

“We just felt that the story of Missouri veterans is sort of the story of our community, so we know who we are as a people, as a town, as a county and as a state, and the importance of recognizing the deeds of our citizens and what they’ve done,” Webber said.

And, perhaps just as important, “we’re going to continue it in a way the state can actually afford,” Kander said. “I’m a veteran of Afghanistan so I know a lot of people who have valuable stories to tell. I’m just not willing to spend $1,400 in taxpayer money for every one of those stories.”

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The Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District, facing a 45 percent increase in pension costs since 2007, wants new employees to get a pension model that the private sector began using years ago.

Contracts with MSD's five unions expired June 30. Three small unions have accepted the change. The two big unions have rejected the latest contract proposal but declined to discuss their objections.

MSD, like most other public and quasi-public agencies, has a defined-benefit program — in which a retiree's benefits are set by a formula of salary and years of service.

But the downturn in the stock market has soured a key source of income for pension funds, and public funds are suffering nationwide. Illinois' are among the worst-funded; one study estimates its funds will run out of money in 2018 if changes are not made.

Public agencies, however, can go to the taxpayer for more money. MSD relies on user fees, not taxes.

Its pension costs have increased to $11.2 million this year from $7.7 million in 2007. MSD expects such costs to range between $10 million and $12 million in the next 10 years.

Lance LeComb, a spokesman for MSD, also noted the district has to spend $6 billion to improve its sewer system the next few decades to comply with federal and state clean-water regulations.

"It is critical that the district has a benefit package that is fair to employees, yet does not create an undue burden for the ratepayers," LeComb said.

Under a "defined-contribution" plan, MSD will make a contribution to an employee's 401(k) plan but won't be responsible for meeting a fixed pension payment.

Such switches have been common in the private sector.

MSD's plan would affect only new employees.
LeComb said MSD did not think it was fair to change programs on current employees, as has been common in the private sector.

In general, employees who have been with MSD 30 years receive a pension equal to about half their salaries. LeComb said the plan, which was fully funded in 2008, is now 83 percent funded.

LeComb declined to say how much MSD would save by changing the pension program, because of ongoing negotiations with unions. He said MSD wants to make the change for all employees, both union and nonunion.

Three unions that represent skilled trade workers at the district have accepted the new approach. Negotiations are continuing with the two largest unions — the Service Employees International Union and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Union representatives had little to say about the issue. "I don't bargain in the press," said Mike Murphy of the service employees union said.

LeComb said the district also does not bargain that way; it provided pension information at the Post-Dispatch's request.

While public employees and their unions have been loath to consider pension reform, pressure for change is mounting.

The Missouri Legislature is considering making most new state employees contribute 4 percent of salary to a defined-benefit plan.

The administration and faculty of the University of Missouri are discussing going to a defined-contribution plan.

The city of St. Louis is keeping its pension options open, said Kara Bowlin, a spokeswoman for Mayor Francis Slay.

Metro pension costs

Pension costs are increasing at Metro, another large regional agency that also has defined-benefit pensions.

The total yearly cost of its four plans in 2007 was about $6.7 million and increased to slightly more than $7 million this year.

Metro expects its cost to be $8.7 million next year, and grow up to 3.5 percent a year.

The plan for salaried employees is slightly overfunded; the three plans for union-represented workers are between 63 percent and 68.5 percent funded.
Metro's plan for union workers generally pays an employee $55 a month for each year of service if the employee retires with 25 years or more service. Labor agreements with Metro's unionized employees expire in November, and negotiations are expected to begin in the fall.