HOUSE ENDORSES PERFORMANCE-BASED COLLEGE FUNDING

NO MU MENTION

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — The Missouri House has endorsed legislation that would implement performance-based funding for public universities and community colleges.

Under the bill advanced Monday, the schools would work with the Department of Higher Education to develop goals, such as graduation and retention rates, that would then be used to determine part of their funding.

The performance-based goals would only apply in years the state can afford to increase funding for higher education.

Missouri used performance standards to determine college funding increases during the current budget year, but the legislation would ensure the practice continues.

The bill needs one more House vote before moving to the Senate, which passed a similar measure last month. The Senate version does not include community colleges and would expire in 2016.

University funding is HB 1390

Online:

Legislature: http://www.moga.mo.gov
Lawmakers push to bar use of state aid at online university

Nixon appears in ads for WGU.

By Rudi Keller

Sunday, March 9, 2014 at 1:59 am Comments (2)

JEFFERSON CITY — Language added to the state budget with bipartisan support aims to torpedo one of Gov. Jay Nixon's pet projects — allowing state financial aid at an online university that lets students prove they know coursework from experience, before the course instruction actually starts.

Nixon's smiling face graces online ads for Western Governors University Missouri. When Nixon announced his support for the school last year, he awarded it a $4 million Community Development Block Grant to establish offices in Clayton and directed the Department of Higher Education to treat its students like those who attend public universities for financial aid purposes.

The restrictive language, added by House Budget Committee Chairman Rick Stream to the Access Missouri and Bright Flight scholarships, allows the money to be used "solely at institutions headquartered in Missouri for purposes of accreditation." Western Governors University Missouri bases its accreditation on its parent organization, Western Governors University, which has headquarters in Salt Lake City.

Lawmakers from both parties have told him they don't like the education model or that a large pool of students eligible for Access Missouri means smaller grants, Stream said.

"It's basically taking away from existing universities in our state and they are concerned about it, and I am too," he said. "Obviously they decrease and the money is not available for the students to use to go to the universities that are out there that are completely accredited and that have been out there for many years."

Changes already approved for Access Missouri helped the department implement Nixon's directive. Award levels will become equal for public and private school students beginning in the fall. To meet a legal requirement that it be "located in the state," the Coordinating Board for Higher Education in June said that an online school must have 25 employees in Missouri and enroll 750 students to qualify.

Western Governors has 88 full-time Missouri employees, including 66 faculty, and almost 1,000 students, Chancellor Angie Besendorfer said. It has awarded 400 degrees in the state and plans its first commencement in August.
The school provides a vigorous program for people seeking high-demand job skills, Besendorfer said. Students pay $3,000 every six months and may take as many courses as they wish during that period. Each course begins with examinations to measure competency and further education focuses on weak areas, she said.

To pass, students must master the entire course, not just obtain a passing average such as a C from equally weighted test scores of A and F, Besendorfer said. The average student requires three years for a degree.

"People prove what they know, learn what they don't and get a degree and that helps them advance," she said. "We are not a paper mill, absolutely not."

**The lawmakers who represent the University of Missouri campus, Democratic Reps. Chris Kelly and Stephen Webber, said they dislike the education model. A program that certifies current skills and knowledge isn't the same as an education to acquire and expand knowledge, Webber said.**

The rule allowing Western Governors students to use Access Missouri is an "end run" around the intent of the law, Webber said. "The purpose of these scholarships is to help people increase their skills or knowledge, not get them credit for something that they already know."

Kelly was harsher in his criticism. Online schools have a bad reputation as "Internet college scams" he said, with "many, many tens of billions of dollars poured down a rat hole in terms of unpaid student loans."

Allowing an online school to use Access Missouri, he said, "is like giving grants to Bonnie and Clyde."

Missouri is 39th in the nation in educational attainment, according to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. About 33.4 percent of adults have an associate’s degree or higher — about 535,000 people — and an almost equal number — estimated at 543,564 — have some postsecondary coursework but no degree.

Allowing Western Governors' students to use Access Missouri is basic fairness, Besendorfer said. On average, they are 37 years old and working full time.

"They all currently reside in Missouri right now and they pay state income taxes," she said.

**March 11, 2014**

Missouri Budget Tiff Exposes Doubts About Competency-Based Education

By Dan Berrett
In public-policy terms, competency-based education has been on a roll.

Last year federal officials opened the way for student financial aid to be awarded on the basis of direct assessments of what students learn instead of how much time they spend in a course, as is the case with traditional measures of "seat time."

A new network of institutions dedicated to that form of educational delivery announced its formation last week.

And governors in Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington State have embraced Western Governors University, which moves students through curricula based on when they demonstrate mastery of the material. Many lawmakers have promoted Western Governors as a way to increase the number of adults in their states who hold college certificates or degrees.

So it is notable that the acceptance of competency-based learning seems to have hit a snag in the Missouri legislature. And the doubts some lawmakers raised have puzzled the movement’s advocates.

A bipartisan group of Missouri representatives recently added language to a state budget bill that would make two state scholarship programs available only to students who attend institutions based in Missouri "for purposes of accreditation." Western Governors, which is based in Salt Lake City, is regionally accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

Some lawmakers expressed a desire to protect their home-grown institutions. "It’s basically taking away from existing universities in our state," Rep. Rick Stream, a Republican, told the Columbia Daily Tribune. The universities "are concerned about it," he said, "and I am too."

**The University of Missouri previously signaled a willingness to work with Western Governors. Last year an official even contested the idea that the online institution would pose a threat to the traditional university’s enrollment.**

It is unclear whether that attitude has changed. The university did not immediately respond to a request for comment.
Misgivings About Prior Learning

Other lawmakers raised questions about Western Governors’ educational quality. "The purpose of these scholarships is to help people increase their skills or knowledge, not get them credit for something that they already know," Rep. Stephen Webber, a Democrat, told the Tribune.

That critique puzzles Western Governors, said Joan Mitchell, the institution’s vice president for public relations. "We are a little surprised," she said. "It just goes to a lack of understanding of what we do and how we do it."

Being awarded credit for knowledge already acquired is a feature of prior-learning assessments, which is a form of competency-based education. But it is not one that Western Governors offers.

"We’re actually not going to make somebody sit through a course or pay for what they already know," Ms. Mitchell said. "They’ll focus on what they still need to learn."

Advocates of prior learning were also confused by the rhetoric. "It does seem kind of strange," said Pamela Tate, president and chief executive of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. "It just feels like it’s coming from another time. It isn’t recognizing the nature of the student body we have today."

Students who receive credit for prior learning earn 21 to 25 credits, said Ms. Tate, and they often persist in their studies to earn associate or bachelor’s degrees. Students who have their prior learning counted for credit will go on to learn, she hoped, "at a higher level, where they belong, rather than wasting their time on things they’ve already mastered."

The budget in Missouri has yet to be approved, but the concerns about educational quality that have been aired play on some of the underlying misgivings about competency-based education and prior-learning assessments. Similar doubts about the watering down of academic rigor have been expressed about the goal embraced by many states and President Obama to increase the number of adults who hold college certificates or diplomas.

Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, mentioned Western Governors during his State of the State address last year, describing it as a resource that would help push to 60 percent the proportion of adults in
Missouri who hold degrees. It is now about 36 percent, according to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

A spokesman for Mr. Nixon said that the governor was committed to high standards in education. "Through the curriculum it offers and the success of its graduates," the spokesman, Scott Holste, said via email, "WGU has demonstrated its ability to provide a quality online education to nontraditional students, giving those students the skills they need in order to advance their careers."

**FOUNDING FATHERS AGREED: FUNDING PUBLIC EDUCATION IS NOT A DEBATE**

Brad Desnoyer

*Brad Desnoyer is a law professor at the University of Missouri School of Law, a former attorney for the Missouri Supreme Court, and a graduate of the Francis Howell district in St. Charles County.*

Two of our greatest Founding Fathers, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, were fierce political adversaries. But in the first years of our nation, these rivals — with vastly different backgrounds and disparate political views — shared common ground. They both believed in the importance of funding public education.

Rather than squabbling, Adams and Jefferson knew that public education was at the heart of democracy. “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it,” wrote Adams. “There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.”

Jefferson, witness to the Revolution, drafter of the Declaration of Independence, and founder of the nation’s first public university, rightfully believed that it was the government and citizenry’s duty to invest tax dollars in public education: “[T]he tax which will be paid for this purpose [education] is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”
More than 200 years later, Missouri currently underfunds education based upon the very funding formula our fiscally conservative Legislature created. And the school year has been bizarre at best: Unaccredited Normandy and Riverview Gardens are busing students to neighboring school districts. The entire Kansas City School District is unaccredited, and current proposals call for the dissolution of the KCSD so that it may be replaced by private entities.

Gov. Jay Nixon recently proposed increasing state spending for K-12 education, moving us closer to meeting the state’s education funding formula. And yet certain members of the Legislature are resisting. Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, called the budget proposal “bloated” and questioned the need for more spending.

There has always been fear of bloated government. There will always be concerns of over-encroaching authority. Rightfully so. And there is a valid argument that our modern schools have failed at their mission, with high dropout rates and graduates who are barely ready for college. There is some truth to this: In recent years, American schools have been surpassed by other nations’. But a big reason for this is inequality — the wealthiest students from the wealthiest school districts still perform well. The poorest students from the poorest school districts — and there are a lot more of them — bring the average way down.

The distress of our underfunded districts does not dismiss our Founding Fathers’ call for public education. Rather it highlights the need for citizens at every level to revitalize public education. This includes parents and lawmakers, teachers and students. It includes taxpayers. And it is in everyone’s self-interest. As Adams wrote, “[E]ducation of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful, that, to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant.” Benjamin Franklin put it more succinctly: “An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.”

Public schools by their nature require tax dollars. Spending money on public schools does not inherently make them bloated, it makes them public. And while money is not the sole solution, funding will benefit our children. Any time an issue requires tax dollars, the Legislature instinctively screeches, “Money won’t help!” They are right that money alone will not miraculously fix our schools. It is not the magic cure. But necessary public funds will help our students to receive the education they, as American citizens, deserve.

Sadly lawmakers favor talking points to wisdom. They seek arguments with their supposed rivals, even in matters that great adversaries like Adams and Jefferson would never spar over — not when our children’s future is the collateral damage of their political battles.

So let me end with a few talking points in hopes of reaching wary lawmakers: Funding our public schools is the duty of our state. At the founding of this nation, the Framers of the Constitution believed in publicly educating our children. Those wise men knew funding public education was an investment in our democracy and in our future. To argue against adequately funding our schools rejects Adams and Jefferson and Franklin. Failing our students in this way is simply un-American.
Elizabeth Smart, kidnapping victim turned advocate, to speak at MU

COLUMBIA, Mo. • A woman who was the victim of an infamous kidnapping in Utah will visit Columbia on Friday to speak at the University of Missouri.

Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped at age 14 by a homeless street preacher and spent nine months in captivity before being discovered with her two captors in Utah. She released her memoir in October 2013.

Smart is now an advocate for abducted and missing children. She will appear at a Friday afternoon book signing at the campus bookstore before her evening lecture at Jesse Auditorium. Admission to the lecture is free for students with a university ID and $10 for members of the public.

Author Rebecca Skloot kicks off 'Decoding Science' symposium

Monday, March 10, 2014 | 11:12 p.m. CDT; updated 7:47 a.m. CDT, Tuesday, March 11, 2014

Rebecca Skloot, author of "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," speaks at Jesse Auditorium on Monday. Her book, which took more than a decade write and research, was a New York Times best seller. • SHELBY FEISTNER

BY JENNIFER BEATTY
COLUMBIA — Scientists' idea of communication and the public's idea of communication don't always match up — and in one case, Rebecca Skloot told a nearly-full house Monday at Jesse Auditorium, that led a man to believe his dead wife was alive and in prison.

Skloot was the first speaker of seven slated for the week-long Life Sciences and Society Symposium, "Decoding Science." The symposium addresses the communication gap between the science community and the rest of the public — and Skloot, a science writer who often bridges that gap herself, said all it takes is curiosity and some easy-to-understand language.

Skloot wrote "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," a New York Times bestseller and Columbia's One Read book in 2011. It's a non-fiction account of the tobacco farmer whose cells were taken without her knowledge in 1951 to became the first immortal cell line, HeLa.

Scientists used Lacks' cells to produce polio and HPV vaccines, and they were the first human cells to be cloned.

In the 1970s, scientists decided to track down Lacks' family to see if they had the same immortal cells, Skloot said. "At that moment there was a communication breakdown."

The Lacks family could not read or write, and the children went through school without anyone realizing they were deaf.

Lacks' husband, who only had a third-grade education, could not understand the scientist who told him his wife's cells were still alive and growing in labs. He thought they had her in a prison cell, Skloot said.

These scientists couldn't understand that the family had never heard of a cell, she said.

"Scientists didn't see any reason to explain anything to the Lacks family," she said.

Skloot said it is an exciting time for science communication. The internet and social media are helping scientists and the public mingle in an easily accessible way.

"Science is about those moments that make you say 'what?'" Skloot said."Those questions can open up a whole other world."
‘Free to Be’ Boys and Girls: 40 Years After the Failed Gender Revolution

1974's 'Free to Be... You and Me' feels like an eternity ago. And, amazingly, kids and adults have yet to morph into mutually respectful, non-gendered human persons.

This week marks the 40th anniversary of an event close to the hearts of gender activists everywhere. On March 11, 1974, ABC aired Marlo Thomas’ “Free to Be...You and Me” — a musical program celebrating gender-free children. Thomas and her fellow co-neutralists envisioned a world where the sex distinction would melt away. Instead of “males” and “females,” there would be mutually respectful, non-gendered human persons. The project resulted in a platinum LP, a best-selling book, and an Emmy. More than that, the idea of gender liberation entered the national zeitgeist. Parents everywhere began giving their daughters trucks and sons baby dolls. Like so many dream boats floating on the utopian sea, this one crashed and sank when it hit the rocks of reality.

In one “Free to Be” song, two babies discuss their life goals: the female wants to be a fireman; the male, a cocktail waitress. Another tells about a girl who liked to say, “Ladies First” — only to wind up being the first to be eaten by tigers. The songs drive home the idea that we are all androgynous beings unfairly constrained by social stereotypes. “William’s Doll” is memorable. “A doll, said William, is what I need. To wash and clean and dress and feed.” In the end his kindly grandmother buys him the coveted toy.

A few months ago, I found myself in a place William would adore: the American Girl doll palace in New York City. But nearly all the children there were girls. “They know what girls love,” said a transfixed seven-year-old girl attached to my hand. We were standing in front of a doll salon, where you could make appointments for your doll to have her hair and nails done. The hundreds of little girls in that store showed a purposefulness and sense of well-being I had not witnessed since the summer before, when I visited the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Only in Cooperstown it was little boys who were enthralled. Hundreds of them filled the shops where they carefully examined and evaluated an unfathomable number of little cards with photos and data about baseball heroes. Yes, I realize there are boys who would enjoy the American Girl doll store and girls whose dearest hope is to visit Baseball Town — but those are the exceptions. I am talking about the rule. And as a rule, the young Williams of this world do not want a doll.
“Don’t Dress Your Cat in an Apron,” another jaunty “Free to Be” song, tell us: “A person should do what he likes to. A person’s a person that way.” Well, OK, maybe sometimes. But, after 40 years of gender activism, boys and girls show few signs of liking to do the same things. From the earliest age, boys show a distinct preference for active outdoor play, with a strong predilection for games with body contact, conflict, and clearly defined winners and losers. Girls, too, enjoy raucous outdoor play, but they engage in it less. Girls, as a rule, are more drawn to imaginative theatrical games — playing house, playing school — as well as exchanging confidences with a best friend. Boys playing kickball together in the schoolyard are not only having a great deal of fun, they are forging friendships with other males in ways that are critical to their healthy socialization. Similarly, little girls who spend hours in deep conversation with other girls or playing theatrical games are happily and actively honing their social skills. What these children are doing is not only fun but developmentally sound.

The year 1974 was a long time ago. It was the Age of Aquarius, and Marlo Thomas and her friends can be forgiven for thinking gender neutrality to be a workable and desirable plan. But in a recent interview, Thomas, now 76, said she found nothing dated about “Free to Be.” Children, she said, “need to hear that … boys and girls are pretty much the same except for something in their underwear.” Except that they are not.

In 2009, David Geary, a University of Missouri psychologist, published the second edition of Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences. This thorough, fair-minded, and comprehensive survey of the literature includes more than 50 pages of footnotes citing studies by neuroscientists, endocrinologists, geneticists, anthropologists, and psychologists showing a strong biological basis for many gender differences. And, as Geary recently told me, “One of the largest and most persistent differences between the sexes is children’s play preferences.” The female preference for nurturing play and the male propensity for rough-and-tumble hold cross-culturally and even cross-species. Researchers have found, for example, that female vervet monkeys play with dolls much more than their brothers, who prefer balls and toy cars. Nor can human reality be tossed aside. In all known societies, women tend to be the nurturers and men the warriors. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker points to the absurdity of ascribing these universal differences to socialization: “It would be an amazing coincidence that in every society the coin flip that assigns each sex to one set of roles would land the same way.”

Of course, we can soften and shape these roles, and that has been, in every epoch, the work of civilization. But civilization won’t work against the grain of human nature, and our futile attempts to make it do so can only damage the children that are the subjects of the experiment. Though few would deny that parents and teachers should expose children to a wide range of toys and play activities, almost any parent will attest that most little girls don’t want to play with dump trucks and few boys show an interest in Hello Kitty tea sets. “Free to Be” purports to be an anthem to freedom; but to “liberate” children from their gender will require unrelenting adult policing, monitoring, correcting, and shaming. Enlightened opinion tells us not to do that with gender non-conforming children; but surely it is just as misguided to do it with kids who conform to the conventions of their sex.

The writer Andrew Sullivan is right when he describes the sex difference as “so obvious no one really doubted it until very recently, when the blank-slate left emerged, merging self-righteousness with empirical delusion.” That delusion was jumpstarted in 1974 with the advent of “Free To Be… You and Me.” Today, an army of gender scholars and activists is marching in support of the genderless ideal. But these warriors forget that ignoring differences between boys and girls can be just as damaging as creating differences where none exist. “Free to Be” is a cautionary example of how an idealistic social fantasy can turn into a blueprint for repression.
The number of Native American students enrolled at MU has been decreasing over the past five years. Native Americans make up less than 1 percent of MU’s total student population. The bar chart shows the total number of Native American students, including undergraduate, professional and graduate students. The bottom chart shows Native Americans as a percentage of MU’s student body.
Dumpster fire quickly spreads through nearby field

By Ashley Jost

Monday, March 10, 2014 at 4:08 pm Comments (1)

Columbia Fire Department crews were dispatched to the O’Reilly Auto Parts store at 2206 Paris Road on Monday afternoon for a fire that quickly spread across a field, with a charred area spanning 3 to 4 acres.

Battalion Chief John Metz said the department got the call around 2:30 p.m., and it took less than 20 minutes to contain the fire.

Metz said at the scene that the origin of the fire is unknown.

Will Melton, an associate at O’Reilly, said he saw the small trash bin behind the store was engulfed in flames and he called 911. He said within 10 minutes, the field caught fire and the blaze spread behind Sonic Drive-In and across the field.

“There was garbage and car parts” in the trash bin, Melton said. “Anything in there could have been flammable I guess.”

A fire also started in the store’s trash bin last year, but Metz said it didn’t travel as far into the field as Monday’s blaze.

University of Missouri nursing student volunteers helped evacuate a hall’s worth of residents from Columbia Healthcare Center, a nursing home. The fire damaged part of the wooden fence around the facility, as well as the grass all the way up to the concrete walkway outside of one of the entrances.

A Columbia Healthcare Center administrator said the smoke and smell were potent for the first few minutes, so after the fire was out the exterior door were opened and the air ventilation system was turned on.

Metz said Monday was a very dry day with 15 to 20 mph winds and low humidity. While the ground is wet from rain and melted snow, the vegetation on top is “really, really dry,” Metz said, which could have been a factor in the fire’s quick spread across the field.
Porcine virus spreads across state

Monday, March 10, 2014 at 2:00 pm

JOPLIN (AP) — A fast-spreading virus that can kill 80 percent of piglets that contract it is rapidly spreading across Missouri hog farms, wiping out entire nurseries in some cases.

Porcine epidemic diarrhea has killed 4 million to 5 million pigs nationwide, or about 4 percent of the pigs that would go to market later this year, The Joplin Globe reported.

"We had our first initial case in December in northern Missouri," said Marcia Shannon, a swine nutrition specialist with the University of Missouri-Columbia. "Since then, there has been an explosion of it, especially in the first two weeks of February. I would consider it widespread now, especially north of Interstate 70."

About 3,000 farms in Missouri have pigs, she said, and any size farm is susceptible.

Ron Plain, livestock economist with the University of Missouri, said he expects most of the state's hog farms to be touched by the epidemic.

"We're adding 300 farms per week to the list of infected farms. I think most all will wind up with the disease," Plain said. "The average slaughter age is 6 months. So we will see the impact of this in six months. We do know it has impacted the futures market for hog contracts. We're at record levels now."

With no evidence that the virus can be transmitted to humans, people who live near industrial hog farms where piglet deaths have been reported shouldn't be concerned, Shannon said.

"The virus does not pose a food safety risk. Humans are not going to get it," she said.

Porcine epidemic diarrhea, which is believed to have originated in Europe in the 1970s and remains uncontrolled in China and other parts of Asia, appeared in the United States last spring and has spread to more than 27 states.

"For a producer who is hit by PED, it can be pretty serious," Shannon said. "If you have 400 litters with 10 pigs in a litter, that's 4,000 piglets that have been lost. It's devastating to those individuals."

Missouri's pork industry employs more than 25,000 people, including in the feed, processing, transportation and packing areas, Missouri Pork Association Executive Director Don Nikodim said.
He agrees there will be fewer pigs in the market chain by this summer, and prices will rise as worldwide demand for meat continues to grow.

"Enhanced biosecurity measures have had a positive impact, but there still has been a considerable baby pig loss," Nikodim said. "The producers are working through it."

University of Missouri students will help build school in Nicaragua

By Ashley Jost

Monday, March 10, 2014 at 2:00 pm

This summer, a group of University of Missouri sorority members will travel to Nicaragua to break ground on a school paid for through MU student fundraising.

The idea started last year when the MU Panhellenic Association — a body that oversees all campus sororities — decided to pick up the Circle of Sisterhood Foundation as the benefactor of its philanthropy. Circle of Sisterhood is an organization focused on removing education barriers for girls and women around the world and has built schools in underdeveloped areas.

That was when the fundraising started.

For a school in Senegal, the band of sororities raised $20,000, but during a Skype call with Circle of Sisterhood's founder, they were motivated to build on that fundraising effort and build a school of their own somewhere else. So, they raised more than $30,000 on top of that.

In all, the Panhellenic group raised about $55,000, which helps fund building costs and the $875-per-participant fees for the 12 MU students going to Nicaragua, said Jamie Beard, vice president of public relations for the Panhellenic Association. She said participants foot the bill for their own airfare, but the donation helps fund their lodging and food costs because the women are staying with host families.

"We really wanted to do something that was closer to the United States, in the Western Hemisphere," Beard said. "Last April, Nicaragua was the country that presented the most need."

The women have banded together with BuildOn, an international not-for-profit organization that helps build schools with sponsoring groups and gets the schools off the ground after they're built. MU participants won't know which village or area of Nicaragua they will be working in for another month, after buildOn assesses Nicaragua's needs.
"BuildOn's organizational mission is to make the school its own self-sustaining entity," Beard said. "We're donating money to build the school, and once we leave Nicaragua and the school is built, it's its own operation."

Employees with BuildOn stay behind to work with the community to make sure the school is successful. The guarantee, which appeals to the mission of the Circle of Sisterhood, is that at least 50 percent of the students will be girls.

Abby Flores, one of the student participants who will leave for Nicaragua in June, said she is really looking forward to the "eye-opening" experience she anticipates it to be, especially to better learn about educational barriers for Nicaraguan kids.

"We've been working toward this school for so long, and I think we're all really excited to finally see it happen," Flores said.

Class challenges college students to plot the ‘perfect murder’

Ex-prosecutor teaches class.

By Ashley Jost

Monday, March 10, 2014 at 2:00 pm Comments (3)

Shelly Romero is plotting the best way to kill her boyfriend. Right now, she's leaning toward using air to cause an embolism. Maybe she will poison his food.

Romero isn't evil. Plotting her boyfriend's murder is actually her homework.

Like her peers, Romero is searching for five ways to kill an acquaintance for her "Perfect Murder" class at Stephens College. The elective course, taught by former Cole County Prosecuting Attorney Bill Tackett, brings crime scene analysis to life in a unique way.

"The traditional way of teaching has had to change from lecturing at students," Tackett said. "You can't and shouldn't do that anymore with the onset of technology."

Instead of teaching crime scene analysis from a textbook, Tackett wanted to incorporate lessons from his 17 years of prosecuting experience with a challenge that would keep students engaged: try to come up with the perfect murder.
The perfect murder, of course, means committing the act without getting caught. And murder, versus a serial killing, often indicates that the person being killed is an acquaintance. Many of Tackett's students choose their ex-boyfriends. Some choose professors.

"It is literally impossible to pull off the perfect murder in the days of crime scene analysis," he said. "If it happens, it's dumb luck."

Tackett started teaching this class at Lincoln University in Jefferson City for a year, then through the University of Missouri Extension office in Jefferson City, which drew more than 100 interested participants.

"It's treated as an academic exercise," Tackett said, laughing about how frequently he is asked about any concerns he has about his class being a liability. "Thus far it hasn't produced any ill results. It's more fun than it is about an evil motive. There seems to be a dark side to human nature where someone has drifted into thinking at some point or another, 'What would happen if I murdered someone?'"

Tackett has brought in several guest speakers to discuss their areas of expertise, including Tony Coleman, director of campus security at Stephens, and Lois Bichler, a Stephens associate professor of biology. Coleman has years of experience investigating murder and rape cases, and Bichler has background knowledge on the human body’s reactions to poisons or injections.

So far, Tackett has yet to have a student come up with the perfect murder.

"If you're tied to somebody, there are just too many ways to find out," he said. "Not to say students won't come up with it."

Romero, one of Tackett's students and an English major, was motivated to take the class to better understand how she could realistically kill off characters.

"What's most interesting about the class is also the hardest, which is how to not get caught," Romero said. "We've learned about so many ways you can get caught, like DNA, fluids and skin cells. It's interesting, yet slightly disappointing, to see all of the ways you can get caught."

The "murder" itself is a semester-long project that students develop. They have to provide five versions of their perfect murder and explain how they would go about it considering the observed living patterns of their chosen victim. Students have to take into account how they would cover up their tracks, dispose of the body and how they would interact with police afterward.
Ohio earthquakes linked to fracking

by Amel Ahmed @amelscript March 10, 2014 10:56PM ET

This may mark the first time that an earthquake has been directly linked to fracking, activists say.

Ohio authorities shut down a hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) natural gas operation in Mahoning County on Monday after two earthquakes were felt in the area, which is near the Pennsylvania border, local newspapers and broadcasters reported.

The quakes registered magnitudes of 3 and 2.6, the U.S. Geological Survey’s National Earthquake Information Center said on its website.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) halted operations of Texas-based Hilcorp Energy — which conducts fracking in the area — while experts from the department analyze data from the earthquakes, the Columbus Dispatch newspaper said, citing a statement it received from the ONDR.

"Out of an abundance of caution we notified the only oil and gas operator in the area, and ordered them to halt all operations until further assessment can take place," the department was quoted as saying.

There were no immediate reports of injury or damage.

The magnitude 3 quake at about 2:26 a.m. was strong enough to wake up some residents in Poland Township, according to local NBC affiliate WFMJ. Reports said the smaller quake followed at 11:44 a.m.

The use of fracking — a gas-extraction process in which sand, water and chemicals are pumped into the ground to release trapped fuel deposits — has increased significantly in the United States over the past decade. Five years ago, the U.S. produced 5 million barrels of oil per day; today, it’s 7.4 million, due largely to fracking.

Supporters of the process say it creates jobs and spurs the economy, while critics say that its development is largely unregulated and that too little is known about pollution and health risks.
The process of drilling so-called injection wells to dispose of fracking wastewater has been blamed for some minor earthquakes, and activists said Monday they hope the latest quakes will lead Ohio officials to halt fracking operations conducted near fault lines.

Ohio already has regulations prohibiting the disposal of fracking wastewater in certain counties. In January 2012, the state halted the disposal of oil and gas waste disposal in injection wells within a five-mile radius of a well in Youngstown, Ohio, that was linked to a series of earthquakes in 2011.

Hilcorp has drilled seven wells at the site near Monday’s earthquakes, according to The Business Journal, a local newspaper.

The Columbus Dispatch cited the ODNR as saying all available information indicates the latest quakes are not connected to injection wells.

Alison Auciello, the Ohio organizer for environmental group Food and Water Watch, told Al Jazeera that the location and depth of the latest earthquakes’ epicenters are consistent with the particular drilling sites — meaning they may have been caused by the fracking operation itself, rather than waste disposal.

Wilma Subra, an environmental consultant and veteran activist, told Al Jazeera that it is only a matter of time before fracking operations cause earthquakes. “When you put that much liquid under extreme pressure down into a shale formation, it leaks out of the shale formation and into an area where is a fault, resulting in an earthquake,” she said.

Shale formations contain fine-grained sedimentary rocks that can be rich in oil and natural gas.

State officials should evaluate the data completely before allowing Hillcorp to continue fracking in the area, Subra said, adding that the officials should also prohibit companies from conducting fracking operations near fault lines. “Before companies can be permitted to conduct fracking operations, states should require companies to assess how close they are to a fault line before granting them a permit,” she said. “Nothing in any of the state regulations require that now, but that may change with the Ohio earthquakes.”

But Auciello does not believe any amount of regulating will prevent earthquakes caused by fracking. “We need to stop risking our communities. Fracking should be banned and we should instead be focusing on renewable energy sources,” she said.

Recent studies have also highlighted environmental and health risks believed to be associated with fracking operations.

A study by The Associated Press in January found that water pollution in four U.S. states was linked to oil and gas wells, and concluded that pollution was more widespread than the industry admits. A December study by the University of Missouri showed that fracking fluids could disrupt human hormones and lead to infertility, cancer and other health problems.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is currently conducting an in-depth study on the potential impact of fracking on water resources, the findings of which are expected to be released late this year.
Have a question about goings-on around town? This is part of a project called "Any Questions?" that takes on community curiosities and tries to address them. Submit your questions to submissions@ColumbiaMissourian.com or by using the form below this story.

Reader Joe Dillard has noticed a sign of spring around town lately: an “inordinate number” of those long-legged, orange-chested robins you see hopping around your yard and hunting for worms and snails after rainstorms. Columbia, unfortunately, hasn’t had many rainstorms lately, bringing us to Dillard’s question: What do robins eat during the winter?

Before we can get to the food — birds? Winter? How does that work?
It’s important to note that though you don’t see them as much, most robins stick around during the winter. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology says on its website that robins are commonly found year-round pretty much anywhere in the continental United States, though they will more than likely be roosting in trees — in groups that sometimes include a quarter-million birds — rather than hopping around your yard.

Those that do fly south are usually back well before the start of spring. John Faaborg, a professor of biological sciences at MU who does research on avian ecology, says he started seeing robins again about two weeks ago and these early arrivals are males who are setting up territories or returning to where they were last year.

Onto the main course
Because there aren’t exactly earthworms aplenty during the winter, robins eat an “enormous variety of fruits” during the fall and winter, according to the Cornell website. Faaborg said in an email that because it has been so cold, groups of robins have been "hanging around crab apple trees or other sources with some old fruit remaining."
The enormous variety of fruit could have detrimental effects, though. Audobon Magazine warns to watch out for tipsy robins teetering around or smashing into your windows. Yes, you read that right. Fruit gives robins energy and keeps them alive, of course, but it also helps them let loose. Eating honeysuckle berries exclusively, the Cornell website says, can intoxicate them.

When warmer weather returns, robins will expand their diets to include a large number of earthworms, snails and a variety of insects.