University of Missouri prevails in syllabus suit

COLUMBIA, Mo. • The University of Missouri has prevailed in a public records lawsuit filed by an education advocacy group that sought access to professors’ copies of course outlines.

A Boone County Circuit Court judge recently rejected the National Council on Teacher Quality's efforts to compel release of copies of course syllabuses under the state's open records laws. University of Missouri system President Tim Wolfe disclosed the favorable ruling in an email to university employees last week.

The council sought the records as part of its nationwide effort to monitor what aspiring teachers learn in college. The university contended that the documents are intellectual property legally protected under federal copyright law.

The council released its review in June, concluding that college programs that train future teachers don’t adequately prepare them for the classroom.
The University of Missouri System on Friday announced the appointment of a 18-person committee to find a new chancellor for the Columbia campus.

The University of Missouri search committee made up of faculty members, staff, students, alumni, donors and retirees will be co-chaired by system curator Ann Covington of Columbia and Dean Mills, dean of the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

“By empowering such a diverse committee of Missourians who share a passion for the university to help identify the very best candidates, we will ensure that we will achieve excellence in the next MU chancellor,” System President Tim Wolfe said in a statement.

The new chancellor would replace, nine-year veteran Chancellor Brady Deaton, who last month announced his retirement, effective in November.
MU Faculty Council hears about academic award for football program

By Karyn Spory

Saturday, July 27, 2013 at 2:00 am

The University of Missouri is continuing to show that student athletes are first and foremost students and that some of their greatest accomplishments are within the classroom.

Brian Maggard, executive associate athletic director, said football Coach Gary Pinkel received a letter congratulating the MU football team on receiving the APR Public Recognition Award. The award is given annually by the NCAA to honor teams earning multiyear Academic Progress Rates in the top 10 percent of all squads in each sport, according to the NCAA website.

"I think this displays the commitment both the academic institution and athletic department have toward the academic success of its student athletes," Maggard said.

Maggard said it's also an opportunity to recognize the coaches for their leadership. "So often a coach is identified for his or her loss record. I think what this effort does is show the public these coaches are highly supportive of the academic endeavors and successes of the student athletes as well," he said.

Although the recognition is directed toward the head coach, Maggard said it is a testament to the hard work and efforts of so many people.

On Thursday, Maggard and Athletic Director Michael Alden met with the MU Faculty Council to update them on athletic endeavors across campus, which included discussing MU's Academic Progress Rate as calculated by the NCAA.

This year, MU received an average APR score of 989.37 out of a possible 1,000 and was second behind Vanderbilt in APR rankings for the Southeastern Conference.

"It allows us to know how do we rank among our conference brethren," Maggard said of the score.
Lori Franz, a professor of management at MU and the NCAA faculty representative of the Intercollegiate Athletic Committee, which advises the chancellor on matters relating to intercollegiate athletics, also met with Faculty Council.

Franz said the athletic department has established three core values: academic integrity, social responsibility and competitive excellence. "I don't think of our 502 student athletes, I don't think there's one who wouldn't say they've been told that many, many times," she said.

Franz said every year she surveys the student athletes about their experiences. One of the questions new to the survey this year asks the student athletes how they perceive themselves — as athletes or student athletes. Franz reported that, out of the respondents, 95 percent saw themselves as student athletes.

This article was published in the Saturday, July 27, 2013 edition of the Columbia Daily Tribune with the headline "Football program scores: Academics are being noticed."

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Posted in Education on Saturday, July 27, 2013 2:00 am.
Three MU education professors land large research grants

By Karyn Spory

Sunday, July 28, 2013 at 2:00 am Comments (32)

Three University of Missouri education professors recently received research grants of more than a million dollars from the U.S. Department of Education.

Erica Lembke, associate professor of special education; Wendy Reinke, associate professor in the School of Psychology; and Keith Herman, professor of counseling psychology, each received a grant for a multi-year project that will support teachers in the classroom.

Lembke received a three-year, $1.5 million grant for her work, "Supporting Teachers' Data-Based Instruction in Early Writing: Tools, Learning, and Collaborative Support." Lembke and her project partner, Kristen McMasters, an educational psychology professor at the University of Minnesota, will work with Columbia Public Schools and a school district in Minneapolis to help teachers do a better job of helping struggling writers in first through third grade.

"Writing is sort of an under-researched area; it's a real need," Lembke said.

Lembke said the purpose of the project is to help teachers by providing them with ways to monitor the progress of their students and by providing a "tool box" of intervention ideas to help get the students on the right track.

"We're going to help provide them interventions that are evidence-based to make sure they are using best practices with the students," Lembke said.

Lembke said she and McMasters revised and resubmitted the grant proposal several times. "In this case perseverance paid off," Lembke said.

Lembke said the grant also was special because the number of grants funded by the Department of Education has decreased. "Because of sequestration they had fewer funds than usual, and so we were really pleased, in a year of poverty, to be funded," Lembke said.
Reinke received a three-year, $1.5 million grant for her project, "The Classroom Checkup: Supporting Elementary Teachers in Classroom Management Using Web-Based Counseling System."

Reinke said the purpose of the project is to find ways to help teachers in elementary school who are struggling with classroom management, "but doing it in a way where they don't need experts on the ground to support the process."

Reinke said she developed a consultation model as part of her dissertation. "We've only really implemented it with teachers who had behavioral expertise — like a masters or Ph.D — we're hoping to simplify the model enough so it can be disseminated more widely and support more teachers," Reinke said.

Herman received a four-year, $2.9 million grant for his project, "Evaluation of a Classroom Management Training Program for Middle School Teachers."

Reinke, who is married to Herman, said her husband will evaluate CHAMPs, a classroom management program. CHAMPs is an acronym that stands for Conversation Help Activity Movement Participation. It was developed by Randy Sprick and gives teachers strategies on how to elicit desirable classroom behavior.

"This will be the first trial evaluating it in that way," Reinke said.

Reinke said the CHAMPs curriculum will be taught to half of the middle school teachers in the project, and the other half will be the control group. "We will do behavioral and academic assessments of the students as well as measuring the use of classroom management strategies," she said.

Reinke said at the end of the trial, Herman will be able to tell if those receiving the training implement more effective practices, and, in return, if those students have better academic and behavioral outcomes.

This article was published in the Sunday, July 28, 2013 edition of the Columbia Daily Tribune with the headline "MU research boosted by large grants: Three professors get federal funding awards."

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Posted in Education on Sunday, July 28, 2013 2:00 am.
MU evaluates test of new alert system

By Mollie Barnes
July 26, 2013 | 5:49 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Thanks to MU’s new alert system vendor, Blackboard Connect, there might be less instances of students tromping through the snow to class only to find out classes were canceled. But there will still be some who don’t receive the text alerts.

MU was evaluating Thursday’s test of a new alert system’s texting feature. Anecdotal evidence pointed toward the new program getting more messages through at a faster rate than the old program, but official statistical evidence was unavailable at this point to tell for sure what times messages were received.

With the previous system, many people signed up for the alerts didn’t receive them at all. Terry Robb, an MU Division of Technology spokesman, said he compared the report from Thursday’s test to the report from Feb. 21 when an alert was sent out announcing school was back in session after a winter storm.

"I never got my text message with the Feb. 21 alert at all," Robb said. "And I’m the administrator."

Robb said he received Thursday’s alert test message within one minute after it was sent.

Of the 14,741 people signed up to receive text alerts, 11,868 texts were sent Thursday as a test of the new system through Blackboard Connect, Robb said.

That means 2,873 text messages were not sent out. Robb said he does not know why those weren’t sent, but he said he is going to find out the reason for the discrepancy with his contacts at Blackboard in order for it to be fixed so everyone who signed up for text messaging receives an alert.

But even if all the texts are getting sent out, MU cannot verify whether some texts were received because once they send the texts, phone companies sometimes decide the messages are spam and do not push them through to people, he said.
"They were successfully sent to 99 percent of the 11,868 we sent Thursday," Robb said.

When 40 people around campus were asked Friday when they received the messages, 15 said they received a message before 9:05 a.m., which is within 15 minutes of the original message being sent. Fifteen people surveyed were not signed up to receive the text messages at all. Two said they received the messages in the afternoon and both said they use AT&T.

Eight people said they were signed up for the alerts, but never got them. Three used AT&T, one used Sprint, one used T-Mobile and three declined to say which phone company they used.

There were different reasons as to why some of the messages weren’t sent. About 100 numbers were invalid, Robb said. In addition, some numbers were international phone numbers and texting was not enabled on them, he said.

There are two methods of sending text messages to people. One method sends the messages as a SMS text from Blackboard, and the other sends the messages through an email address. Based on anecdotal results, the SMS message seemed to come within one to five minutes and the messages via email came an average of ten minutes after the SMS message, Robb said.

The SMS message will be the preferred method in the future, but he said many statistics about the delivery of these messages are unavailable to MU. The SMS messages seemed to be coming in a lot faster, he said. But administrators can’t know exactly what time everyone is getting the message on average because it depends on whether the phone company sends the messages through or treats them as spam. Robb said his office can only see when and if the messages were sent out.

"It looks generally all right," Robb said.

He said MU plans to do a campus wide test in September or October when more people are signed up for the program to get a more accurate count of how the program will function.

It’s too early for him to say for sure whether the program works better than the old one because he said he doesn’t know the new program that well yet. But given the speed and the accuracy of the people he talked to, he said he thinks it’s going to work out just fine.

People can sign up for the text message alerts on MU Alert’s website.

Supervising editor is John Schneller.
Middle school students learn leadership at camp

By Karyn Spory

Saturday, July 27, 2013 at 2:00 am

Maude Chibnall-Voltmer, an incoming seventh grader at West Middle School, looked around the circle of her peers as she held a ball of yarn in her hands.

"I learned a little change can make a big impact," she said before tossing the ball of yarn to another student across the room.

Maude was one of 22 middle school-aged children who attended the inaugural Truman Leadership Program, which was conducted by graduate students at the University of Missouri's Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs.

Yesterday, before the campers left Memorial Union for the final time, they sat in a circle and tossed the ball of yarn as they described what they learned during the week. Each person held onto part of the yarn, intertwining it from person to person, thus creating a web of leadership.

"Think about if a community was sitting on top of the web," co-director Megan Ogar said. "If even two of you were not holding onto the web, the community would collapse."

Ogar was trying to drive home the theme of the program: Each individual matters to a community, and each person can make a difference.

"When you go back to school, remember this and hold up your end of the string," she said as she tugged on her portion of the yarn.

The camp was the brainchild of Nicole Phillips, who served as co-director of the camp, along with Ogar and fellow graduate student Bryce Osman. Ogar explained that as students of the Truman School of Public Affairs, an internship is required for graduation. "Nicole approached me and told me about this idea she had about" creating a camp "and using it as our internship," Ogar said.
Ogar said from there the camp quickly evolved, and, although Phillips' idea, it really came from a place of realizing how important it is to be engaged in your community and giving back to your community. "Unless you realize that at a young age, and value it at a young age, it's probably not going to be something you value later in life," she said.

In addition to the three camp directors, six undergraduate and graduate students worked as camp leaders. Ogar said the camp leaders were "phenomenal." "They are great leaders for these kids and really great role models," she said.

Adam Schmid, a graduate student at the Truman School of Public Affairs who served as a camp leader, described the camp as a little bit of fun mixed with a little bit of education that you wouldn't necessarily get in the classroom.

"We did a lot of games and team building, making sure they had to work together and ask for other people's opinions," Schmid said.

Schmid said he's enjoyed watching the campers work together, become more vocal and more confident.

Price Phillips, an eighth grader at West Middle School, said he came to the camp because he felt he wasn't being enough of a leader at his school. "I was looking for new ways to lead my fellow students," he said. Price said one of the most important skills he picked up during the week was learning when to speak and when to listen.

The camp was open to kids entering seventh and eighth grade. Ogar said there was a $50 fee for the weeklong day camp, but scholarships were available.

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Posted in Education on Saturday, July 27, 2013 2:00 am.
COLLEGE EXPENSES: HIDDEN NUMBERS SHOCK SOME STUDENTS

The task of sending a child to college for the first time can be daunting. While students are eager and excited to begin a new chapter in their lives, it's easy to understand why parents have one question: How much is this going to cost?

Besides the set costs of tuition and housing, students face the unexpected expenses that add up in the end: books, supplies, groceries, décor, laundry, etc.

When looking at the price of college, parents and students see tuition and housing as the two main expenditures. But the cost of a meal can be more than anticipated. For example, the University of Missouri-Columbia estimates that students living on campus should spend about $8,838 per year solely on housing. All students living on campus are required to have a meal plan, which can cost an additional $2,610 to $3,450.

Living on campus does have its perks, but off-campus living can help keep costs down. Yet, there are still some surprises.

“I realized once I moved off campus that there are so many hidden costs you normally don’t think about,” said Carmen Hughes.

Hughes, a junior at MU, spent her sophomore year living in an off-campus apartment with three roommates. Hughes said that although having the freedom to relax in her own space was a plus, she did have moments where she wished she still lived on campus.

“Living in a dorm, you have the pleasure of getting up and going to the dining hall to eat, where everything is prepared for you,” she said. Off-campus, “You have to cook everything yourself.”

Hughes brings up an important expense for college students living off-campus: groceries. Although buying groceries is much cheaper than purchasing a meal plan, it is a challenge to deal with. In addition, apartment dwellers will need utensils, pots and pans, dishes, small appliances and household supplies a dorm-resident wouldn’t need.

There’s also the cost of transportation. While most first-year students choose not to bring a vehicle, off-campus students can add the cost of gas (and perhaps car payments and insurance) to their list of unexpected expenses. Hughes said that during her sophomore year, she drove an SUV, which she filled up twice a month.

Along with the cost of gas, students may have to purchase a campus parking pass to avoid the cost of parking tickets. That could run students about $120-$200 each year.
When it's time to purchase textbooks, students should think twice about which vendors will offer the lowest prices.

Jordan Hill, a sales representative at the Textbook Game, 3855 Lindell Boulevard, says that when it comes to purchasing textbooks, there are some options to consider first.

"The first mistake students make is buying their textbooks from their university bookstore," she said. "There, the university marks up the textbook prices a lot, much more than their retail value." Hill added that it would be smart for students to consider purchasing their textbooks from sites such as amazon.com, chegg.com and the Textbook Game stores.

Another option for all students is to just wait a little while. Not every professor uses the textbooks listed on their course syllabus. That alone could save students a couple of hundred dollars.

Students are told to enjoy their time in college and that the college years will be the "best of their lives." Attending a college or university should be an exciting time for students.
INTEREST RATE BILL ONLY SCRATCHES THE SURFACE OF STUDENT DEBT PROBLEM

Future college students may need to monitor the bond market almost as closely as they watch their grade-point averages.

Under a bill passed by the Senate on Wednesday, future interest rates on student loans will rise and fall with the yield on 10-year Treasury notes. That yield is close to historic lows and is likely to move higher.

That doesn’t mean students got a raw deal. The rate on subsidized Stafford loans was due to jump from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent without the bill. Now, assuming that the House goes along, the rate will drop to 3.86 percent for subsidized and unsubsidized undergraduate loans made this fall. That rate is good for the life of the loan, and future undergrad loans are capped at 8.25 percent.

Watching the bond market may actually be easier than trying to guess what Congress might do next. The old fixed rates had to be renewed periodically and were always an inviting target for deficit hawks.

“I think the philosophy behind the bill is a good one,” says Richard Vedder, an Ohio University economics professor who has written extensively about higher-education issues. “This is a way of aligning the government’s costs with the needs of students, and students should have to share in real-world economic realities.”

Opponents of the bill seized on a Congressional Budget Office projection that the measure would shrink the federal deficit by $710 million over 10 years. That amounts to balancing the budget on the backs of poor students, the critics said.

Predicting interest rates five to 10 years from now is a dicey business, though. The CBO’s projections for this year and next should be much more reliable — and the bill increases the deficit by $8.1 billion in 2013 and $12.7 billion in 2014. That’s more subsidy to students, not less.

In a sense, however, Congress did students a disservice by focusing so narrowly on interest rates. We should be more concerned about the size of the debt students are amassing than about the cost of servicing it.

According to the Project on Student Debt, two-thirds of the Class of 2011 graduated with loans, and the average debt was $26,600. The debt figure has climbed steadily along with tuition costs.
Vedder says the easy availability of federal loans — along with tax breaks and other forms of assistance — has been a major driver of tuition increases. When the government puts more money in students’ hands, colleges see a signal to raise prices.

“The student loan program has had disastrous unintended consequences that no one foresaw when we created the program,” he says. “I’d like to put less emphasis on the interest rate and more emphasis on the cost issue.”

In Warrensburg, Mo., last week, President Barack Obama also expressed concern about an “undisciplined system” that has let college costs spiral out of control. He vowed to “shake the trees” for ideas to lower tuition costs.

Vedder has a couple of suggestions: He would cut off loans at colleges that get too expensive, using the government’s clout to hold down tuition increases. And he would make colleges share in the default risk, which would penalize institutions with low graduation rates.

As Obama said in his Missouri speech, “there’s never going to be enough money” if college costs keep rising. The Senate may have passed a student-loan bill, but it hasn’t begun to deal with the real student debt problem.
ST. LOUIS RESEARCHERS MAKE A RAINFOREST-SAVING DISCOVERY

MU MENTION P. 3

Thousands of miles away, in Southeast Asia, an oil industry is booming, gobbling up giant tracts of rainforest in the process.

A St. Louis genomics company believes it has come up with a solution that could prevent further damage to the region’s sensitive — and ecologically valuable — environment.

In the past three decades, global palm oil production has quintupled, turning the humble tropical tree into a $44 billion industry.

The oil — virtually absent from products decades ago — can be found in everything now, from toothpaste to sauces, having gained traction among manufacturers because it’s cheap and shelf-stable. It is now the world’s most widely produced food oil, at about 60 million tons a year.

But the boom, like most, has come at a cost. As demand has shot up, so has the consumption of vast swaths of Southeast Asian tropical rainforest, which have been plowed under to make space for palm oil plantations. The deforestation has pushed certain species of orangutan, elephant and tiger to the brink of extinction, while slash-and-burn practices have led to smog and huge releases of climate-warming carbon.

Enter Orion Genomics.

The company and its partner, the government-funded Malaysian Palm Oil Board, just announced they have sequenced the massive palm oil genome, and have identified the gene mutations that lead to higher-yielding palm oil trees. That identification could mean fewer palm trees are needed on fewer acres, placing less pressure on rainforests while still satisfying surging global demand.

“We believe the technology is the answer,” said Nathan Lakey, president and CEO of the company, which is based in St. Louis’ Central West End. “If we can make palm trees more and more productive, that will enable us to provide enough food and biofuels on the existing planted area.”

Malaysia is the world’s second-largest producer of palm oil. It and neighboring Indonesia grow roughly 90 percent of the world’s palm oil.

The oil is often referred to as the “backbone” of the Malaysian economy, so the quasi-governmental palm oil board, which regulates the industry, also funds research to make it more efficient and profitable.
About a decade ago, the board became interested in biotechnology and sequencing, so it approached James Watson, the Nobel laureate who co-discovered the structure of DNA, and asked for his counsel. He referred them to Orion.

"We definitely could not afford a whole genome sequencing, so we realized the company offered a unique technology, where you didn't have to sequence the entire genome," said Ravigadevi Sambanthamurthi, director of the board's Advanced Biotechnology and Breeding Centre. "They had a proprietary technology where the nonfunctional part of the genome is filtered out, and we could zoom in on the expressed gene."

The palm oil tree, like a coconut tree, has a fleshy interior, a hard shell, and then a softer, fleshy exterior. It, uniquely, yields three types of fruit: one with a thick shell, one with no shell, and one with a thin shell — the latter, a hybrid of the first two, being the most productive and the one grown commercially. This hybrid produces 30 percent more oil.

While growers purchase the hybrid seeds that produce the thin-shelled variety, they end up with a dud—one of the two undesirable types — about 10 percent of the time. Because the trees are slow to produce fruit, that 10 percent ends up being quite costly and takes up valuable land.

"There's a certain amount of contamination, and you get wild trees in the mix," Lakey said. "It takes them six years to realize they have a low-yielding type, but by then you can't chop the tree down because they're too tall."

So the researchers at the board and Orion set out to determine first of all, which gene was responsible for the shell thickness, and then how mutations in that gene are responsible for differences in shell thickness, and therefore, oil yield. That was the prize target.

"When I met with the leadership," Lakey said, recounting frequent meetings, "the first questions were, 'Where are we on this project? Have you found the shell gene?'"

In late 2011 the team did, indeed, find the gene. And by 2012 it was certain of its discovery.

"We wanted to do lots of validation," Lakey said. "I didn't want to say, 'We have it' — and not have it."

The Malaysian government, according to Sambanthamurthi, has put limits on the rainforest acreage that can be developed for agriculture. That's why, she said, the finding was critical. In theory, it means no more rogue trees — only highly productive ones — and that could translate to hundreds of million of dollars for the Malaysian economy, without exploiting new lands.

The board hasn't settled on how the discovery will be utilized — how it will get into the hands of producers. But it will likely be in the form of a diagnostic test that the board will license, and for which it will receive some royalties. The board spent the last year filing patents on the gene applications and various diagnostic approaches.

The larger genome, too, could enable further research toward identifying genes that control other traits, such as tree height or drought tolerance. "Having the sequence now opens a whole new avenue of looking at other genes," Sambanthamurthi said. "The shell is just the start."
ST. LOUIS ASSETS

On the world’s scientific stage, the team was not the only one scrambling to find the “shell” gene.

“Clearly the Orion and MPOD (board) team felt pressure,” Lakey said. “There were other teams around the world looking, and with more money. We were outspent, and had to be very diligent and work very fast.”

So, in other words, Orion and the board beat some formidable researchers to the target, and its findings, published last week in the prestigious science journal, Nature, cement their discovery. At the same time, Lakey says, it helps solidify its own reputation — and its hometown’s.

“As a company this was another validation of our leadership in this space — to have such high-profile papers come out,” he said. “It will help us secure additional contracts.”

In doing the work, Orion subcontracted with several St. Louis biosciences companies, so being here was critical, Lakey said. “The St. Louis community — the broader technology community — has tremendous assets.”

Lakey would not discuss the financial terms of company’s contract with the board. But, he said, typically providers, such as Orion, are paid lucrative service fees. Often they have “milestone” or “success” fees if there are breakthrough discoveries. Sometimes the discoverer gets royalties.

“We have a deal that’s one of those combinations,” Lakey said.

Some critics have expressed concern that this discovery, or genetic manipulations in the future, could lead to more deforestation.

“Yes, increased oil production could mean fewer acres would be needed to yield the same amount of oil,” said Hank Stelzer, associate professor of forestry at the University of Missouri. “But, land ownership patterns (are) what generally drives land use. If anything, if such a palm tree was developed it could lead to speculation by others to clear more land in order to plant a commercially valuable tree.”

But for now, the board, at least, is satisfied.

“At a minimum,” Lakey said. “Our customers, they’re really happy.”
Editor, the Tribune: I'm writing to express my concerns and questions regarding the University of Missouri Police Department's jurisdiction over me and other residents of Columbia who have no involvement in the university's affairs.

I've noticed university patrol cars patrolling heavily on the stretch of Stadium Boulevard between College Avenue and Old 63.

A young female acquaintance was pulled over late one night on this stretch by a male officer, subjected to what she perceived as overly aggressive and intrusive spotlighting of her and the interior of her car, questioned repeatedly and obstinately over her drinking and drug consumption, and finally ticketed for speeding 11 mph over the limit — a familiar number to anyone who has seen the pricing brackets on the back of such summonses and dubious in my knowledge of this particular woman.

The ticket is to be handled by the city of Columbia's Municipal Court, with administrative costs to be paid for by taxpayers.

After reading the university website, MU police are considered to be in their jurisdiction on any and all public streets within or adjacent to university properties owned, leased or used by the university and also are empowered by the city (which I read as able to act as city police).

Can this be right?

If so, how does the city justify authorizing a publicly owned, for-profit entity's employees to act as law enforcement officers on private citizens?

Name withheld upon request
By JUSTIN DYER assistant professor of political science at the University of Missouri

Louis C.K. has a sketch about the advantages of being white in America.

"I'm not saying that white people are better," the comedian says. "I'm saying being white is clearly better. Who could even argue? If I could re-up, I would do it every year."

Louis teases, but, like all good comedians, he teases on the truth. Yet we often don't talk about one of the principal advantages whites enjoy in 21st century America: A white child is far likelier than his black peers to grow up in a home with his biological father.

In his recent comments on the tragic Trayvon Martin case, President Barack Obama described some of the many challenges black Americans continue to face. Young black men in particular are disproportionately the "victims and perpetrators of violence," "disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system," and disproportionately are looked at and are treated with suspicion by strangers.

One thing President Obama did not mention in his comments but has eloquently spoken about elsewhere: black children disproportionately grow up without a dad at home. This is both heart-wrenching and significant, and it is a fact often left out of our discussions of the enduring racial disparities in American life.

As the introduction to the president's Fatherhood Pledge acknowledges, "When Dads aren't around, young people are more likely to drop out of school, use drugs, be involved in the criminal justice system and become young parents themselves." Father absence destroys social mobility and creates a self-perpetuating cycle.

Absentee fathers adversely affect the life prospects of children of every race. According to the most recent government census, 24 million American children (and two out of three children in low-income families) do not live with their biological fathers. Fatherlessness is an American problem, and it touches every community.

But for a host of complex reasons — historical, political, and cultural — only about 37 percent of black children live in a home with both a mom and dad present (compared with 75 percent of white children). Even fewer black children live in homes in which their biological parents are married to each other.
President Obama is right to insist that the “poverty and dysfunction” in some black communities “can be traced to a very difficult history,” a history that includes slavery and Jim Crow. Today, disparities in family structure reinforce and deepen the disparities in income, educational attainment and incarceration rates that are partly a legacy of that difficult history. Nearly every negative life outcome correlates with father absence, and the problem becomes worse every generation.

Of course, it is much easier to diagnose a problem than to solve it. I won’t presume to know the practical answers to the myriad challenges black Americans face today. No doubt the answers are complicated.

But, in the spirit of Louis C.K.’s bit about being white, I can speak to the advantages I had growing up in the suburbs of Kansas City. One of the biggest advantages was having a dad who was home every night.

This is an element of “white privilege” not emphasized enough. White kids have much better odds of growing up in a home with both a mom and a dad.

In life’s lottery, having a father at home is like winning the jackpot. Today, white children at a higher percentage are winning.