MU student leader joins loan rate effort

Monday, June 24, 2013 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri’s student body president has joined a national effort to prevent a large increase in student loan rates.

Missouri Students Association President Nick Droege recently joined 100 other student body presidents from across the nation in an effort to draw attention to the growing student debt crisis. Unless Congress acts in the next week, subsidized Stafford student loan interest rates are set to double from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent.

The letter from the group of student presidents, signed by Droege as well as Ashley Koesterer of the Missouri University of Science and Technology, requests that Congress keep rates low, ensure repayment options are simple and predictable and reinvest cost savings back into financial aid.

A bipartisan student loan compromise is being worked out in the Senate. According to reports, the bill would have interest rates tied to financial markets, and students would see the rates rise slightly, from 3.4 percent to 3.8 percent. The Senate has already failed to pass two dueling bills that would have stopped the loans from doubling.
COLUMBIA GROUP WORKING TO HELP STARTUPS

Columbia economic development officials are working on a new program designed to help startup businesses get off the ground.

The Columbia City Council last week allocated $150,000 to Regional Economic Development Inc., with an original goal of providing loans for new small businesses. But REDI is instead working with the University of Missouri and the Small Business and Technology Development Center to devise a program that would provide more than just financing.

The goal is to offer people with new business ideas a chance to participate in a program offering classes, field trips and mentors on topics including raising capital and developing business plans, The Columbia Daily Tribune reported (http://bit.ly/i4T32st). Some funding, probably low-interest loans, would also be offered.

REDI President Mike Brooks and others are considering a summer program, possibly for eight weeks, to allow students to participate between academic semesters.

Entrepreneurs with "very early-stage companies" would take classes or listen to speakers, as well as visit successful companies and work with mentors and professionals to develop their concepts. Eventually, they would have a chance to pitch their ideas to potential investors. Part of the program would involve some seed funding, likely with a low-interest loan.

"What we don't know is whether that (loan) will be automatic at acceptance or something that will be offered at the conclusion of training," Brooks said.

Organizers hoped to begin the business accelerator this summer but a funding source from the University of Missouri fell through, said Steve Wyatt, vice provost for economic development. He said the university still will be involved in the program, with loans or in-kind services. And waiting for next summer will allow organizers to develop curriculum, activities and better marketing, officials said.
Interest in non-GMO crops grows

Labeling gains some traction.

By Laura Mazurak

Monday, June 24, 2013 at 2:00 pm

Clarence is like many small towns in Missouri. There's a church, a bank, a gas station.

But rising above the town of 800 is a seed-cleaning facility for non-genetically modified crops, a feature that puts Clarence in the middle of a national trend.

Premium Ag Products, an hour north of Columbia in Shelby County, cleans, sorts and ships grains that are free of genetically modified organisms, or GMOs. The facility, owned by a co-op of 71 farmers, is part of a growing niche in agriculture. Although genetically modified corn and soybeans occupy about 90 percent of the market, non-genetically modified crops are an increasingly popular option for U.S. growers.

"We've always had non-GMOs, but we're probably going to see more of an uptick in terms of planting," said Joe Parcell, an agricultural economist at the University of Missouri.

Rising interest might be driven in part by labeling initiatives across the country. More than 20 states have or will propose bills requiring labels for food that contains genetically modified products. In early June, Connecticut passed the first widespread labeling law, although it won't take effect until neighboring states follow suit. Last week the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved the use of labels for meat certified GMO-free by the Non-GMO Project, and restaurant chain Chipotle voluntarily started labeling menu items that contain genetically modified ingredients.

However, Parcell said he doesn't expect to see the passage of a similar labeling bill in Missouri anytime soon. The agricultural industry has a significant presence in the state, with Missouri ranked seventh in soybean production and the multinational agricultural giant Monsanto based in St. Louis.

Even non-GMO facilities such as Premium Ag are a rarity in the state. According to the Non-GMO Sourcebook, Missouri has only 13 suppliers of non-genetically modified crops, compared with 29 in Iowa and 31 in Illinois.

Genetically modified crops were introduced for commercial use in 1994 with the development of Monsanto's Roundup Ready soybeans. Conventional seeds were injected with a gene that made them
resistant to Roundup, a widely used herbicide. This allowed farmers to spray entire fields, preventing weed growth without damaging the crop. Roundup Ready corn was introduced in 1998, and by 2000, genetically modified crops were the norm in corn and soybean production because of the convenience of the technology and the belief that the seed was higher-yielding.

The technology has attracted criticism for crossing biological barriers: Genetically modified crops can contain genes from multiple organisms, which is not possible via conventional breeding methods. Europe and Asia have long been wary of genetically modified crops, and Premium Ag Board President Scot Shively estimated that 35 percent of seed his facility processes is exported to Asian countries.

Shively said he expects the U.S. market to grow as Americans become more ingredient-conscious and health-focused stores such as Whole Foods grow in popularity. "We thought it would be something consumers would be wanting," said Susan Bentley, Premium Ag's administrative assistant.

Shively said higher prices for conventional corn and soybeans also are a factor: Premiums are around $2 a bushel, on top of the going rate of $14 to $15 a bushel.

"Two or three years ago, bigger companies weren't offering premiums, but now they're getting into that game," said Shively, who farms 1,200 acres near Shelbyville.

Although non-genetically modified crops bring higher prices, they can also cost more to maintain. Boone County farmer John Sam Williamson, who grows Roundup Ready soybeans on 1,400 acres in the Missouri River bottoms, said the premium offered for non-GMO crops isn't high enough to make him reconsider his choice of seed.

"Non-GMs cost more to produce and have a smaller yield," Williamson said. "It's not economically feasible."

Grover Shannon, a soybean geneticist and breeder at MU, said the perception that genetically modified varieties have better yield doesn't always turn out to be true. "There are some very competitive non-GM varieties," he said. "But nobody knows that story because everybody's testing GMOs."

Shannon said most funding for conventionally bred crop research comes from public universities, whereas agribusinesses can devote millions to researching GM crops. "GMOs have the advantage because that's 90 percent of the market," he said.

Despite growing interest in conventional crops, Parcell suspects most Missouri farmers will continue to grow GMOs. "Farmers will pay for yield no matter where the genetics come from," he said.
Gary Pinkel fan has stats on his side

By BILL CLARK

Monday, June 24, 2013 at 2:00 pm

Jim Larsen, a 1969 graduate of the University of Missouri, a former track man and an "M" Club member, lives today in Minden, Nev.

He's a devoted Tiger fan and proud of it. He's also a fan of Tiger football Coach Gary Pinkel.

Jim is a Michigan native who spent two years playing football and running middle distances at Grand Rapids Junior College. When two of his football buddies accepted pigskin scholarships at MU, he came along to run the half-mile and as a two-year member of the 4x800 relay team.

He earned a degree in business administration and enjoyed a 40-year career with State Farm Insurance Cos., 25 in Kansas City, a decade in St. Louis and in Connecticut before retiring to the Reno area, near the Larsens' two children, Betsey and Blake.

A friend in Columbia sent Jim a copy of Ol' Clark's recent column about MU football as seen through the eyes of a Sporting News reporter. He came to the defense of the Tigers and Coach Pinkel, doing it in proper fashion — with the facts of performance past.

Following is his letter:

"After reading your June 3, 2013, article, I was reminded of a conversation at a friend's home not long ago. Our host asked my wife, "How's Jim?" Without hesitation she replied, 'How's Jim — compared to what!?'

"So here I am asking myself, 'How's my coach?' — compared to what!

"Mizzou has a long (122 years) and proud history. From 1890 to 2012 there have been 31 head football coaches. Of the 31 head coaches only 3 have served 10 or more years. Don Faurot 19 years, Dan Devine 13 years and Gary Pinkel 12 years. Both Coach Faurot and Coach Devine are in the College Football Hall of Fame.

"The coaches with the total wins:
"Don Faurot — 101 wins, 5.3 per year.

"Dan Devine — 93 wins, 7.1 per year.

"Gary Pinkel — 90 wins, 7.5 per year.

"I suspect 2013 will be the year that Coach Pinkel passes Coach Devine in total wins; in less time, 12 years versus 13. And, I feel certain coach Pinkel will become the winningest coach in Mizzou history, passing Coach Faurot, this season or next.

"Mizzou has played in 29 bowl games.

"Coach Faurot — 4 Bowls

"Coach Devine — 6 Bowls

"Coach Pinkel — 8 Bowls

"Two other issues should also be considered:

"1. Student athlete graduation rates have never been better. I believe Mizzou is in the highest group of universities nation wide. The Total Person Program has helped student athletes accomplish their educational goals in every college within the University.

"2. Financial contributions seem to be at an all-time high. The sports park is improving and expanding at an unprecedented pace.

"It would appear to me the Mizzou football program is in very capable hands with Coach Pinkel.

"Objective observers realize that this is a time of transition from the long and proud history of Mizzou football to an even better future.

"If there is to be a change in our head football coach, I hope it will be after Coach Pinkel becomes the longest tenured football coach in Mizzou history."
CHONGQING, China — On the outskirts of this sprawling megalopolis of 29 million in southwest China stand a pair of college campuses — one representing education's past in the world's most populous country, and the other, perhaps, its future.

In its mission and dreary name, the College of Mobile Telecommunications is typical of China's hundreds of Soviet-era universities: rote learning, hyper-specialization and a lock-step course of study for all.

On a hill above it, surrounding a secluded courtyard, stands Yuanjing Academy, a new experiment with a very different feel. Here, college students take a broad array of subjects their first year, in small classes, learning to do things like argue about literature and play the guitar.

"We are adults," said Zhang Panyu, an 18-year-old student whose reading of "Jane Eyre" helped him navigate his own first romance. "We need to know something about everything."

The Great Recession began in late 2007 with the near-collapse of the global financial system, depressing economies and employment worldwide. It also drove millions more than ever before to seek higher education. Global enrollment is closing in on 200 million, after passing 100 million barely a decade ago. In the United States it surged by 3 million — 18 percent — during the last few years of economic turmoil.

Yuanjing shows how different countries are drawing different lessons from recent economic history about what to study and what kind of knowledge will drive future economic growth.

In the United States — where top schools have long championed a liberal style of learning and broad education before specialization — higher education's focus is shifting to getting students that first job in a still-shaky economy.
Broad-based learning and the liberal arts and sciences are losing favor with students and politicians. Tuition is so high and the lingering economic distress so great that an education not directly tied to an occupation is increasingly seen as a luxury.

Elsewhere in the world, there is a growing emphasis on broader learning as an economic necessity.

In Europe, where for centuries students have jumped straight into specialized fields and studied little else, recent changes have pushed back specialization, making more room for general education. In Africa and the Middle East, experiments are moving away from a relentlessly narrow education tradition. And on a much bigger scale, China is breaking down the rigid disciplinary walls that have long characterized its higher education system.

The trend is far from universal; many countries remain urgently focused on narrow skills and job-training.

But advocates in a broad range of places around the world hear employers demanding the "soft skills" — communication, critical thinking, and working with diverse groups — that broad-based learning more effectively instills. These advocates argue their countries need job-creators, not just job-fillers. They think the biggest innovations come from well-rounded graduates — from empathetic engineers, say, or tech-savvy anthropologists.

There's "a weird symmetry" at work in the educational world, says Columbia University professor Andrew Delbanco, author of "College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be."

As people in the United States "talk less and less about the value of liberal education," he said, "our so-called economic competitors talk about it more and more."

**Emphasis on jobs**

Though the United States invented broad-based learning, getting a job has always driven Americans to college and affected what they study, says researcher Arthur Levine.

Now head of the New Jersey-based Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which supports leadership development in education, Levine has tracked students' attitudes toward college since the 1960s. He takes an even longer view than that: Even the medieval theologians reading Latin at the first universities wanted secure work in the church, he notes.

Still, something has definitely changed.
As recently as the 1970s, fewer than half of U.S. college students felt increasing earnings was the chief benefit of college, his research has found. Now, about two-thirds do.

A national survey of U.S. college freshmen shows a jump in such attitudes starting in 2007, when the economy turned. About three-quarters of freshmen want colleges to provide more specialized career training.

"There's just been a lot more emphasis in the kitchen-table conversations about choosing a college and choosing a major that is a clear path to a good-paying job," said Richard Ekman, president of America's Council of Independent Colleges. "That has shown up in the pattern of majors and in the choice of institutions."

And it has shown up at a place called the University of Farmers.

It's not actually a single place — there are two campuses, one in California, the other in a suburban office park beside the Grand Rapids airport in Michigan. And it's not officially a university, but rather Farmers Insurance's much-praised corporate training operation.

Michael Hoffman, 29, started working at Farmers two years ago but hit a ceiling without a degree. He's one of thousands of employees Farmers is helping pursue their diplomas. In Michigan, many shuttle between the Farmers training program and nearby Davenport University, which awards the degrees.

Farmers will support degrees in a range of fields, and emphasizes that specialized business degrees aren't required to work there. But virtually all choose business.

Some, including Hoffman, are in a new management program that focuses them even more narrowly: They are essentially majoring in insurance.

"I want what's going to be specifically oriented to my career and my career goals," Hoffman said, explaining a curriculum focused on things like underwriting regulation, ethics and licensing. And with an infant at home, "Really, that's all I have time for."

With tuition up 27 percent above inflation over the last five years, and students' combined debt now exceeding $1 trillion, students are demanding specialized, job-focused offerings. Colleges have obliged:

- Over the last decade, the number of academic subjects tracked by the U.S. government has expanded about one-fifth, with 354 new and increasingly specialized subjects identified since 2000.
The fastest-growing majors in the United States are mostly tied narrowly to professions, areas like homeland security, law enforcement and firefighting (up 76 percent over the last decade); health professions (up 60 percent) and parks, recreation, leisure and fitness studies (up 90 percent). The largest undergraduate major by far is business, accounting for nearly one-quarter of U.S. degrees.

The share of four-year degrees in the general arts and sciences has held fairly constant; some fields, like psychology, have even grown. But overall, humanities like literature and philosophy have suffered. Harvard reported this month that one-third fewer students enter planning to major in the humanities than did in 2006.

American politicians are encouraging the trend of practicality in higher education. The governors of Florida and North Carolina have pushed to shift state funding away from liberal arts subjects to programs that lead more directly to jobs. A half-dozen states now publish employment and earnings outcomes, broken down by school and degree program, for new graduates.

On average, people with career-focused degrees do have higher earnings and lower unemployment — at least out of the gate, according to research by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. But how majors affect careers over the long-term is harder to pin down.

Employers lament a technical skills gap that left millions of jobs unfilled even at the peak of unemployment in the Great Recession. But in surveys, they also complain students aren’t well-rounded enough — lacking an ability to communicate and continue to learn. A recent employer survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found 93 percent reported that capacities to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems were more important than undergraduate majors.

Association of American Colleges and Universities President Carol Geary Schneider said even seemingly staid fields like insurance are evolving rapidly, and will require sharp and creative thinking. Students can get broad learning in focused degrees, but too often don’t. "Employers are saying to us, 'We don't want to hire people who have been locked into mental cubicles,'" Schneider said. "The best way to be locked into a mental cubicle is to study only one subject and look at it only from a particular point of view."
Another price, Levine said, is too many students studying subjects they aren't passionate about, and failing to grasp that — while majors matter — a strong liberal arts major complemented with a more practical minor or a foreign language remains desirable in the job market.

"Part of it is overreaction," Levine said of the trend. "Part of it is lack of knowledge about what it takes to get a job. And part of it is these are really scary times."

Frank Novakowski, an associate Davenport dean, says the school's curriculum injects broad-based learning throughout its curriculum. But he also calls Davenport pragmatic, noting Farmers is halfway through hiring 1,600 new workers here.

"People are getting really serious about 'what am I getting an education for, and what am I going to do after?' " he said. "And if the kids aren't asking, their parents are."

Shift to liberal arts
"University of Farmers" actually has a Chinese ring to it. In its once tightly planned economy, China's universities churned out graduates for specific lines of work. Universities often were overseen by a national ministry or trade agency. Their names say it all: Chongqing Nanfang Translators College, Nanjing Audit University, North China Electric Power University.

Yuanjing founder Peng Hongbin excelled in that system, studying at a prestigious university and, after a government job, later getting rich in the flooring business. But he doesn't credit his education for his success: Under the rote learning style he never learned to speak up.

"China does not teach you how to communicate," said Peng, who in 2007 bought the telecommunications college when it went private and, five years later, founded Yuanjing on the hill above it.

Now, he's a leader in an effort to bring broader-based, liberal-arts style learning to China's education system.

His academy picks 150 students from the freshman class of 5,000 at the telecommunications college, which also is undergoing changes, adding clubs, sports, community service and art appreciation.

"For a country to innovate, to be creative, it needs imagination, not a knowledge and know-how from a specific field of study," he said.
His advisers include a Dutch academic named Hans Adriaansens, who on a recent sunny afternoon sat in the checkered shadow of a traditional Buddhist "Bodhi" tree of wisdom on the Yuanjing's campus, talking to students about their ambitions, work and daily worries. Adriaansens' journey is a kind of microcosm of the global movement. Decades ago he studied at American campuses including Harvard and Smith College, falling in love with liberal arts learning. He struggled for decades to bring the model to Europe, where students historically have been channeled into specialties as early as age 12.

"When I started, everybody was against it, even at my own university," he said.

But in recent years, he's helped leading Dutch universities install liberal arts colleges within their campuses. Now, Europe-wide changes he's encouraged have opened space during the first years of higher education for broader learning, delaying specialization. Singapore and Hong Kong have made similar moves.

Elite St. Petersburg State University in Russia recently opened its first liberal arts faculty, and there are similar projects in Poland, Slovakia and even Germany, which invented the rigid disciplinary model. Jonathan Becker, the vice president for international affairs at Bard College in New York who has worked in Europe for decades, says it's no accident that the St. Petersburg effort's been led by a former Russian finance minister.

"They realize," Becker said, that "narrow boundaries of disciplines are not the answer to modern world problems."

Not every country is embracing the trend. In much of the world, facing crippling high youth unemployment, broad-based or liberal-style learning is still viewed as an unaffordable luxury. India's development efforts are focused on vocational training for 500 million people by 2022. Turkey is rapidly expanding vocational training, while Rwanda is focused on information technology, agriculture and tourism.

Still, from Morocco to Saudi Arabia to Malaysia, experiments in broader-based learning are expanding. And China is the movement's promised land. Leaders may not have fully considered the potential political implications of liberal education, but they've endorsed the economic case. They want China to invent the next iPad, not build the last one.

Change is apparent not just at experiments like Yuanjing but across China's big public universities. Hangzhou's Zhejiang University in eastern China, for example, has reduced the number of majors from more than 200 to seven general directions.
"It's new to them but, to my surprise, it's going much faster than it went in my country," Adriaansens said.

There is no suggestion that the Chinese system yet resembles the traditional American one, or will soon.

"The 12 years of education has not given our students the habit of thinking," says Bai Fengshan, who is leading a new liberal arts curriculum at prestigious Tsinghua University, traditionally known for technology and engineering. "They simply take whatever is given. They can tell when what's given is bad, but they don't know why."

Students "lack the ability to be critical," he said, "which is different from the ability to criticize."

He is committed to the transition.

"When a person leaves the university," he says, "he or she should be a whole person."
Employers seek college graduates who can think fast, work in teams

BY PAUL WISEMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

No MU mention

WASHINGTON — They can get good grades, earn a diploma and breeze through that campus rite of spring, the job interview. But college graduates still might not land a decent job.

The world’s top employers are pickier than ever. And they want to see more than high marks and the right degree.

They want graduates with so-called soft skills — those who can work well in teams, write and speak with clarity, adapt quickly to changes in technology and business conditions and interact with colleagues from different countries and cultures.

"Soft skills tend to differentiate good college graduates from exceptional college graduates," says Joseph Krok, university research liaison at Britain’s Rolls-Royce.

To find out what employers are seeking from university graduates around the world, The Associated Press talked to dozens of corporate recruiters, university career counselors, economists and students. What’s clear is that companies increasingly want skills that don’t show up in a college transcript or a sit-down interview.

"What the employers want is a well-rounded student," says Jean Manning-Clark, director of the Colorado School of Mines’ career center. "The ones that get 10 to 12 job offers are the ones who have strong soft skills."

And companies are going to ever-greater lengths to identify the students who have the right mix of skills by observing them in role-playing exercises to see how they handle pressure and get along with others, relying more on applicants who have already proved themselves
in internships and co-op jobs in which students work while attending school, and organizing contests that reveal how students solve problems and handle deadline pressure.

"It used to be that the interview itself was where you made or broke your chances with a company," says Dan Black, head of campus recruiting in the Americas for the accounting and consulting firm Ernst & Young. "Now the assessment is a much longer and broader process."

More than a major
The hiring process is more intense because employers the world over are more demanding.

They've always needed people with specific technical skills. Those remain important, but employers want something more — the soft skills that determine whether recruits can get along with co-workers, articulate ideas, engage in critical thinking and solve problems on the fly. In short, whether employees can make the transition from classroom to workplace.

Globally, employers say it's hard to find that right combination of hard and soft skills. Just 43 percent of the 2,832 employers McKinsey surveyed in nine countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas said they could find enough skilled entry-level workers.

Mona Mourshed, leader of the education practice at the global consultancy McKinsey & Co., remembers one employer saying: "I have never fired an engineer for bad engineering, but I have fired an engineer for lack of teamwork" ... People have to work together. They have to collaborate."

A survey of employers released in April by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 93 percent of the respondents reported that a capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems was more important than an undergraduate major.

"Many technical programs around the world have historically focused more on technical depth," says Paul McIntyre, vice president in charge of global recruiting at oil giant BP. "We've been communicating to universities the importance of soft skills."

Mixing it up
Knowing that college transcripts don't tell the whole story, companies are looking for creative ways to identify the talent they need. "The old approach doesn't find them," says John Sullivan, a management professor at San Francisco State University.
British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline likes to see first-hand how students mix with others, think on their feet and handle pressure. After it narrows its job applicants, Glaxo brings in groups of 10 to 12 for a full day’s assessment. Glaxo managers observe as recruits interact with each other, solve problems and give presentations. Usually, half get hired.

Having a successful internship with Glaxo increases the odds; interns have shown whether they fit in. "We love our internship and co-op programs," says John Sweney, who heads Glaxo’s talent program. "We want to fast-track those people."

Indeed, companies are becoming more reliant on internships. Rolls-Royce’s Krok calls them "three-month interviews." Manning-Clark, of the Colorado School of Mines, says former interns used to account for about half the recruits companies wanted to hire; now, it’s about 75 percent.

Tata Technologies, the Singapore-based engineering arm of India’s Tata Group conglomerate, hires 500 graduates every year in India and another 15 to 20 in North America. "We always look for the ones that have co-op experience or internship experience," says Giulio Desando, a human resources manager at Tata. "They have the soft skills."

At Denmark’s Maersk Oil, global recruiter Lee Paul Milligan advises students to let employers know if they’ve spent a lot of time abroad. "An international mindset is important to us," he says. "You go to any office in the world, and you’ll find a huge variety of nationalities. I think I’ve got 10 in my own office ... Some students forget to put down that they’ve traveled to 10 countries."

Milligan is especially impressed with foreign exchange students, saying it takes courage to uproot yourself and study abroad, perhaps learning in a language that is not your own.

One of Maersk’s recent hires is Luzana Costa, who left her native Angola at age 13 to attend school in Philadelphia. She wound up with a master’s in applied geosciences from the University of Pennsylvania and joined Maersk last July as a geologist, working first in the Angolan capital Luanda and later at Maersk headquarters in Copenhagen.

**Killing zombies**

Maersk also finds talent by sponsoring competitions.

Last year, it challenged students at Danish Technical University to help solve a problem that had been plaguing one of its North Sea oil rigs for months. Seeing the students compete
helped Maersk Oil "get to know them on a more personal level," Milligan says. "We're benefiting; they're benefiting."

BP challenges students from universities in the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, the United States and Trinidad and Tobago to offer innovative solutions to technical problems. The winning team from each country gets to go on what BP calls "the Ultimate Field Trip" — a two-week paid internship with BP operations in London, Scotland's Shetland Islands and Stavanger, Norway. BP has offered jobs to several of the contestants.

Google sponsors an annual competition that requires programmers from outside the company to solve algorithmic problems. Called Code Jam, the contest has been around since 2003 and last year drew nearly 21,000 contestants. Google has hired 1,000 Code Jam participants since 2009.

The contest "allows us to see how creatively people can solve problems, their ability to think creatively and solve tough, algorithmically difficult problems," says Lysandra Donigian, Google's student outreach manager. "Googlers get a chance to interact with the coders, so they get a chance to see if they would fit in."

The contest is meant to be fun. Last year's finals required competitors to design programs to kill zombies as they clambered out of the grave, among other challenges. The allure of the contest almost backfired with one recruit, though. Donigian says it took several years for Google to convince a two-time winner to accept a job. Joining Google, he complained, would leave him ineligible for Code Jam.