Alpha Phis at the University of Missouri thread tissue paper through chicken wire for homecoming decorations. The process, called pomping, can take 30 to 40 hours. Credit Dan Gill for The New York Times

Imagine finding a bill for $200 in your mailbox because your daughter was late to a couple of sorority events. Imagine, too, that those who snitched were her new best friends. This is one of the unwelcome surprises of sorority membership.

Depending on the generosity of the vice president of standards, a fine can be reversed with proof of a qualifying reason, such as a funeral, doctor's appointment or medical emergency, so long as a doctor's note is forthcoming. A paper due or a test the next day? No excuse.
(Fraternities, by the way, rarely impose even nominal fines to enforce punctuality.)

Now imagine attending mandatory weekend retreats, throwing yourself into charitable work, making gifts for your sisters and, at tradition-thick schools like the University of Alabama and University of Missouri, investing 30 to 40 hours pomping — threading tissue paper through chicken wire to create elaborate homecoming decorations or parade floats that outdo rivals’.

During fall or winter rush, sororities court starry-eyed freshmen. They showcase their joyful conviviality with skits and serenades. They stress the benefits of joining, and brag about attracting the prettiest, smartest or most athletic. At many traditional sororities, however, not much energy is spent explaining what is expected, leaving many pledges unaware of the considerable time commitment and costs.

Do the math: Official charges include Panhellenic dues, chapter fees, administrative fees, nonresident house/parlor fees, a onetime pledging and initiation fee and contribution toward a house bond. Members must also buy a pin (consider the diamond-encrusted one) and a letter jersey. Without housing, basic costs for the first semester (the most expensive) average $1,570 at University of Georgia sororities, $1,130 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and $1,580 at Syracuse University.

But such fees are only a portion of the real cost. Add in fines, philanthropy and the incidentals that are essential to participate in sorority life and the total spirals upward, especially when a closetful of designer party dresses is part of the mix.

“You think it is just a school club,” said Jessica Rodgers, a Georgia State junior and Alpha Xi Delta pledge in 2012. “I wasn’t expecting such a burden every month.” The first year, she said, she paid about $1,100 in basic fees and $100 to $200 a month over that on sorority-related incidentals. “For someone who pays for all their own expenses, it’s alarming,” she said. “I was 17 and not thinking about billing and the huge time commitment of joining. It was like signing up for a loan — they said the debt could go to a collections agency if you failed to pay.”

Georgia State, American University and Syracuse are among campuses that publish a range of fees covering all their chapters, but information on specific sororities is often hard to come by before the midst of rush.
Syracuse’s Alpha Phi chapter distributes a sheet with financials on the second day of recruitment and then promptly collects it, according to Cameron Boardman, Alpha Phi’s 2014 president. She wishes she could email financial information earlier so students could “have an open and frank conversation with their parents about it,” but she says she does not have approval from the campus Panhellenic Council to do so.

At the same time, she voices concern that members might be scared off by the cost (which she doesn’t want made public) without understanding the benefits and realizing that other Syracuse sororities that seem cheaper impose hefty fines.

Costs mushroom with incidentals, which neither sororities nor offices of Greek life enumerate.

Sisters spend a significant amount of time and money on one another. It’s a loving relationship, to be sure. Once Bigs choose one or more new members to mentor (Littles), they take them out regularly. They secretly decorate their Littles’ rooms, and bake and craft gifts to shower on them. Essential tools are a glue gun and Puffy Paint to adorn anything imaginable — boxes for sorority pins, tumblers, door hangers, T-shirts — with the sorority’s letters or mascot. Mod Podge mavens make decoupages with Lilly Pulitzer and Vera Bradley patterns, trimmed with official colors like straw, salmon pink, vieux green and Carolina blue.

With the pressure on, students troll Facebook and Pinterest for the hottest trends in sorority artwork.

Ms. Rodgers received a personalized picture frame, painted wooden Greek letters and a giant initial for her wall from her Big, who she estimates spent $200 to $300 on her. Her second year, the sorority standardized gifts to put an end to competitive spending.

Hannah Hembree, a recent University of Oklahoma graduate and an Alpha Chi Omega, says her spending exceeded $1,000 for gift baskets, coordinated pajamas and treating Littles to meals, movies, bowling, ice cream and coffee.

After a 2009 assessment at the College of William & Mary found that sisters were spending $500 per Little and deemed it excessive, the campus Panhellenic Council capped such expenditures at $250, though it relinquished enforcement to the individual sororities.

Syracuse’s Alpha Phi suggests a $100 cap on spending on Littles. “It is the culture of the school to really spoil them,” Ms. Boardman said. “You can’t stop girls who want to spend $500.” Alpha Phi has two
basket days, when Littles discover treats from secret Bigs, and a reveal day, when they find out the identity of their Big.

To help with all this crafting, a cottage industry has sprung up, offering a dizzying array of custom items. DesignerGreek.com sells canvas totes with appliquéd sorority letters for $23.95; Etsy.com showcases a bejeweled paddle for $65. Avoid trips to Michael's with DiyGreek.com's “supply sacks” for $24.99 containing paint, glue, scrapbook paper, wire, charms, ribbons, ceramic beads and stencils with a sorority's symbols and colors.

Recruitment is particularly onerous. Some hopefuls attend an event a day during Rush Week or dedicate two full weekends to activities. Following rush, Gamma Phi Beta pledges must participate in an eight-week program with meetings at least three times a week, according to Krista Spanninger Davis, international president of the sorority, which has more than 130 chapters. Among the activities are lectures about sorority history and tradition. Yes, there's a test at the end (open book).

Nicole Davies, a peer adviser at American University's career center, observes that many students' grades suffers as they pledge. When she rushed Alpha Chi Omega, she experienced almost a full week of all-nighters. She had to work two jobs to pay her expenses — she had been “clueless” about the hundreds of dollars in extras — and found it too stressful. She de-sistered.

Ms. Rodgers, too, dropped out of her sorority. As she was struggling to get everything done on her overcommitted schedule, she would miss class or pull an all-nighter, and she started to resent being made to feel guilty when she would try to get out of an event. When she left she had to return all letter items, including shirts, bags and a $130 pin, without reimbursement.

For her 2004 exposé, “Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities,” Alexandra Robbins interviewed hundreds of sorority members. “It is a massive time commitment, but they also want the girls to pare down their non-Greek activities,” she said recently. She estimates that the demands “take more time than an extra class.”

Even though the word “optional” is attached to social mixers and dances, many sisters fear being treated with disapproval or left out of emerging social circles if they aren’t present. Leah Jordan, a senior at Georgia State, says she does not know anyone at Alpha Omicron Pi, her former sorority, who skips those events. “That's why you join.”
Ms. Jordan says she reached her breaking point at the beginning of sophomore year. She says it’s not usual for people to drop out and she got some grief for leaving, but she had no choice. She had skipped classes and watched her grades slip while prepping for sorority events and attending meetings, socials and fund-raisers, including a charity walk for autism, a football tournament and a puzzle-making contest.

With an assist from mandatory weekly study hall, members must maintain a minimum grade-point average or are placed on academic probation by the chapter.

Laura Wright, an associate professor at West Carolina University and a Chi Omega at Appalachian State, remembers once trying to hide at the back of a meeting to study and being called out for not behaving “in a sisterly way.” She said: “I felt there was a strange line and I was not sure how to stay on the right side of it.”

Miss enough of those weekly meetings or seminal events and risk not only possible fines but exclusion from formal, the semester highlight. Meetings, which run one to two hours, often take place on Sunday nights, leaving members scrambling right before assignments come due, especially if they follow an overnight weekend retreat.

What to do?

Sorority veterans recommend students do research before joining, to get different perspectives. Ms. Davis of Gamma Phi Beta encourages pledge candidates to visit sororities’ social media pages and websites, and to ask the meatier questions. “You need to collect all the info you can to make the best decision that works for you,” she says. She acknowledges, however, that freshmen clamoring for a bid can lack the confidence to ask about attendance policies and finances.

Gamma Phi Beta chapters are supposed to help with time management skills, she said. She proposes sorority members skip a required Sunday night chapter meeting if work necessitates and expresses the hope that members understand that “academic and family values should come first.”

Sororities are governed according to their own guidelines, and colleges do not intervene to limit their demands on students. But Ms. Robbins believes it is the colleges’ role to take action. She says they could do a much better job reporting what sorority life is like by requiring that each chapter supply recruits with a realistic list of time commitments and average yearly costs.
Universities are hesitant to crack down, Ms. Robbins suggests, because Greek alumni have strong bonds to the university and make sizable contributions.

Sororities can provide young women with a lively social life, engagement in community and the satisfaction of supporting worthy causes, but they’re clearly not for everyone. “If you’re going to join a sorority,” Ms. Rodgers said, “you must dedicate your life to it.”

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Homecoming spending boosts Columbia businesses

Monday, October 27, 2014 | 10:40 p.m. CDT; updated 6:40 a.m. CDT, Tuesday, October 28, 2014
BY YIZHU WANG

COLUMBIA — The sun had barely risen Saturday, and Quinton’s roof was already packed.

On most gamedays, the rooftop patio is reliably half-full, said Alison Ries, who works as a waitress at the bar and deli. On other Saturdays, she's lucky to get four tables.

But MU Homecoming is different. Between the parade, the football game and the nighttime revelry, thousands of people crowded into downtown businesses. Hotels filled up, and an empty taxi was hard to come by. Some employees said it was the busiest weekend of the year.

Megan McConachie, the Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau's Web and communications manager, agreed. Homecoming and parents' weekends are typically the busiest football weekends of the year, she said.
For Ries, the Homecoming spree peaked Friday. She noticed her customers ordered pricier drinks and left heftier tips. “They are here to have a good time with old friends,” she said. "So, obviously, they know they’re probably gonna spend more money.”

When the parade ended, the Starbucks on Ninth Street served 39 customers in 30 minutes, barista Jamie Boyer said. The store also sold out of pastries, even though it had doubled its order.

On Friday night, Sparky’s Homemade Ice Cream was crowded from 8:30 p.m. until closing time at 11 p.m. Customers packed into the ice-cream store; others waited on the curb. Sparky’s ran out of four or five flavors that night, manager Delia Rainey said.

Homecoming is Taxi Terry's busiest weekend of the year, operation manager Jason Kollock said. On regular game weekends, the business can count on 400 more rides than usual, he said, but Homecoming weekend ratchets that up a bit.

Shakespeare's Pizza's downtown location brought in four or five extra staff to work the outlet's second kitchen and handle the extra traffic. The store made 1,100 pizzas on Saturday, a few hundred more than normal, said Charles Koenig, one of the pizza chefs who worked Saturday.

It’s been 11 years since graduation for Heather Couch, who works as a loan officer in Sikeston, Missouri, and she was determined to get some Shakespeare’s — even if the wait was more than an hour. In the meantime, she brought her family to The Mizzou Store.

Alumni weren't the only ones streaming into town. Kim and Tim Berry drove from Indianapolis to visit their son, who is a freshman at MU. The family stayed at the Drury Inn and bought jewelry, clothes and gifts from Poppy Arts and Woody's Clothiers. The three-day trip "probably cost $1,000," Tim Berry said.

Daniel Riley, who graduated last year and works in Kansas City as a financial consultant, has been a loyal fan of Willie’s since he was a student. Riley was no stranger to the gameday rush, but Friday's crowd was different from what he's previously experienced. "It's crazy," he said.

Riley stayed the weekend in Ramada Columbia, where all of 89 rooms were sold out.
Phoebe Mason, the hotel's front desk clerk, said the price of a standard room with a king-sized bed increased from $59 per night to $129. It was the third home game weekend this year the hotel filled up, she said, along with the Georgia and Indiana games.

"Usually, on a good day, we sell about 40 or 50 (rooms)," Mason said.

In 2013, Columbia's average hotel occupancy was around 60 percent, McConachie said. January was the lowest at 41.6 percent, and June was the highest at 67.1 percent.

Supervising editor is Adam Aton.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

As autism diagnoses increase, hospitals and schools try to keep up

Tuesday, October 28, 2014 | 6:00 a.m. CDT; updated 6:26 a.m. CDT, Tuesday, October 28, 2014

BY TAYLOR LOWER

COLUMBIA — Most kids have tantrums, but not like this one.

It was December 2012, and 18-month-old Keller Garcille had been told "no," that he couldn't have something – a snack, a toy, a certain place to sit – at his daycare. What followed was an epic meltdown. Limbs flailing, face red from screaming and streaming with tears, Keller was inconsolable.

That evening, his mother, Erika Garcille, noticed Keller wasn't using his left arm. When she took him to the emergency room, she learned he'd broken his own elbow during the tantrum.

At the follow-up appointment, she asked the doctor if a fit that extreme was considered normal.
It wasn't.

But Keller was still too young for a reliable diagnosis, so the Garcilles waited and watched. More than a year later, they got the news — Keller has autism.

Initially, Erika and Trevor Garcille felt relieved; they had an answer. That relief quickly gave way to feelings of being overwhelmed, as the couple began to realize that the vision they had for their child's future — a mainstream school enrollment, early participation in organized sports and activities — might be further away than they thought.

But then they realized Keller's autism didn't mean he couldn't enroll at a mainstream school or that he couldn't play organized sports. It just meant he'd have to take different steps to get there than the average child.

His father, Trevor, remembers thinking: "Why are we putting limitations on something just because it hasn't happened before?"

Keller, now 3, is just one of an increasing number of children diagnosed with the disorder, which affects the development of social and communication skills. An estimated one in 68 people are diagnosed with some form of it.

In March of 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released new estimates of the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder. Taken from data collected in 2010 by the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, the new estimates show an increase in children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder: up 23 percent compared with 2006 estimates and 78 percent compared with 2002.

Stephen Kanne, an autism researcher and the executive director of the MU Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, said the increase doesn't necessarily reflect an increase in the number of people with autism, but rather an increase in people who are being recognized as having autism and diagnosed at an early age.

Health professionals say there are two primary reasons for the increase: widening of the parameters for classifying mental disorders to include a greater range of symptoms and greater public awareness of autism through programs such as Autism Speaks, which has resulted in many people being diagnosed earlier in life.
And that's a good thing — the earlier intervention begins, the better the prognosis. But not all schools, hospitals or therapists were ready for the higher numbers of children diagnosed with the disorder.

**A litany of appointments**

Keller's diagnosis changed the Garcille family's life. Now they spend their time in waiting rooms and doctors' offices, researching autism developments and watching Keller for anything that may hint at a meltdown in the making.

"Appointments. Lots of appointments," Trevor Garcille said.

**Because there are few autism specialists in Rolla, Missouri, where the Garcilles live, the family has made the Thompson Center in Columbia their primary source of care.**

Every few months, the couple makes the two-hour drive with Keller for his appointments. Fortunately, the Garcille's insurance is accepted by the MU Health Care System.

"We go to Columbia because the Thompson Center is one of the best in the country. A two-hour drive is nothing when it gives him the best chance for growth," Erika Garcille said.

Since his diagnosis in April, Keller has had five assessments. That doesn't include all of the doctors' appointments and consultations for other factors, such as the influence of diet on his symptoms. In a time span of only 6 months, Keller has been to see one sort of doctor or another at least 14 times.

The Garcilles aren't the only ones stressed by the number of appointments they have. People or organizations that provide treatment, like the Thompson Center, are also feeling the strain. Wait times for new patients are getting longer as the center manages an increase in the number of referrals it receives, as well as an increase in requests for evaluations.

The Thompson Center uses a clinic-based model of therapy, meaning the child with autism receives therapy treatment on site. Individualized instruction for parents is also encouraged and provided to create consistency for the child.
The center is on the hunt for more therapists and "implementers," trained professionals who receive a specific treatment plan from an Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA therapist and then treat the child with autism in the child's home based on individual needs. Qualified applicants have been hard to find, Kanne said.

SungWoo Kahng, a specialist in ABA therapy, said there are no academic training programs dedicated to ABA in mid-Missouri, but Thompson and MU's Department of Psychology in the School of Health Professions are working to develop a program at MU.

Meanwhile, the Garcille family is in the land of therapy limbo as they wait to be assigned an implementer. Keller used to receive one hour of occupational therapy a week at daycare, but he has aged out of that program. Now the family is awaiting approval from their insurance company for a new therapy plan. Although Keller's doctor recommends he receive 10 to 12 hours of specialized ABA therapy a week, the Garcille family is only able to afford six hours.

But six hours is better than none.

If the insurance company approves the therapy plan, Keller's weekly therapy will be split into three two-hour sessions, each of which will include exercises in ABA therapy.

Schools struggle to keep up
As far as Keller's schooling goes, the Garcilles are unsure of what they are going to do. Their primary goal is to ease him into a mainstream classroom, but they won't know whether or not that will be possible until they get closer to that time — after he has received more therapy to help curb his symptoms.

"The one thing we've learned about autism is you can plan all you want, but sometimes it has its own agenda," Erika Garcille said.

In 2000, with seven years of experience, Cristy Segress was hired to fill the position of the autism teacher in Waynesville, Missouri, for the only autism-focused special education program in the school district. Segress estimates there were roughly 4,500 students in the district. At that time, the veteran special education teacher had six students. The next year she had more than 10.
Within four years, she had too many students for a single classroom and had to split her class in half, one of which would be taught by another instructor. By the following year, both of those classes were full, and the splitting continued.

By the time Segress left Waynesville for Smithton Middle School in Columbia in 2012, the Waynesville district had five autism-focused special education programs at the elementary level, one at the middle school level and one at the high school level. Segress estimates the district had as many as 6,000 students by then.

Segress said her previous district had to keep adding programs to meet the student demand.

The Columbia Public Schools District has had districtwide programs in place for several years providing autism-focused special education. Segress has five students and two aides in her autism-focused classroom all day, with an additional aide who floats between Segress' class and the other special education class.

Segress' middle-school class focuses on "functional academics," like how money works and developing communication and social skills. The class watches videos and practices the observed lesson in the classroom. Then they take a field trip to practice the skills in a real-life setting.

One such field trip was a trip to the supermarket. The students watched a video on how to make a list, thought critically on what they would need to put on a list and wrote one. The final stage of the lesson was to take their lists and go buy only the things on their list and use money correctly.

**Learning a new routine**

Before Keller can begin learning about money and shopping lists, though, he's learning how to deal with unexpected changes in his routine, which can be difficult for a child with autism.

Because Keller is the youngest of Trevor and Erika Garcille's three children, he sometimes has to adapt to changes in siblings' schedules. His sisters, Skylar, 14, and Parker, 5, both play sports, which means lots of games and practices, on top of having their own social lives and schoolwork.
So that means that Keller, for example, gets to have popcorn and candy at Skylar's Tuesday volleyball game. But to him that means he gets to have popcorn and candy at Skylar's Wednesday volleyball game. If the Wednesday volleyball game is canceled, Keller has to cope with the lack of the expected popcorn and candy.

His parents try to explain it to him as best they can, but often Keller responds by kicking, screaming, crying and even biting the back of his own hand. His fits sometimes only last a few minutes, but they leave him in a highly volatile state, vulnerable to another meltdown. Once he's comfortable at home, though, in his own space, he feels back in control and calms down.

While Keller is learning to accept changes, the rest of the family is learning to embrace unexpected interruptions and changes as well. Aside from medical appointments demanding more of the family's time, Keller himself requires more attention than the average child. He's bright. He can complete a puzzle of the United States on the family's iPad in under 2 minutes.

But he can't communicate his knowledge, as is common among children with autism. Many times, whomever Keller is speaking to has two or three chances to understand what he is trying to say before a meltdown occurs.

"His attitude dictates a lot of our schedule right now," his mother said.

There are days when Keller cannot sit at a volleyball game after having behaved all day at daycare. Noise canceling headphones and an iPad give him his own escape, but sometimes even that is not enough and he just needs to be somewhere else.

If Keller is having a bad day, the family will often leave where they are or stay home altogether, rather than exposing Keller to busy environments.

With regular ABA therapy and continuing support from his family, his parents and doctors believe Keller could become a fully functioning member of society — play sports, an instrument or even be class president. The Garcille family doesn't see Keller's autism as a determining factor but rather a challenge to overcome.

"He's not sick. He's not broken. He doesn't need to be fixed," his parents say. "He just needs to be understood."
Scientists blame oil drilling for spike in number of baby deaths in Colorado town

Air pollution from oil and gas wells in Utah is being linked to the deaths of 13 infants last year - six times higher than the national average.

Vernal has 12,000 oil and gas wells, and some scientists whose research focuses on the effect of certain drilling-related chemicals on fetal development believe it could be the reason for the spike in infant deaths.

But given drilling has helped the area prosper and kept thousands employed since the 1940s, the connection hasn't been welcomed by those living near the Uintah Basin. Midwife Donna Young who raised the link has received threats and her property has been vandalised.

She uncovered an upward four-year trend in infant deaths: One in every 95.5 burials in Uintah County in 2010 was a baby, which increased to one in every 53 the following year. In 2012, the figure increased again to one in every 39.7 and last year it jumped to one in every 15.

Heather Jensen, whose two infants sons, died in late 2011 and 2013, told The Denver Post: 'People like to blame stuff on that all the time, but I don't feel like it has anything to do with oil and gas. I just feel like it's a trial I was given,'

But the link between drilling and the possible effect it has on infants and the unborn, isn't limited to the northeast corner of Utah.

Late last year an unusually high number of fetal anomalies in Glenwood Springs, 175 miles away in Colorado, were reported to state authorities. A study found no connection with drilling.

Concerns have also been raised in other areas of heavy drilling, but no spikes in deaths have been recorded and no conclusions have been reached.

Susan Nagel, a University of Missouri School of Medicine researcher who is focusing her studies on fracking-fluid chemicals that affect hormones said she suspects there is a 'relationship' between drilling and the deaths.

Medical studies have found that air pollution can harm embryos. Harmful chemicals like benzene, toluene and xylenes are released during drilling, and can cross the placental barrier and cause heart, brain and spinal defects.
Dr Brian Moench, president of the Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment, said establishing a conclusive link between drilling and baby deaths is complicated, but of the Vernal-area deaths, he said 'air pollution from drilling is a part of it'.

Air pollution is often a combination of chemicals and particles, combined from multiple sources.

In Vernal, diesel pickups and fracking rigs are commonplace, and spew out fumes; a coal-fired plants sends plumes of smoke into the air, and oil field-support businesses, stretch for miles.

A study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric administration recently showed dangerously high levels of ozone in the Uintah Basin around Vernal. And last winter the levels were recorded as being well beyond those set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The study pointed at the oil and gas industry.'I think we pretty clearly have an air-quality problem, but we try not to freak out,' said Seth Lyman, an air-quality researcher with Utah State University in Vernal.

'But I think there is a low probability (that) air quality is bad enough to impact infant mortality.'

Another factor being considered as possibly contributing to the deaths, is an explosion that occurred east of Vernal in March, 2013, at a business that cleans fracking equipment, that sent debris over a half-mile area.

Authorities in Vernal discounted the explosion as having any environmental impact, much like the drilling. They've said those complaining about air quality in Vernal, don't live there.

The possibly link was given some credence, when the TriCounty Health Department decided to help with a study to investigate the daby death spike. Midwife Ms Young had taken her findings, compiled through obituaries, to Dr Moench.

Epidemiologists initially are using birth and death certificates to test Ms Young's findings. Their findings are expected early next year.

Pollution aside, the Uintah County isn't a healthy place. It ranks 24th of 27 Utah counties in health rankings, smoking rates are twice what they are in the rest of Utah, obesity is also an issue, as is heavy drinking. There are also a high number of teen mothers.

Dr Moench said those not considering the connection 'have blinders on'.

Ms Nagal has gathered samples in Colorado's Garfield County and is exposing pregnant mice to fracking fluids to investigate what if any impact they have on their offspring.

Earlier research she showed babies born to mothers living within 10 miles of wells are at greater risk of congenital heart defects and neural tube defects. But other researches have discredit her research methods.
Ms Young, who delivers a lot of babies for father's who work in the oil fields, now insists that all
her pregnant patients use air and water filters.

The study in Garfield County, was also sparked by concerns raise by midwives. The study
looked at 22 cases and found no direct links to air pollution.

A recent survey of Vernal residents indicated 85 per cent welcomed oil shale development which
is expected to get underway next year.

More than 25,000 new oil and gas wells are proposed in the basin.

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The New York Times

Magic May Lurk Inside Us All

How many words does it take to know you’re talking to an adult? In “Peter Pan,” J. M. Barrie
needed just five: “Do you believe in fairies?”

Such belief requires magical thinking. Children suspend disbelief. They trust that events happen
with no physical explanation, and they equate an image of something with its existence. Magical
thinking was Peter Pan’s key to eternal youth.

The ghouls and goblins that will haunt All Hallows’ Eve on Friday also require people to take a
leap of faith. Zombies wreak terror because children believe that the once-dead can reappear. At
haunted houses, children dip their hands in buckets of cold noodles and spaghetti sauce. Even if
you tell them what they touched, they know they felt guts. And children surmise that with the
right Halloween makeup, costume and demeanor, they can frighten even the most skeptical adult.

We do grow up. We get jobs. We have children of our own. Along the way, we lose our
tendencies toward magical thinking.

Or at least we think we do. Several streams of research in psychology, neuroscience and
philosophy are converging on an uncomfortable truth: We’re more susceptible to magical
thinking than we’d like to admit. Consider the quandary facing college students in a clever
demonstration of magical thinking. An experimenter hands you several darts and instructs you to
throw them at different pictures. Some depict likable objects (for example, a baby), others are
neutral (for example, a face-shaped circle). Would your performance differ if you lobbed darts at
a baby?

It would. Performance plummeted when people threw the darts at the baby. Laura A. King, the
psychologist at the University of Missouri who led this investigation, notes that research
participants have a “baseless concern that a picture of an object shares an essential relationship with the object itself.”

Paul Rozin, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that these studies demonstrate the magical law of similarity. Our minds subconsciously associate an image with an object. When something happens to the image, we experience a gut-level intuition that the object has changed as well.

Put yourself in the place of those poor college students. What would it feel like to take aim at the baby, seeking to impale it through its bright blue eye? We can skewer a picture of a baby face. We can stab a voodoo doll. Even as our conscious minds know we caused no harm, our primitive reaction thinks we tempted fate.

How can well-educated people — those who ought to know better — struggle to throw a dart at a piece of paper? Some philosophers argue that magical thinking is, in some ways, adaptive. Tamar Gendler, a philosopher at Yale University, has coined the term “aliefs” to refer to innate and habitual reactions that may be at odds with our conscious beliefs — as when pictures of vipers, snarling dogs or crashing airplanes make our hearts race.

Aliefs motivate us to take or withhold action. You might enjoy sweets, but would you eat a chocolate bar shaped like feces? Dr. Rozin and his colleagues showed that college students would not, though they knew it would not harm them. Our conscious beliefs tell us to shape up, use our wits and act rationally. But our subconscious aliefs set off deeply ingrained reactions that protect us from disease. The alief often wins.

We may have evolved to be this way — and that is not always a bad thing. We enter the world with innate knowledge that helped our evolutionary ancestors survive and reproduce. Babies know mother from stranger, scalding heat from soothing warmth. When we grow up, our minds cling to that knowledge and, without our awareness, use it to try to make sense of the world.

Can magical beliefs offer a window into the aggressive mind? My colleagues and I examined this idea in recent research published in the journal Aggressive Behavior. In one illustrative study, 529 married Americans were shown a picture of a doll and were told that it represented their spouse. They could insert as many pins into the doll as they wished, from zero to 51. Participants also reported how often they had perpetrated intimate partner violence, which included psychological aggression and physical assault.

Voodoo dolls can measure whether your romantic partner is “hangry” — that dangerous combination of hunger and anger. If we let our blood sugar drop, it becomes harder to put the brakes on our aggressive urges. In a study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, we showed that on days when their blood sugar dropped, married people stabbed the voodoo doll with more pins.

Do people take the voodoo doll seriously? If they don’t, their responses should not relate to actual violent behavior. But they do. The more pins people used to stab the voodoo doll, the more psychological and physical aggression they perpetrated.
Stabbing a voodoo doll can also satisfy the desire for vengeance, another study found. When German students imagined an upsetting situation, they began to see the world through blood-colored glasses, increasing their tendency to ruminate on aggression-related thoughts. Stabbing a voodoo doll that represented the provocateur returned their glasses to their normal hue. By quenching their aggressive appetite, magical beliefs enabled provoked students to satisfy their aggressive goal without harming anyone.

Yes, children believe in magic because they don’t know any better. Peter Pan never grew up because he embraced magical beliefs. But such beliefs make for more than happy Halloweeners and children’s books. They give a glimpse into how the mind makes sense of the world.

We can’t overcome magical thinking. It is part of our evolved psychology. Our minds may fool us into thinking we are immune to magical thoughts. But we are only fooling ourselves. That’s the neatest trick of all.

MU human resources expert featured speaker

Monday, October 27, 2014 at 1:00 pm

The sixth-annual Columbia Daily Tribune Women in Business Awards luncheon featured Betsy Rodriguez as its keynote speaker.

Rodriguez has worked as the vice president for human resources and as a general officer for the University of Missouri System since 2008.

Rodriguez began her academic and human resources career at the University of Missouri. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from Vanderbilt University, she attended graduate school at MU, earning both a master’s and a doctorate in psychology. During her graduate studies, she worked for the campus and system in several positions before moving to Colorado.

In Colorado for 20 years, Rodriguez held various positions with the University of Colorado and the state. At CU, she served as assistant vice chancellor on the Denver/Anschutz medical campus, and was associate vice president for human resources for the university system. Prior to filling those roles, Rodriguez managed the state of Colorado’s Employee Benefits and
Rodriguez has served on the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) national board. She was selected last year to receive the Distinguished Service Award. She is currently a director of the Greater Missouri Leadership Foundation board and the Heart of Missouri United Way board.

Four takeaways from Missouri football media day

Monday, October 27, 2014 | 9:53 p.m. CDT; updated 10:44 p.m. CDT, Monday, October 27, 2014
BY WADE LIVINGSTON

COLUMBIA — Missouri (6-2, 3-1 Southeastern Conference) hosts Kentucky (5-3, 2-3 SEC) on Saturday, and Tigers coach Gary Pinkel has a saying about the importance of November games.

“Those who win in November will be remembered,” Pinkel said Monday at his weekly news conference.

Yes, it’s Week 10 of the college football season already. As Pinkel said, this is the time of year when people start talking about conference championships and bowl games. And Tuesday, for the first time ever, the College Football Playoff Selection Committee will release its ranking of the top 25 teams in the country — including the four coveted national semifinal spots, hosted by the Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl this season.

The Tigers sit in sole possession of second place in the SEC East at the moment, behind Georgia. Kentucky is right on their heels, and Missouri’s coaches have noticed the Wildcats’ improvement in Year 2 of the Mark Stoops era.

Winning Wildcats
This time last year, Kentucky was 1-6 and winless in conference play. The Wildcats finished the 2013 season 2-10 overall, with no SEC wins.

Kentucky comes into Saturday’s game after a two-touchdown loss to No. 1 Mississippi State, a contest that was quite the scare for the Bulldogs.
Missouri offensive coordinator Josh Henson wasn’t surprised that the Wildcats gave Mississippi State such a fright. He said Kentucky looked good on film, and he praised Stoops for elevating the program’s recruiting efforts.

Pinkel said the Wildcats have a play-making quarterback, one who moves quite well considering his 6-foot-5, 238-pound frame.

Kentucky signal-caller Patrick Towles had 76 yards rushing against Mississippi State and ran for two scores. He’s completed more than 60 percent of his passes on the season, racking up 12 touchdowns and 2,077 yards through the air. He’s only been intercepted four times.

**Confidence? He never lost it**

Maty Mauk had a much better game against Vanderbilt. He didn’t throw any interceptions, and he passed for his first touchdowns since Sept. 20.

Pinkel said Mauk could have had “five or six” more completions against the Commodores if not for some dropped passes and route confusion. When asked if Mauk had regained his confidence, the coach responded that the quarterback had never lost it.

Henson said much the same thing, though he admitted that Mauk — and the entire offense — had been frustrated during the month leading to the Vanderbilt game. Over that stretch, the Tigers ran fewer plays for fewer yards; they were shut out by Georgia and carried by their defense and special teams in a weird win over Florida.

On Monday, Mauk said he felt like the offense was “moving in the right direction.”

“We’ve got the right mindset,” Mauk said. “And we’re ready to attack this week.”

“**We’ve got SEC Nation here this week,” Pinkel said. “And that’s going to be real big.”**

**SEC Nation, the SEC Network’s pregame college football preview show, will air from 9-11 a.m. and is scheduled to broadcast from Missouri's Francis Quadrangle.**

This is the show's debut season, and Saturday’s visit is the program's first trip to Columbia.
“It’s kind of the University of Missouri’s shot to show them how great Mizzou is,” Pinkel said. “And it’s not only great for our football program, but it’s great for the University of Missouri.”

Strong showing
It was good to get a win at home, Pinkel said Monday. He’ll hope for another victory Saturday.

Both of the Tigers’ losses have come at home this year. While one of those losses was to an unranked Indiana squad, the other was to Georgia, currently a top-10 team.

When asked about his thoughts on the forthcoming College Football Playoffs rankings, Pinkel said he hopes the committee finds a better way to value teams’ strength of schedule.

“Will strength of schedule be significant? That’s my biggest concern,” Pinkel said. “I think before, that’s what they didn’t get. You know, bottom line is can you look at the strength of schedule and people they play and make the right decisions?”

The College Football Playoffs Selection Committee is scheduled to reveal its first set of rankings at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday on ESPN.

NCAA's Graduation Rates Don't Necessarily Prove Success
October 27, 2014 By Brad Wolverton

College athletes are serious students, the National Collegiate Athletic Association says. And every year, it offers up numbers to make its case.
Last year, the association reported that 82 percent of Division I athletes had graduated within a recent six-year period, up from 74 percent a decade before. Last year’s data also showed that a record proportion of football players from major conferences completed college in that time.

"More student-athletes than ever before are earning their college degrees," Mark Emmert, the NCAA’s president, said last year. "And we are gratified to see our reform efforts impact the lives of those we serve."

New NCAA "graduation success rates" are expected to be released this week. But how accurately do they reflect the academic performance of players?

The NCAA says its figures may actually underestimate how many students complete college. But some researchers say the data can be easily manipulated and don’t fully account for dropouts.

Most years, a release about graduation rates causes little stir. But as colleges face increasing calls to justify their sports priorities, many are relying on metrics that attempt to show their success in educating students.

The NCAA’s measure, which it began using in 2003, differs from the way the federal government calculates graduation rates. Unlike the federal metric, the NCAA’s measure does not penalize colleges for students who transfer before completing degrees so long as they leave in good academic standing, still eligible to play.

But critics say colleges can misrepresent the number of eligible transfers.

"It’s very easy to monkey with the eligibility figures so it appears a kid would’ve been eligible but he may or may not have been," says Welch Suggs, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Georgia who has studied athletes’ graduation rates. (Mr. Suggs is also a former reporter for The Chronicle.)

NCAA officials say they take such concerns seriously and have come down hard on programs that have done it.
Most people agree that the NCAA’s rate is a more accurate estimate than the federal number. But if the federal government underestimates how many students complete their degrees, the NCAA makes the opposite mistake—it overestimates, says Woodrow Eckard, a professor of economics at the University of Colorado at Denver.

"The NCAA treats all students that are eligible as if they transfer to another school," he says, "ignoring that a lot of these kids simply drop out."

Legitimate Estimates

There’s no perfect way of tracking what happens to transfers. Many move on to other NCAA colleges, where they become part of their new institution’s cohort. Others go on to different colleges and complete their degrees. But some never finish.

Those who left in good academic standing, with roughly a 2.0 grade-point average or better, represent a sizable chunk of big-time athletes. Of the nearly 115,000 players identified in the association’s 2013 report, about 21,000 had transferred in good standing.

Todd Petr and Tom Paskus, the NCAA’s chief data experts, acknowledge that they have examined data showing that some athletes who leave college eligible for sports do not go on to graduate. But they say that some athletes who are counted as nongraduates in their metric eventually graduate.

Neither colleges nor the NCAA track students "well enough to be able to pin down the real graduation rate," Mr. Petr said. But the NCAA’s longitudinal studies, which include responses from tens of thousands of athletes, give him and Mr. Paskus confidence that the association’s estimates are legitimate.

The studies, Mr. Paskus said in an email, show that the NCAA "does NOT overestimate who graduates from somewhere, but actually slightly underestimates the true student-centered grad rate."
What Moves the Rates?

A variety of factors can affect institutions’ rates. One key factor, colleges say, is coaching turnover. Players often choose a college based on the coaching staff. And when coaches leave, many players follow. If the players don’t leave in good academic standing, colleges’ graduation rates take a hit.

Several coaching changes have contributed to a drop in graduation rates at Baylor University, says Bart Byrd, associate athletic director for student-athlete services.

Over a recent eight-year period, Baylor’s graduation-success rate for football declined the most of any major program, from 88 percent to 67 percent, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of the most recently available NCAA data.

A change in a program’s stature can also affect rates, Mr. Byrd said. Baylor’s football team finished the 2011 and 2013 seasons ranked in the top 15 in the country, which led some second- and third-string players to transfer, seeking more playing time.

Another factor, Mr. Byrd says, is that the NCAA has become more lenient with waivers, allowing players to avoid losing a year of eligibility when they transfer. That leniency, he says, has encouraged some players to leave.

Still, many Baylor players have stayed on track to graduate, and the university expects its football graduation rate to go back up soon.

This season Baylor’s team has eight players who have already earned their degrees, Mr. Byrd said. They include Bryce Petty, the quarterback, who graduated in May with a degree in health-sciences studies.

Just as coaching changes can contribute to declining graduation rates, stability at the top can improve them. After a series of coaching changes in the early 2000s, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa hired Nick Saban as its head football coach. Since taking over, in 2007, the football graduation rate has climbed steadily.
Last year the Crimson Tide’s six-year rate reached 73 percent. Less than a decade ago, it was 39 percent.

**More Resources**

Alabama’s rise has helped boost the Southeastern Conference, the *Chronicle* analysis showed. Over a recent eight-year period, the SEC’s average graduation rate in football increased 25 percent, more than any of the big-five conferences. (The Big Ten, another of the wealthiest leagues, was No. 2.)

In the early 1990s, when Jon Dever, Alabama’s director of academic services for athletics, was hired, the university had just five academic-support staff members, including a secretary, he says. Now it has 15. During the football season, he says, the university hires up to 100 tutors. And its academic facilities for athletes have grown exponentially, from about 2,000 square feet when he started to 40,000 today.

Those resources can help, but Coach Saban wields another stick.

"All players here want to play, and they know they can’t practice or play unless they do what they’re supposed to do in school," he said. "I hope they all want to go to school, but I know they all want to play.

"I can really get our players to do academically what I want them to do," he said, "more easily than what I could get my own kids to do."

That may not always translate into more graduates, he acknowledges. But the nudges help get them closer to their degrees.

*Jonah Newman contributed to this article.*

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**Football Programs With the Biggest Swings in Graduation Rates**
NCAA graduation rates can fluctuate for many reasons, and critics say they do not always accurately reflect how many players are completing their degrees. But they are the association’s best metric for evaluating outcomes.

Below are the biggest movers among top-level football programs over a recent eight-year period, from 1998 to 2006.

**Football programs with sharpest declines in graduation rates**

Baylor U., 88% in 1998 to 67% in 2006

Kansas State U., 75% in 1998 to 59% in 2006

Indiana U. at Bloomington, 77% in 1998 to 67% in 2006

Vanderbilt U., 93% in 1998 to 82% in 2006

U. of Nebraska at Lincoln, 85% in 1998 to 76% in 2006

**Football programs with sharpest increases in graduation rates**

U. of Alabama, 39% in 1998 to 73% in 2006

U. of Minnesota-Twin Cities, 41% in 1998 to 75% in 2006

U. of Georgia, 45% in 1998 to 82% in 2006

Michigan State U., 41% in 1998 to 70% in 2006

U. of Kansas, 46% in 1998 to 70% in 2006

Source: National Collegiate Athletic Association