MU communications leader Chris Koukola to retire
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BY ROSELYN ADAMS

COLUMBIA — Chris Koukola hasn't been bored in 28 years.

Koukola's job can change by the hour. One hour, she could be meeting with the university affairs staff and attending a chancellor's meeting. The next hour could be spent talking with alumni, and the next hour she could be discussing MU’s next television commercial with the marketing team.

But soon, all of that will come to an end.

Koukola will retire Jan. 31, having served as MU’s assistant to the chancellor for university affairs since 1986. Mary Jo Banken, executive director of the MU News Bureau, will fill the position in the interim.

"That's what I've liked so much over the years: It's always interesting," Koukola said. "It reflects the diversity of the university. Dealing with all the different parts — we're like our own city with different operations."

Koukola has not only guided the university's communications, but also the five chancellors she has worked with during her tenure at MU.

"Since I began working with campus administration in 1989, Chris has been my wise counsel," said Brady Deaton, MU’s chancellor from 2004 to 2013, in an MU news release. "(She's) provided me with her sound judgment in every aspect of public communication of the mission and matters critical to MU."

With rising tuition costs, Koukola foresees challenges for her successor.
"It's going to be important to help citizens understand the great benefit and value a research university brings to the state and to their own lives," she said.

Koukola said she decided she was at an age and point in her career to explore a few goals for what to do with her time in retirement.

"Not to read my email every hour," she said. "I would also like to spend more time with my family and my new horse."

Koukola, an Illinois native, will stay in Columbia and enjoy the state she fell for at junior high summer camp.

"I loved Missouri," she said. "I thought it was beautiful."

In 2009, Koukola received the Mizzou Alumni Association's Geyer Award, presented to one elected official and one citizen who have made a positive impact on higher education and MU. Prior to working at MU, Koukola served as director of information services and publications at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.
CNN analysis: Some college athletes play like adults, read like 5th-graders

By Sara Ganim, CNN

- Specialist Mary Willingham was shocked by the number of UNC athletes who struggled to read
- CNN found 7%-18% of basketball, football students in many schools read poorly
- Experts say it's hard for a busy college athlete to improve reading ability in just four years
- NCAA: Number of poor readers is small percentage of overall total of its athletes

NO MU MENTION

(CNN) -- Early in her career as a learning specialist, Mary Willingham was in her office when a basketball player at the University of North Carolina walked in looking for help with his classwork. He couldn't read or write.

"And I kind of panicked. What do you do with that?" she said, recalling the meeting.

Willingham's job was to help athletes who weren't quite ready academically for the work required at UNC at Chapel Hill, one of the country's top public universities.

But she was shocked that one couldn't read. And then she found he was not an anomaly.

Soon, she'd meet a student-athlete who couldn't read multisyllabic words. She had to teach him to sound out Wis-con-sin, as kids do in elementary school.

And then another came with this request: "If I could teach him to read well enough so he could read about himself in the news, because that was something really important to him," Willingham said.

Student-athletes who can't read well, but play in the money-making collegiate sports of football and basketball, are not a new phenomenon, and they certainly aren't found only at UNC-Chapel Hill.

A CNN investigation found public universities across the country where many students in the basketball and football programs could read only up to an eighth-grade level. The data obtained through open records requests also showed a staggering achievement gap between college athletes and their peers at the same institution.

This is not an exhaustive survey of all universities with major sports programs; CNN chose a sampling of public universities where open records laws apply. We sought data from a total of 37
institutions, of which 21 schools responded. The others denied our request for entrance exam or aptitude test scores, some saying the information did not exist and others citing privacy rules. Some simply did not provide it in time.

See the details of our findings

**Academic vs. athletic scandal**

As a graduate student at UNC-Greensboro, Willingham researched the reading levels of 183 UNC-Chapel Hill athletes who played football or basketball from 2004 to 2012. She found that 60% read between fourth- and eighth-grade levels. Between 8% and 10% read below a third-grade level.

"So what are the classes they are going to take to get a degree here? You cannot come here with a third-, fourth- or fifth-grade education and get a degree here," she told CNN.

The issue was highlighted at UNC two years ago with the exposure of a scandal where students, many of them athletes, were given grades for classes they didn't attend, and where they did nothing more than turn in a single paper. Last month, a North Carolina grand jury indicted a professor at the center of the scandal on fraud charges. He's accused of being paid $12,000 for a class he didn't teach.

When Willingham worked as a learning specialist for athletes from 2003 to 2010, she admits she took part in cheating, signing her name to forms that said she witnessed no NCAA rules violations when in fact she did. But the NCAA, the college sports organizing body, never interviewed her. Instead, it found no rules had been broken at Chapel Hill.

UNC now says 120 reforms put in place ensure there are no academic transgressions.

But Willingham said fake classes were just a symptom of the bigger problem of enrolling good athletes who didn't have the reading skills to succeed at college.

"Isn't it all cheating if I'm sitting at a table with a kid who can't read or write at college level and pulling a paper out of them? Is this really legitimate? No," Willingham told CNN. "I wouldn't do that today with a college student; I only did it with athletics, because it's necessary."

NCAA sports are big business, with millions of dollars at stake for winning programs.

In 2012, the University of Louisville earned a profit of $26.9 million from its men's basketball program, according to figures that schools have to file with the Department of Education and were analyzed by CNNMoney. That's about 60% more than the $16.9 million profit at the University of North Carolina, whose men's hoops team had the second-largest profit.

Willingham, now a graduation adviser with access to student files, said she believes there are still athletes at UNC who can't do the coursework.

UNC Athletics Director Bubba Cunningham told CNN the school admits only students it believes can succeed.
"I think our students have an exceptional experience in the classroom as well as on the fields of competition," he said.

Anecdotally, NCAA officials admit there are probably stories that are troubling, but they also say the vast majority of student-athletes compete at a high level in the classroom.

"Are there students coming to college underprepared? Sure. They are not just student-athletes," said Kevin Lennon, vice president of academic and membership affairs at the NCAA.

But he said the NCAA sees it as the responsibility of universities to decide what level athlete should be admitted to their schools.

"Once the school admits them, the school should do everything it can to make sure the student succeeds," he said. "(Universities) don't want a national standard that says who they can recruit and admit. They want those decisions with the president, provost and athletic directors. That is the critical piece of all of this."

**Scarce information**

The NCAA admits that almost 30 athletes in sports that make revenue for schools were accepted in 2012 with very low scores -- below 700 on the SAT composite, where the national average is 1000. That's a small percentage of about 5,700 revenue-sport athletes.

However, the NCAA did not share raw data. The U.S. Department of Education does not track statistics on the topic, nor do the conferences.

In fact, CNN only found one person in addition to Willingham who has ever collected data on the topic. University of Oklahoma professor Gerald Gurney found that about 10% of revenue-sport athletes there were reading below a fourth-grade level.

So, after consulting with several academic experts, CNN filed public records requests and concluded that what Willingham found at UNC and Gurney found at Oklahoma is also happening elsewhere.

The data CNN collected is based on the SAT and ACT entrance exam scores of athletes playing the revenue sports: football and basketball.

In some cases, where that information was not available, CNN then asked for aptitude test scores administered after the athlete was accepted by the university.

Based on data from those requests and dozens of interviews, a CNN investigation revealed that most schools have between 7% and 18% of revenue sport athletes who are reading at an elementary school level. Some had even higher percentages of below-threshold athletes.

According to those academic experts, the threshold for being college-literate is a score of 400 on the SAT critical reading or writing test. On the ACT, that threshold is 16.

Many student-athletes scored in the 200s and 300s on the SAT critical reading test -- a threshold that experts told us was an elementary reading level and too low for college classes. The lowest score possible on that part of the SAT is 200, and the national average is 500.
On the ACT, we found some students scoring in the single digits, when the highest possible score is 36 and the national average is 20. In most cases, the team average ACT reading score was in the high teens.

"It is in many ways immoral for the university to even admit that student," said Dr. Richard M. Southall, director of the College Sport Research Institute and a professor at the University of South Carolina.

**Scores aren't the whole story**

Officials at the universities from which CNN collected data all said they recognized the low scores -- and gave several possible reasons for them:

-- Some athletes don't aim for high scores when taking entrance exams, looking only to score high enough to become NCAA eligible.

-- Many times, low scores are indicators of learning disabilities.

-- Entrance exams are just one factor taken into consideration when deciding whether to accept a student-athlete.

The officials also said they believe excellent tutoring and extra attention from academic support allows these athletes to excel off the field as well as on, and many cited the high graduation rates of athletes.

Robert Stacey, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, said the conversation should be about the achievement gap -- the difference between the academic levels of the athletes and their nonathlete peers at the same university.

"We know how to close the achievement gap. It's just very expensive," he said. "A student who scored a 380 on his or her (SAT) critical reading is going to face tremendous challenges, won't be able to compete the first year with a student who has a 650 or 700. But with intensive tutoring -- and I'm not talking about cheating, I'm talking about tutoring -- by the time they get to be juniors, they're competing. But it's a very expensive process. It takes intensive work."

But some of the universities from which CNN sought data didn't even have remedial classes for student-athletes to attend. Athletes, many times, take the field before they even get to a classroom. And even if, over time, they can be brought up to speed, how are they getting through the first few semesters?

We found one plausible explanation at Iowa State -- where the achievement gap between students and student-athletes was fairly low.

There, any athlete who is specially admitted -- they would not have gotten in on academics alone -- is mandated to start school in the summer term, where they are given remediation.

Tom Hill, senior vice president for student affairs, said it's done partly because the school recognizes that it is simply too much to ask athletes to jump into a tough schedule of practice and games, plus keep up classwork, especially if they are already academically behind.
"We'll provide them with support and help to begin the process to shore up deficiencies," Hill said. "It's not just throwing them in there."

Hill also said that Iowa State -- a land-grant university that takes many students from small, rural towns across the state -- doesn't separate academic support for athletes from the rest of the student population. Anyone can get the same tutoring as an athlete does.

Hill, who has a long background as an administrator in college athletics, said he is well aware of the practices of pushing athletes through at more competitive schools. And he is blunt about what he thinks of it.

"Those people who do that should be arrested," Hill said. "We should make it against the law. I know it happens. I've spent time in athletics."

Former and current academic advisers, tutors and professors say it's nearly impossible to jump from an elementary to a college reading level while juggling a hectic schedule as an NCAA athlete. They say the NCAA graduation rates are flawed because they don't reflect when a student is being helped too much by academic support.

"They're pushing them through," said Billy Hawkins, an associate professor and athlete mentor at the University of Georgia.

"They're graduating them. UGA is graduating No. 2 in the SEC, so they're able to graduate athletes, but have they learned anything? Are they productive citizens now? That's a thing I worry about. To get a degree is one thing, to be functional with that degree is totally different."

Hawkins, who says in his 25 years at various universities he's witnessed some student-athletes fail to meet college reading standards, added: "It's too much for students reading below a college level. It's basically a farce."

Gurney, who looked into the situation at the University of Oklahoma, put it bluntly: "College presidents have put in jeopardy the academic credibility of their universities just so we can have this entertainment industry. ... The NCAA continually wants to ignore this fact, but they are admitting students who cannot read.

"College textbooks are written at the ninth-grade level, so we are putting these elite athletes into classes where they can't understand the textbooks. Imagine yourself sitting in a class where nothing makes sense."

**Risks and rewards**

All of the university representatives we talked to deny that their tutors do too much work for student-athletes who come in at such low reading levels.

"I lose sleep about a lot of things; I don't lose sleep about writing tutors. We are extremely strict," said Brian Davis, associate athletics director for football student services at the University of Texas, acknowledging there were, of course, challenges.
"You have to minimize the risk as much as you can. If you're signing 20 (recruits), you can't have 30 to 50% extremely at risk. It puts way too much pressure on the system. That's when you get into more nefarious issues, and I'm very proud of how we've addressed the risk factors," Davis said.

There are anecdotes of student athletes who do succeed. Christine Simatacolos, the associate athletics director for student life at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, talks of a student whose low scores fell below the college literacy threshold but who graduated from Louisiana State University and is now in medical school.

But far more anecdotes of failure were recounted to CNN during our monthlong research.

Kadence Otto, who once taught at Florida State University, recalled one situation where an academic support tutor would call every week to check up on a starting player.

"I would say, 'He's not doing well. He can't read and write.' And (the tutor) said, 'Well, we'll see what we can do,'" Otto said. That stopped with a career-ending injury. "He's worth nothing to the team, and I never once heard back from the academic support adviser. He never showed up to class again, either."

Otto, who now teaches at Western Carolina University, says that experience had a big impact.

"That's one of the reasons I got into working in corruption in college sports. Sending messages that maybe they don't really care about the athletes as people," she said. And as for claims by institutions that they can bring poor readers up to speed with tutoring, she said: "Honestly, it feels to me it's like trying to turn a Little League Baseball player into a pro."

Periodically since the 1980s, stories have surfaced of athletes who could not read.

-- Former basketball player Kevin Ross told ESPN's "Outside the Lines" about his struggles at Creighton University in the 1980s.

-- In 1989, football player Dexter Manley told Congress that he got through college and into the pros without ever learning to read.

-- Dasmine Cathey's compelling story of struggle at the University of Memphis was recounted by The Chronicle of Higher Education in 2012.

And as far back as the 1980s, faculty and staff have spoken up about illiterate athletes who are pushed through with passing grades to keep up their eligibility to play, while their reading was little addressed.

Linda Bensel-Meyers, who worked for Tennessee until 2003, said a university-hired psychologist would diagnose learning disabilities in athletes and put them in a program without the graduation requirements set for other students.

"Many of the records I looked at revealed that these athletes came to us essentially illiterate and still left the school functionally illiterate," Bensel-Meyers told CNN.

When contacted by CNN, Tennessee did not answer questions.
Then there was Brenda Monk. In 2009, the former Florida State University learning specialist told ESPN's "Outside the Lines" that she was forced to resign from the university as a cheating scandal surfaced in which the NCAA said that tutors were writing papers for athletes and giving them answers to test scores.

Monk denied the allegation that she did too much work for athletes, but she said she saw some of them reading at second- and third-grade levels.

The NCAA levied sanctions against Florida State in 2009, including vacating wins and reduced scholarships.

Florida State did not provide CNN with records in response to our request.

**Change ahead?**

In December, the Drake Group, which pushes for academic integrity in collegiate sports, organized a lobbying trip to Washington to push for an amendment to the College Education Act of 1965.

Director Allen Sack said he wants to see a College Athlete Protection Act -- legislation that would keep athletes on the bench as freshmen if they are academically more than one standard deviation lower than the average student admitted to the university.

"That's unconscionable, to bring in a young athlete who does not fit in the general profile of the student body and have them play football on national television before they've entered the classroom for the first time in the fall," Sack said.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Dent of Pennsylvania introduced legislation in the House last year that calls for a complete overhaul of the NCAA. When he talked to CNN, he cited the lack of consistency in the way recent NCAA investigations into various improprieties were handled at Auburn, Florida State, Miami, North Carolina, Ohio State and Penn State.

"I think (the NCAA) needs to be looked at. I think they need to be reined in," Dent said.

Mary Willingham went on the trip to Washington and said she came back feeling that they could make some progress in bringing change.

Others aren't so confident that a beast as big as collegiate athletics can be tamed.
CNN Finds Athletes Who 'Read Like 5th Graders'

January 8, 2014

NO MU MENTION

A CNN investigation has found many football and basketball players at big time athletics universities may not be literate above a fifth grade level. The network approached public universities with open records requests for SAT and ACT scores of athletes on those teams. Some universities refused to comply. But of those that did, between 7 and 18 percent of football and basketball players were "reading at an elementary school level." The investigation also compared overall football and basketball player SAT and ACT scores to those of other students, finding large gaps at many institutions. Universities offered a variety of reasons for admitting athletes whose test scores would raise questions about their literacy. Some said, for example, that athletes don't take the tests that seriously, aiming only to do well enough to meet National Collegiate Athletic Association minimum requirements.
New NCAA Standards Encourage Academic Shortcuts

By Brad Wolverton

NO MU MENTION

Last year the NCAA overhauled its academic standards, making it tougher for students transferring from community colleges to play Division I sports. But so far those rules have led to the creation of new shortcuts, putting community-college transfers in position to play without making the academic improvements the NCAA had sought in the first place.

To meet the new requirements, which include a minimum grade-point average of 2.5—up from 2.0 in previous years—students have adopted a variety of tactics. Among them: enrolling at multiple community colleges to avoid prerequisites or tougher courses on students' home campuses; signing up for remedial classes in condensed formats, allowing students to speed through material without always learning what they should; and changing majors to ease their entry into big-time programs.

According to the NCAA, athletes who start at two-year colleges are among the least prepared academically, graduating at rates far lower than players who qualify for major-college sports directly from high school. And many of those students were already cutting corners, loading up on physical-education classes and less-rigorous courses.

Academic advisers for two-year athletes are not against a higher bar, but they complain that the NCAA raised its requirements too quickly, and that the standards
are steeper than those for other players. They worry that many athletes in need of remediation will not have enough time to receive it while on a two-year campus.

"No one is opposed to fair academic standards," says Evans Roderick, who advises football players at Mt. San Antonio College, a prominent feeder program in California. "But if you're trying to squeeze these kids through in two years, it ain't gonna happen."

Leaders of two-year institutions have called for an academic "year of readiness," which would build in a third year toward the completion of an associate degree. Under such a scenario, the NCAA would allow students six years, rather than the current five, to complete their athletic eligibility.

"What's the holy grail about the five-year clock?" Mr. Roderick says. "The average student graduates in six years, but we're expecting athletes to do it in less."

What's at Stake

It's unclear how many students will be adversely affected by the NCAA's changes, which went into effect for students who enrolled full time after August 2012. But many community-college officials expect the impact to be significant.

Last year at least 2,500 athletes transferred from two-year colleges to the NCAA's highest levels, including some 1,000 in men's basketball and football alone.

The new rules require those players to take a more-rigorous academic load than in the past, including a course in natural or physical science. The NCAA had already expected two-year students to complete two English-composition courses as well as college-level mathematics. Starting this year, the association has put limits on physical-activity credits, allowing only two such classes to transfer.

Many two-year students have leaned heavily on classes in physical education to pad their GPAs. In recent years, 20 percent of athletes from two-year institutions
transferred at least a dozen physical-education credits, the NCAA says. In some cases, students arrived in Division I with half of their 48 hours in PE units.

"We could not in good conscience continue to let that happen," says Diane Dickman, the NCAA's managing director of academic and membership affairs. "Those students weren't getting a solid community-college experience, and they were absolutely bound to fail at the four-year institution."

Last year roughly 20 percent of junior-college athletes came to NCAA colleges with a grade-point average below 2.5, the NCAA says. That figure is not predictive of future classes, as transfers could rise to meet the new threshold. But the number could give some idea of the potential fallout.

Some of the most-prominent two-year institutions have the most at stake. Iowa Western Community College, which won the national championship in football among junior colleges in 2012, sent 18 players from that team to elite NCAA programs, including Jake Waters, who started at quarterback for Kansas State University this past season.

About half of those players did not have a 2.5 grade-point average, estimates Mike Strohmeier, the Reivers' assistant head coach and recruiting coordinator. He believes a majority of this year's class has the potential to hit that mark, but he expects to see some students settle for Division II.

"The kid who used to go to Texas Tech—now that guy's going to the University of Minnesota-Duluth," he says.

As for those still hoping to play in the Football Bowl Subdivision, some are seeking easier paths, says Ben Bannon, a former academic adviser for Iowa Western athletes. As many as 10 football players recently decided to pursue an associate-of-general-studies degree, which has a less-rigorous math component than another general-studies track that was already popular with athletes.
Football players have also taken advantage of the college's decision to merge three developmental-math classes into one course, Mr. Bannon says. Students have the potential to finish much faster, he says, but they often don't graduate prepared for math at a four-year institution.

In fact, Mr. Bannon, who recently took a job at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, worries that the NCAA's new standards may invite misconduct. He believes the system is set up to move players along academically even if they aren't always ready for the next level.

"The faculty know that these students have a scholarship offer on the line, and that puts a lot of pressure on them," he says. "You may have a professor say, 'Oh, instead of a C, I'll give him a B or allow extra credit.'"

'Is That Ethical?'

Of the roughly 350 athletes at the College of the Canyons, in California, about 90 percent have remedial needs in math and English, says Albert Loaiza, an academic counselor for athletes there.

Some of those students need as many as 25 hours of remedial classes, he says, making it nearly impossible to transfer to a four-year institution after just two years.

Some athletes are helped by the college's English department, Mr. Loaiza says, which has combined what were once three remedial classes into two. Students can take those classes during a regular semester, or register for a five-week "intersession"—something that Mr. Loaiza says an increasing number of football players have expressed interest in.

Many players have struggled with those condensed classes, he says. But some feel as if they have no choice but to take them. California does not offer athletics scholarships to two-year athletes, and many students don't have the money for an extra year of school.
Other athletes are loading up on online classes, which often cost considerably less than ones offered face to face. Mr. Loaiza says he has seen a doubling of interest in online classes among athletes in the past year. But he worries about the lack of rigor and oversight in such classes—he has heard some students say their girlfriends or others have performed coursework for them.

Players have also registered for online classes to sidestep prerequisites that the College of the Canyons requires. According to Mr. Loaiza, some colleges with online offerings do not require students to take classes in sequence—a loophole he says major-college coaches know about.

"Is that ethical? Is that right?" he says. "As an educator, I don't like it, because it doesn't prepare students for the next level."

Some community colleges don't allow such classes to count toward a student's degree. But at many NCAA colleges, Mr. Loaiza says, the credits have transferred.

**Encouraging Change**

NCAA officials say it is not their place to dictate what courses colleges accept. Their intention with the new requirements, they say, was to identify a group of students that was underperforming academically and spur it to change.

The higher standards, they say, are part of an effort to raise the academic expectations for all athletes. Among other changes, the NCAA has increased its initial-eligibility standards, making it tougher for athletes who come directly from high school to participate in Division I sports.

NCAA leaders say they debated for months about how much to increase the minimum-grade standard for two-year transfers. They settled on a 2.5, Ms. Dickman says, after noting that a much higher percentage of two-year transfers graduated from four-year colleges when they came in at that level or above.
As for students with the greatest remedial needs, maybe more of them just won't make it to Division I—or they might have fewer years of athletic eligibility when they get there.

The association considered allowing an academic "year of readiness" for students in need of significant remediation, Ms. Dickman says, but decided against it for now.

"It doesn't mean it won't ever come back again to be talked about," she says. "But we want to see the results that come out of the new standards before we consider any further changes."

The NCAA is concerned that some players might be working around its new requirements. But Ms. Dickman says she did not want that to deter the NCAA's progress.

"Because of the potential for fraud, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep setting standards that are appropriate for higher graduation rates," she says. "We can't be derailed by online-course activity that might not be as rigorous as it should be, or by someone trying to cheat the system."
The Tribune's View

‘Museum district’

By Henry J. Waters III

Tuesday, January 7, 2014 at 2:00 pm

My old friend and local historian/businessman Warren Dalton came up with another good reason to build the "museum district" on the block between Sixth and Seventh streets on Elm Street, the site of a planned new building for the State Historical Society of Missouri.

As I hope everyone knows by now, agitation is growing for locating the University of Missouri’s Museum of Art and Archaeology and Museum of Anthropology on the site as well, making a wonderful triumvirate of public attraction and research opportunity. The two university museums, recently banished from the Red Campus to the Business Loop to allow renovations to their former locations, should be brought back to campus. Creating synergism with the historical society repository of art and artifact is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

In addition, says Dalton, himself a senior citizen of less-than-original mobility, the new location would provide unmatched handicapped access. The society plan calls for underground parking, which easily could be extended beneath the entire block to serve the restored Red Campus museums as well.

It all depends on the willingness of MU to relocate staff from the aging Heinkel Building on the site, a plan long in sight. MU officials could create a three-fer; goodbye to the blight and hello to a new home for their two museums, with ideal parking access, to boot.

HJW III

Parents cannot leave a better legacy to the world than well-educated children.
For the first time in nearly six years, Boone County's unemployment rate has stayed below 4 percent for two months in a row.

Data released by the Labor Department on metro area unemployment rates indicates the percentage of job seekers without work in Columbia fell to 3.7 percent in November, down from 3.9 percent in October and 4.2 percent in November 2012. The October jobless figure was the lowest for the area since the spring of 2008, and the latest data from the Labor Department did not revise the figure.

Although the November data is preliminary and could be revised upward, the area's unemployment rate typically falls toward the end of the year as retailers add additional workers for the holiday shopping season. Employers also keep payrolls high while the University of Missouri semester keeps the area's population at its peak.

Not since late 2007 has there been a two-month string of area unemployment less than 4 percent. Columbia's jobless rate peaked at 7.4 percent in June 2009, and it typically fluctuates about a point as MU is in and out of session.

The Columbia metro area, defined as Boone County, has the lowest unemployment rate in Missouri, which recorded a 5.5 percent unemployment rate in November. The Jefferson City metro area — which includes Cole, Callaway, Moniteau and Osage Counties — had 4.8 percent unemployment in November, unchanged from October and down from 5 percent a year earlier.

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Posted in Local on Tuesday, January 7, 2014 2:00 pm.
Missouri's new director of agriculture promises good leadership for the state's leading industry. Richard Fordyce recently was appointed to the position by Gov. Jay Nixon.

Mr. Fordyce already has demonstrated his commitment to making the area better, serving on the boards for MU Extension, the Northwest Missouri State Fair and the Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri, as well as mentoring youth through FFA. His participation on the state's Soil and Water Districts Commission shows he values our natural resources.

Even more important is that Missouri farmers can be assured Mr. Fordyce will understand their needs and concerns. This is because he is one of them.

Beyond being a landowner and manager, Mr. Fordyce is a hands-on farmer who has experienced the pride in a job well done and the frustrations of markets and weather beyond the grower's control.

He will have plenty of opportunity to prove his merit at the Department of Agriculture. Former director Jon Hagler left under a cloud of controversy that included allegations of a hostile work environment and employment of inexperienced aides. The new director will do well to surround himself with capable advisers and managers.

Finally, Mr. Fordyce brings experience in the state's powerful commodity organizations, having served in the past on the Missouri Soybean Merchandising Council and National Biodiesel Board. An in-depth understanding of these industries is an asset.

Agriculture, even within the borders of Missouri, is a wonderfully complex business. Mr. Fordyce faces a steep learning curve to become familiar with all its facets that touch not
only on commerce, but also on values and social issues woven deeply into the fabric of our state.

We wish our new agriculture director the best of success. A lot is riding on his leadership.