Editorial on campus rape has undercurrent of 'share the blame'

June 17, 2015

Regarding "Ending campus ‘rape culture’ " (June 15):

There is a tone to the editorial that makes me think: did a woman write this? You're correct, of course, that if you're going to be in the presence of predators who may commit a felony on your body, you should stay sober. Alas, young people do not listen to this because they are so naïve that they would never expect rape. Mizzou had to dispense with their Greek's Little Sister and Big Brother programs awhile back, because the rate of rape was so bad, little sisters actually thought that "big brothers" would treat them with respect.

Freshmen women make the best targets.

You also made a feeble effort to say that "women must share some responsibility for changing the campus culture." The advice should be: groups of young males, unsupervised in the presence of alcohol, are more likely to commit rape. Therefore, although the rapist is totally responsible if he forces sex onto another person, women would need to be sober to defend themselves against potential felons like this.

Women aren't the ones who joke in private about "scoring" on a man's body. They aren't the ones who, in droves, try to get others drunk to get sex while our culture jokes about it. I've heard two men in their 70s joke about this in the last year.

Ask the administrators of universities how the fraternity alumni threaten to withdraw donations. Can't afford to give up that money — don't enforce underage drinking. Colleges have covered up rapes for decades and there are lawsuits over that.

Then when the editorial concludes, "The key is education," its first comment is that women must learn how to resist pressure to have sex? I spent years teaching sexual assertiveness at the community college; today's campus rape centers are knocking themselves out to increase awareness of when a victim is being targeted by predators, and the first advice is that women don't know how to resist pressure? Talk to rape survivors who screamed, fought, and said no, and or woke up from drugs in the drink.

What's wrong with the editorial is a matter of emphasis: If you're young and naïve, someone may try to intoxicate you in order to steal your wallet. Perhaps you can be educated to avoid thieves. But it's the thief who should be blamed. There's an undercurrent of "We share the blame" in the editorial.
And the clothes? Yes, research shows that, unlike women, men view revealing clothes as an invitation to intercourse. But the good men that I know wouldn't assault a woman even if she was walking down the street stark naked.

Elizabeth Powell • St. Louis County

Greek leaders implement sexual violence education at Mizzou sororities


COLUMBIA, Mo. - After proposed rules for University of Missouri fraternities cause an uproar on social media, now Greek leaders are working to educated women about sexual violence.

The MU Panhellenic Association implemented a new education plan for the upcoming school year.

Until now, educating members on sexual violence has been up to each individual sorority on the Mizzou campus with no guidelines from Panhellenic. Mizzou sophomore and Delta Delta Delta member Erin Peters said although her sorority has discussions on the topic, she would not know what to do if she were a victim.

"Definitely not," Peters said." No. Even having that meeting, I wouldn't even know where to begin or to start."

Now, each sorority will be required to host a training session with all new members.

"Newer members come to college without a really good understanding of what sexual violence really means," PHA Vice President of Risk Management Kendall Foley said. "And so that's why we're trying to provide more education right when those newer members get to college."

A group of new members from each sorority will learn about prevention and reporting in a training session. And chapter leaders will go to a yearly summit on how to handle different scenarios.
"A lot of times what happens is leaders in a chapter are faced with a situation where members come to them and they say, 'this has happened to me, what do I do' because they're leaders, they're supposed to know what to do," Foley said. "But really, they haven't been trained on that. And that's really overwhelming and scary for them. Plus they're not able to provide the support that they need for that member who is coming to them."

Panhellenic will give leaders resource manuals. Plus, all sororities will be required to provide a sexual violence education program at least once a year with PHA, the Title IX office and the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center.

"We don't need the same education as fraternity members," MU Chi Omega member Maddie Stanze said. "And I think it's a good idea for the Mizzou campus as a whole to have the education, not just the Greek community."

---

**Law enforcement, Mizzou respond to ESPN report**


COLUMBIA -- A recent ESPN Outside the Lines report said many victims of alleged crimes involving Mizzou Athletes did not go through with charges or prosecution because they feared fan backlash and unwanted publicity.

The study examined criminal activity involving athletes on football and men's basketball teams from ten major universities from 2009-2014.

The study found Mizzou had 63 criminal incidents, 38% of which went unprosecuted or charges were dropped because of that aforementioned fear.

Columbia area law enforcement says it is important to report crimes, no matter who it involves.
"It doesn't matter if you're a high profile athlete, a leader in the community or not, we treat everybody the same, nobody gets preferential treatment,” said Detective Tom O’Sullivan of the Boone County Sheriff’s Department.

Law enforcement officials tell us there are multiple resources for victims of any crime allegedly committed by anyone.

"It's important for a victim to know that they aren't going to go through this alone. They're going to have support. And they're going to have people that will have their back," said O’Sullivan.

Captain Brian Weimer of the MU Police Department said although it works closely with the Mizzou Athletic Department, it does not give the program extra warnings or special treatment.

Christian Basi of the University of Missouri News Bureau, said in the past 18 months, the university has taken many actions to improve the safety of campus and enhance resources available to students who are victims of crime. Some of those improvements include:

- Completion of a comprehensive review of all sexual assault and mental health resources, policies, procedures and training available to students, staff and faculty.

- Creation of a sub-taskforce in Intercollegiate Athletics to evaluate how the department handles student incidents and concerns related to sexual assault.

- Educating faculty and staff about their responsibilities and procedures related to sexual assault. Basi said this is ongoing.

- Creating an independent committee with special training to specifically handle cases in which a student is accused of sexual assault. Previously, these cases were handled by the Office of Student Conduct, according to Basi.

- Engaging NCHERM, an outside consultant, to determine if improvement in other areas is needed. NCHERM conducted numerous training sessions and assisted with policy development, according to Basi.

- The creation of http://title9.missouri.edu . The site contains an online reporting form that can be completed anonymously.

- The UM System Board of Curators revised the university’s Collected Rules and Regulations to further strengthen the university’s response to sexual misconduct and discrimination.

- Hiring a full-time Title IX administrator, Ellen Eardley, who was hired April 20th.
New investors are putting billions in this fund

If you're too busy to do laundry or cook dinner, you probably don't have loads of time to invest either.

Many people in your shoes are putting their investments on "auto pilot" in target date funds. You sign up, put your money in the fund and basically forget about it until you retire.

It's called "target date" because you select one fund to put your money into that best matches the approximate year you want to retire. So if you're 25 today, you probably want to go into 2055 fund (which works out to retiring around 65).

It's essentially a one-stop shop for investing because target date funds gradually adjust the amount of stocks and bonds in your portfolio. They become more conservative as you near retirement. So when you're 25, the target date fund typically has you more heavily invested in stocks. By the time you retire, your portfolio is heavy on the bonds.

New, inexperienced investors are more likely to enter into target-date funds than anyone else, according to a study by University of Missouri professor Michael Guillemette.

A popular choice: "[Target-date funds are] simply a way for an investor to let someone else drive the car," says Brad McMillan, chief investment officer at Commonwealth Financial Network. Average investors "are probably going to come out better with a target-date fund...than they're going to do by themselves."

In theory, they are simple. But they aren't bullet proof. Like any investment, you want to do a little homework, especially on fees. The managers of target date funds can use an array of investing options to make up the portfolio. Some of those investments cost more than others.

It's not entirely "one size fits all." But increasingly, target date funds are finding appeal with young investors.

Born in 1994, target date funds have ballooned in recent years. People had over $700 billion invested in target date funds at the end of last year, according to Morningstar. That's about double the amount from 2011.

A key law change in 2006 has allowed employers to automatically enroll employees who do not want to actively manage their 401(k) money into target date funds. That has also spurred the big surge in target date investing.
What to ask before you invest: If you're considering putting your money -- especially your 401(k) -- into a target date fund, which millions already do, ask these questions:

1. **How much time do you want to spend on your funds?** Consider how much time you want, or have, to manage your investments.

2. **Can you invest better than a target date fund?** Can you do better than the "auto pilot" option? Take a look at performance over many years of the target date fund versus some of your other options.

3. **What are the fees?** If they're high, it might take away some advantages.

4. **Did your employer automatically enroll you in a target date fund for your 401(k)?** Call up your provider and ask if you are uncertain if you're already enrolled in a target date fund.

Here's the skinny on target date funds recently.

**Performance:** Target date funds are beating the average Joe.

Only 41% of retail investors -- that's you, your mom, your dad, etc. -- beat the average gains of a target date fund last year, according to Openfolio, an investing app that allows users to share their portfolio and compare with others.

Generally speaking, target date funds -- with their mix of stocks and bonds -- have performed better than bond funds but a little less than equity funds in recent years.

The average S&P 500 total return fund, which is all stocks, gained about 12.7% in the last four quarters. The typical target date fund that expires in 2040 -- think where you'll be in 25 years! -- gained 6.6%. Barclays Total Return bond fund, a yardstick for how many bond funds perform, rose 5.7%.

The key difference is that a target date fund offers the diversity that a bond and stock fund do not. You may have made more in all-stock fund in the past 12 months, but you're also more vulnerable to volatility.

**Fees:** They vary. There are three big players in target date funds: Fidelity, T. Rowe Price and Vanguard. On a fund that "expires" in 2045, Fidelity charges 0.75% ($7.50 for $1,000) and Vanguard charges 0.18% ($1.80 per $1,000).

Fidelity and T. Rowe Price are more expensive because they invest in actively managed funds -- stock and bond funds run by people. The idea is that these experts should beat the market over time. But that's a big debate in the investing world.

Vanguard, on the other hand, invest solely in passively managed funds, which just mimic indexes like the S&P 500. It's very cheap to do that, although you're not going to "beat the market" when you essentially own the market.
When happens when you hit the target date: When a target date fund reaches its end year -- say 2055 -- it doesn't simply end overnight. It lives on, just becoming more and more conservative until it reaches a landing point where the allocation doesn't change. If the fund is never cashed out, managers roll it into a retirement fund, says Jeff Holt, an analyst at Morningstar who covers target date funds.

The biggest consideration is to ask yourself how much you want to learn about investing and how much time you want to spend on it.

With a target date fund, you don't need to learn much and you will have more time to make dinner, play with the kids or mow the lawn.

"It's similar to going to the doctor," says Holt. "Do I want to hand off the responsibility to the surgeon or do I want to just learn how to do it myself?"

Big Question: Can My Brain Get Too Full?

You remember your first kiss. You remember your childhood phone number, where you parked your car, and the last time you got really drunk. You probably remember the digits of pi, or at least the first three of them (slacker).

Each day you accumulate fresh memories—kissing new people, acquiring different phone numbers and (possibly) competing in pi-memorizing championships (we would root for you). With all those new adventures stacking up, you might start worrying that your brain is growing full. But, wait—is that how it works? Can your brain run out of space, like a hard drive? It depends on what kind of memory you’re talking about.

“It’s not like each memory takes a cell and then that cell is used up,” says Nelson Cowan, cognitive psychologist at the University of Missouri. Over the long term, memories are encoded in neural patterns—circuits of connected neurons. And your brain’s ability to knit together new patterns is limitless, so theoretically the number of memories stored in those patterns is limitless as well.

Memories don’t always keep to themselves, though. They can crossbreed, like similar but distinct species, creating the recollection equivalent of a mule. If you can’t remember it, a
memory is pretty much worthless—and similar memories can interfere with each other, getting in the way of surfacing the right one. Though memory interference is well documented, researchers like Cowan are still guessing at the phenomenon’s neural mechanics.

“I assume it happens because two different ideas that are similar have similarities in the patterns of brain activity,” he says. “Your brain has to settle into the right pattern, and if you are confused, your memory can fail when you settle on the wrong pattern.” If you’re learning two related languages at the same time, say Portuguese and Spanish, you may find words from one invading the sovereign territory of the other. It’s not that you’re out of hard drive space; you’re just learning to sort and group the information you’ve newly acquired. Theoretically, your storage capacity for long-term memories is endless.

You possess a different kind of memory, though, known as working or short-term memory—and that kind easily fills to capacity and overloads. Juggling more than just a few pieces of information in your head at once is really hard. Throw one item too many into the mix and you’ve forgotten the name of the person you were just introduced to, or lost the idea you had before you got that phone call.

Researchers can count the items people can retain in short-term memory. And it’s not a lot. When asked to remember colored spots on a computer screen, for example, most people can only remember three or four of them. Tasked with remembering random letters, most people max out at seven. “But if I ask you to remember the letters ‘CIA, FBI and IRS,’” says Cowan, “you can remember those nine letters no problem. But because they’re not meaningless, but are grouped in your mind, it’s really like remembering just three items.”

It is by assigning items meaning, and collecting them into larger chunks, says Cowan, that we expand the number of concepts that we can mentally manipulate. Essentially, that’s the process of learning—turning short-term memories into long-term ones. The brain deals with lots of information with maximum efficiency by extracting general information, and slotting it into the categorical models we’ve been building since our birth.

Forgetting is, counterintuitively, an important part of that learning process. “Our brains aren’t designed to store an infinite amount of information,” says Joe Tsien, a neurologist who runs the Brain Decoding Project at Georgia Regents University.

Behavioral studies have shown that learning something new can promote forgetting. That’s an advantage because old information is likely to interfere with newer, more useful information. Did you meet someone interesting over the weekend at a party? Your brain probably kept the information it found important: if they seemed charming, smart, or funny. It’s in your best interest to forget the color of the buttons on their shirt, or the number of freckles on their nose.

A study published this spring in *Nature Neuroscience* used neuroimaging to reveal how this happens. When two ideas compete with each other, the brain rallies inhibitory mechanisms to its aid, suppressing the distracting idea. The networks encoding old memories wither, and new
memories are reinforced by the mere process of recollection. (Some people with a condition known as hyperthymestic syndrome can’t forget, and generally wish they could.)

Just because you’ve forgotten something though, doesn’t mean it’s permanently erased. “It can be hard to extract just the right information on demand,” Cowan says. “But it may still be there.” Memories often depend on context. In a famous study from 1975 published in the British Journal of Psychology researchers demonstrated that participants who learned lists while scuba diving had better recall when they were underwater than when they were on land.

In the same way, it’s easier to remember the bartender’s name in the same bar you met them. If memorizing more digits of pi is part of your game, put yourself into the same mental context each time (imaging yourself in certain place, for instance) to retain more. Your brain has a lot more storage than you’ve used, so get to it.

**COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN**

Matthes: Recovery from recession uneven in Columbia

ALEXANDRA WOZNICZKA, 11 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — Columbia City Manager Mike Matthes issued his annual State of the City report on Tuesday, critiquing the city's performance on meetings its goals over the past year and outlining the challenges that lie ahead.

Matthes said city government has increased residents' satisfaction in many respects. Still, he said in the 10-page report, it must do more to ensure equal opportunity across the board.

"I believe that we reached all of the most important goals included in our strategic plan," Matthes wrote in his introductory message to residents. "Although we see progress, we also see troubling signs that not everyone in Columbia has an opportunity to thrive."

Key areas of the report focused on the city's unemployment situation, affordable housing and a continued erosion of sales tax revenue.
UNEMPLOYMENT

Although the overall unemployment rate in Columbia has decreased since 2009, a wide gap between black and white unemployment remains — and over the past few years, it has gotten wider.

In 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, unemployment among Columbia's black residents was 15.7 percent; among white residents, that number was 4.4 percent. Nationwide, the black unemployment rate is about double that of whites, said Eric Parsons, an assistant research professor at MU who specializes in labor economics.

Moreover, unemployment among Columbia's black residents has risen since 2009, when the U.S. economy technically emerged from recession. Between 2009 and 2013, black unemployment in Columbia has risen 1.6 percent. White unemployment decreased 0.9 percent over that same period.

Although economists expect a gap between white and black unemployment on a national level, Parsons said, "the fact that the gap has widened in the past few years is surprising and concerning."

Tyree Byndom, a KOPN radio host and a prominent voice in the local black community, said the issue is more complicated than it looks.

“Other individuals, they would probably say it’s one-dimensional, but it’s not. It’s ancient, and it goes back to slavery and up to now,” he said, citing uneven access to education and job training along with racial discrimination.

Over time, Columbia has lost a lot of the manufacturing and vocational jobs that would be able to employ people who don’t have college degrees, Parsons said.

"The Columbia economy is heavily driven by the university and health care," he said. "The jobs that are available in Columbia tend to be very technical."
The black community hasn't been adequately prepared for such a specialized job market, Byndom said. “There’s not a job shortage, there’s a skill shortage.”

Third Ward Councilman Karl Skala said the city needs to do a better job of developing a workforce geared towards a broad, diverse set of skills — something that hasn’t been happening in recent years.

Second Ward Councilman Michael Trapp agreed. He said supporting manufacturing and construction jobs, which require no college degree but pay a living wage, “would be helpful.”

Byndom also pointed to the destruction of the historic Sharp End district during a period of urban renewal, which he said wiped out more than 120 businesses along with the local black community’s economic center.

Trapp agreed that the effects of urban renewal continue to reverberate through the community. “I think it’s reflective of the historic nature of how we’ve treated the African-American business community,” he said.

**AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Matthes’s report noted that satisfaction with how the city government plans for growth reached a new low at 28 percent in 2014, down from about 33 percent in 2013.

“Almost half of Columbia’s rental households are 'cost-burdened' by rent and utilities, leaving less money to spend on other basics like food, clothing and health care,” his report said.

While the city has taken steps to introduce affordable housing, Skala said, concerns remain “about the lack of affordable housing — and also how affordable 'affordable housing' really is.”

Trapp and Councilmen Clyde Ruffin and Ian Thomas of the First and Fourth wards, respectively, have formed a work group to focus on affordable housing. They plan to hold an affordable housing conference to “show that it can meet a social need and also be profitable,” Trapp said.
Some of the proposed initiatives include looking at zoning codes, introducing inclusionary housing laws and urban planning.

**INTERNET PURCHASES EAT INTO SALES TAX REVENUE**

Because items that people buy online aren’t taxed at the local level, the city loses money from those purchases every year — an estimated $18 million over the past decade, Matthes reported.

"We're not keeping up with inflation or growth as far as sales tax is concerned," Trapp said. Both he and Skala said there's little the city can do about it right now.

"If we don't have the local law, we won't be able to capitalize on it if it passes at the federal level," Trapp said.

**OTHER KEY POINTS**

Matthes' 10-page report, which is augmented by colorful photographs and graphics, outlined key accomplishments, goals and challenges in several areas.

**CUSTOMER SATISFACTION**

- Columbia residents’ satisfaction with city employees' customer service increased to 74 percent in a 2014 survey from 69 percent in 2013. Matthes said that exceeds the Missouri-Kansas and national averages by 20 percent. The city's goal is 80 percent.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- The city added 115 biotech jobs and attracted more than $52 million in new investment in 2014, Matthes reported.

- The city saw a 9.6 percent increase in hotel gross receipts from 2013 to 2014.

- More than 106,000 passengers used Columbia Regional Airport in 2014, up 23 percent from the previous year.

**FINANCIAL HEALTH**
• The city collected $1.6 million more in sales tax revenue in 2014 than in 2013. Still, at 13.4 percent over the past 10 years, general revenue growth is failing to keep pace with inflation (21.2 percent) or population growth (24.6 percent), Matthes said.

• The city ended fiscal 2014 with $27.1 million in general fund cash on hand.

GROWTH MANAGEMENT

• Residents' satisfaction with the city's growth management dipped to 28 percent, an all-time low, according to the 2014 survey. Matthes said that dissatisfaction was particularly pronounced in the central city. Population density has risen to 1,800 people per square mile from 1,715 people per square mile in 2010. The city has issued building permits for nearly 1,500 apartments over the past three years.

• The median home sales price in Columbia was $169,250 in 2014, up from $119,000 in 2000.

PUBLIC SAFETY

• Columbia police cleared 57 percent of violent crimes in 2014, the highest rate since 2010 and well above the national average of 48 percent, Matthes said.

INFRASTRUCTURE

• The city has invested $7.7 million in street resurfacing projects over the past three years. It repaved 360 miles of pavement in 2014 and built 16,141 feet of new sidewalks and pedways. It installed 7.24 miles of water mains and replaced 1,743 feet of sewer pipe.

WORKFORCE

• Turnover among city government employees fell to 8.8 percent in 2014, compared to 10.9 percent in 2013. The city also graduated the first class of supervisors to attend its internal City University.
More prospective teachers in Missouri failing exit exams

June 17, 2015
By Jessica Bock

JEFFERSON CITY • Prospective Missouri teachers are failing a new batch of exit exams at high rates. The lower passage rates immediately followed the state’s adoption of more challenging exams. The move has prompted criticism from those overseeing college programs that train future teachers.

Less than half of the teacher candidates passed exams in 12 subject areas on their first attempt, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reported Tuesday to the State Board of Education.

Overhauling the tests has been divisive, with some college administrators accusing state leaders of wanting more teachers to fail.

“They are getting what they wanted,” said Diana Rogers-Adkinson, dean of Southeast Missouri State University’s College of Education, one of several who predicted that failure rates would spike if teacher colleges were not given enough time to prepare their students.

Prospective teachers, counselors, librarians, principals and superintendents must earn a qualifying score in a series of exit exams to earn their certification.

The new teacher tests are part of an effort to improve struggling K-12 public schools. The effort in Missouri mirrors those nationwide: Fix the programs that train teachers, in order to fix the country’s poor performing schools.

Since September, those seeking teacher certification in the state have been taking the new exams, called the Missouri Content Assessments. The tests replaced a version called Praxis. More than 7,100 of the new exams had been administered as of April.

Scores generally improved when candidates retook the test, reducing the number of subject tests that had less than a 50 percent passage rate to six.
After repeated attempts on the middle school math test, 45 percent passed, compared with 100 percent on the old exam. Passing rates also were low on successive tries on high school math, physics and chemistry, at 19 percent, 25 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

Those in favor of overhauling teacher education programs say the previous tests were too easy.

A recent report from the National Council on Teacher Quality found that students in teaching programs were more likely to graduate with better grades than peers in other majors. Teacher education programs say that in the rush to fix low-performing schools, data are often misinterpreted, teachers are blamed and teacher colleges become scapegoats.

Paul Katnik, an assistant commissioner in the state department of education, said the new exams are about having high standards for Missouri teachers, and requiring a stronger command of the subjects they teach.

“They’re more rigorous assessments. That was the intent. Putting excellent teachers in a classroom means they really know their content,” he said.

Not only are teacher candidates tested on new material, they also are given longer tests with insufficient time to finish, Rogers-Adkinson said.

For instance, one test that previously required students to answer 50 questions in two hours now requires students to answer 100 questions in two hours and 15 minutes, she said.

Rogers-Adkinson also pointed to the scores for chemistry, where none of the 11 prospective teachers who took the exam passed the first time.

“I don’t think every single unified chemistry major in Missouri has zero knowledge of chemistry,” she said.

**REVIEW FOR BIAS**

The State Board of Education on Tuesday discussed a few changes, such as reducing the number of questions on seven exams and extending the amount of time permitted to complete the tests by 15 minutes, at the suggestion of two advisory boards. They did not adjust the scores needed to pass.

But they are reconvening committees to review the test, one that will again look for signs of bias. The board plans to discuss the issue further with the Coordinating Board for Higher Education.

Rogers-Adkinson said her main issues with the new tests are that they come from a national vendor and haven’t been vetted for fairness and bias.

And just as importantly, she said, the state’s teacher colleges haven’t been given enough time to align what they teach in the classroom to what students are tested on.
Missouri has nearly 50 teachers colleges. They prepare teaching candidates to teach the full range of subjects offered in K-12 schools.

Nearly 800 teachers or others involved in educator preparation programs were involved in the development of the tests, according to the state education department.

Alexander Cuenca, an assistant professor of social studies at St. Louis University, said the state has put juniors and seniors enrolled in teacher education programs at a huge disadvantage.

They are required to take the new tests, after having been taught the information measured on the old tests.

“It’s not a question of how rigorous our programs are,” Cuenca said. “Tell us what it is our students need to know, and we will design our programs accordingly.” Cuenca noted the added expense for recent college graduates who have to take the test multiple times, sometimes paying nearly $300 for one test.

Cuenca, who also sits on a state advisory board for teacher preparation, said he finds it problematic that only 6 percent of the 35 prospective African-American teachers passed all four tests required for elementary school teaching.

He said it speaks to a bias within the tests that has not been properly appraised.

“We have to look at the kinds of questions in the tests, the ideas contained in them and how the questions are framed,” he said. “It isn’t a coincidence that so many students didn’t pass.”

The new exams and requirements are part of the state’s plan to change how teacher colleges perform. Also involved is the development of an annual report card for each program in the state.

Let Your Communications Professionals Tell the Truth—It’s their Job

June 16, 2015 - 3:00am

Teresa Valerio Parrot
I’m thinking about having t-shirts printed so I can hand them out to a number of my colleagues at the next conference I attend. They will say, “I get paid to tell the truth, so get your money’s worth.”

My colleagues and I work with a number of institutions on proactive and reactive communications and these days we are encountering three roadblocks at increasing and alarming rates. All three are warning signs for our team that our efforts to advocate for transparent communications may be at risk.

The first recipient of my t-shirt will be our colleagues who worry that sharing their counsel will put them at odds with their bosses. The reality is that we get paid to play devil’s advocate and are tasked with pushing for clear and truthful communications. Anyone who has “communications” or “public relations” in their title and isn’t advocating for the truth should look for a new job. Our bosses have the prerogative to follow our advice or not, but at the very least they should be presented with our best thinking and make that decision for themselves. Truthfulness is a core tenet of our jobs and we must live it if we want to have a say during a crisis.

We’ve all sat alongside that senior-level colleague who agrees profusely with the president despite evidence and data that indicate they should do otherwise. It’s infuriating and tremendously dangerous. Presidents need their senior staff to serve as litmus tests and gut checks or their tenures may come to premature ends.

This means that we may have to tactfully tell our bosses how a situation is being viewed by our campus community or those outside of our campus boundaries, when an apology needs to be issued and how best to live its words, and when our words or actions aren’t being believed and what underlying reality has set us on that path. It also means we need to explain to our superiors when they need to talk to the media and why, especially if they believe a reporter has an ulterior motive. It is my experience that reporters are looking for good stories and not for administrators’ heads on stakes—unless, of course, the administrator makes the situation personal. Once it’s personal, all bets are off.

The second recipient of my t-shirt is the communications professional who doesn’t have direct access to the president and has experienced varying degrees of success with their boss serving as intermediary. Even if they and their supervisor subscribe to a policy of honesty, there are still two filters and a natural time delay that dilutes and delays messages intended for the president. I understand protocol but during a crisis, protocol within communications can cause escalation of the situation.

I have a colleague who has extremely strong instincts on how to listen to a campus community and draft communications that address their concerns. She is a tremendous advocate for incorporating feedback into communications, can anticipate campus unrest before it bubbles to the surface and has the ability to match strategy to any situation. Yet, her campus is repeatedly tripped up in part because her advice never makes it to the level of the cabinet and her insight isn’t shared with her president. The structure of their organizational chart stymies her ability to contribute and her institution’s efforts to communicate with its community.

The final recipient of my newly designed t-shirt is my colleague who is asked to spin a situation by the board or leadership. We are truthful storytellers and bristle when asked to scale back transparency,
obscure our words or their meaning, or bury the lede. If asked to frame a situation in an untruthful way, my colleagues and I will push back against telling a story that is no longer in the best interest of the institution or doesn’t have the best interest of our faculty, staff or students in mind. Telling the truth sometimes stings, but lying or spinning can be fatal to a career.

I would never advocate for an institution hurting itself in a court of law or court of public opinion. We can truthfully communicate with our campuses, talk to the media, and share our stories in ways that balance transparency and our obligations to our campus community. It doesn’t have to be an all or none situation. Let your communicators share your institution’s truth. After all, it’s what they get paid to do.

Defining Competency

June 17, 2015

By Paul Fain

NO MU MENTION

The U.S. Department of Education and regional accreditors are closer to being on the same page about competency-based education.

Earlier this month the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, which represents the seven regional accreditors, issued a common framework for how to assess and approve competency-based programs. The Education Department followed last week, with a letter to accreditors that echoes many of the same points. The department's letter also described requirements for a meaningful faculty role in competency-based education, including students’ ability to interact directly with instructors.

With two sides of the regulatory triad that oversees higher education having weighed in (states are the third), experts said colleges have clearer guidance as they seek to create competency-based programs.

“It’s designed to provide clarity for our institutions,” Barbara Brittingham, president of the higher education commission of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and chair of C-RAC, said of the accreditors’ four-page guidance document.

Both the feds and regional accreditors included some basic definitions about competency-based education.
For example, the accreditors described relatively new competency-based programs that do not rely on the credit hour standard -- so-called direct assessment degrees. The document cites the department’s use of that term, and uses similar language about the approval process for direct assessment programs.

"They seem to be in synch,” said Deb Bushway, interim associate dean at the University of Wisconsin-Extension and former chief academic officer and vice president of academic innovation at Capella University, where she worked on competency-based programs.

The unusual degree of coordination between the feds and accreditors on the two documents could help smooth out the kinks in the department-backed experimental sites program on competency-based education. Experimental sites allow participating colleges to be exempt from certain rules for federal aid eligibility as they tinker with different approaches to higher education.

However, the experimental sites project on competency-based education has been sluggish at times, due in part to mixed messages from the department about the emerging form of higher education, which more than 200 institutions have begun offering or are seeking to offer.

For example, the Higher Learning Commission, which is the largest of the regional accreditors, recently froze its approval of new direct assessment programs.

The commission said it made that decision in response to enhanced expectations the department issued in December about the approval of competency-based degree tracks. The department’s Office of Inspector General also has been auditing the commission over its review of direct assessment programs. The accreditor said on its website that it would await clearer guidance from Washington.

“HLC has determined it must wait until receiving those guidelines before changing its protocols for review of direct assessment and establishing new protocols for review and approval of competency-based education,” it said. “HLC will provide new protocols as quickly as possible after we receive the guidelines from the department.”

The commission was glad to get the six-page letter from the feds to accreditors, said an HLC spokesman. But more may be needed to free up the logjam of colleges that have applied to give competency-based education a try.

“We are waiting on clarification as to whether or not this will eventually apply to competency-based education as a whole or just to experimental sites,” the spokesman said via email. “Our being able to provide new protocols for our institutions will depend on that clarification.”

**Defining the Faculty Role**

Even so, experts said the similar language in the two documents will clear up some confusion.

“The more clear that the regional accreditors are, the better for the institutions,” said Laurie Dodge, vice chancellor of institutional assessment and planning and vice provost at Brandman University. Brandman is one of six colleges with a direct that has earned approval from both the department and a regional accreditor. Dodge is also co-chair of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), a Lumina
Foundation-funded group that is comprised of institutions that either have competency-based degrees in place or are creating them.

The department’s letter describes what sort of quality review accreditors should conduct for competency-based programs that will be part of the experimental sites work.

In addition to describing what, exactly, constitutes a direct assessment program -- which has been an area of confusion for some -- the department’s letter touches on the faculty role in competency-based programs, many of which are online only.

The part faculty members play can be different than in the traditional model, particularly when it includes elements of self-pacing, where students can progress as fast as they can master course material or successfully complete assessments.

Instruction in competency-based programs and, more broadly, in online education, has been an area of scrutiny by the Office of Inspector General, which has criticized the department’s approval of direct assessment degrees and raised questions about the potential rise of poor-performing versions of competency-based education.

Accreditors are in charge of determining whether a college provides “regular and substantive” interaction between students and instructors as part of a competency-based program, according to the feds.

The department’s recent letter describes what it means by regular and substantive. Students must have access to qualified faculty, meaning instructors with “appropriate academic credentials and experience in the applicable knowledge domain,” the letter said. And that access must be available to students who are struggling to master learning materials or objectives, according to the department, or for “any reason when the student wants to interact with a faculty member.”

The department also described what that interaction might look like.

“While individual students may elect not to initiate contact with qualified faculty, program design must include periodic contact by qualified faculty with the students,” the letter said. “Those contacts could be made through the use of email or other social media, but must create the opportunity for substantive interaction.”

Learning coaches, online tutors and other support can be offered, too. And the department said those staff members may even account for the majority of students’ support. But programs must provide access to a qualified instructor “at least when students need or want it.”

The letter said competency-based programs can use teaching assistants, such as graduate students, to assess and grade student work, as traditional higher education has long done.

Both documents include a focus on tracking learning outcomes. Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher education at New America, has said competency-based education’s spread could help move the rest of the academy to better track what students learn.

“Could this signal a move to an outcomes-based approach?” she said. “I think it should.”
Brittingham said the collaboration between the group of regional accreditors and the department on competency-based education has been unusually intensive. She said C-RAC issued a similar guidance document on “best practice” in online education back in the 1990s.

Fred Hurst, senior vice president for extended campuses at Northern Arizona University, said he welcomed the new clarity from the regional accreditors. “It puts them on record.”

Northern Arizona enrolls about 500 students in its competency, Hurst said, with three new degree tracks on the way.

“We’re going full speed ahead,” he said.

Block That Regulation!

June 17, 2015
By Doug Lederman

NO MU MENTION

Take your higher education regulations and shove them, Obama administration.

Republicans in the House of Representatives didn't use exactly those words in the 2016 spending bill for the Department of Education they released Tuesday, but the message they delivered couldn't have been much clearer.

The bill drafted by Republican leaders of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees spending for education, health and labor programs would bar the Education Department from using any of its appropriated funds to carry out existing regulations related to "gainful employment" for graduates of vocational programs, state authorization, teacher preparation, and the credit hour, and to implement President Obama's envisioned system to rate colleges and universities.

Essentially, it would block virtually all efforts by the Obama administration to hold colleges more accountable for how they use federal funds, which Republican lawmakers (and many college officials) have opposed as overreaching, misdirected and unlikely to work. Republicans have opposed most of the initiatives previously,
but now that they control both houses of Congress, they are in a better position to actually block some of them -- or at least force President Obama to horse-trade for some of them in negotiations over the spending measures.

Administration officials, not surprisingly, characterized the House action as a move to undermine taxpayer protections, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan -- as he did last week in announcing new avenues to debt relief for student borrowers -- cranked up his anti-for-profit-college rhetoric in blasting the House bill's blockade of gainful employment rules.

“With students across the country reeling from the predatory behavior of failed and fraudulent ‘career’ colleges, it’s truly mind-boggling that House Republicans are still fighting tooth and nail to protect schools that take advantage of students and leave taxpayers with the bill,” Duncan said in a statement. “Make no mistake: a vote for this proposal is a vote to leave students in the dark and taxpayers holding the bag. Both deserve better.”

Beyond the policy roadblocks the bill would impose, the 2016 spending legislation would provide somewhat surprising increases for some programs important to colleges and universities, given the GOP's overall push to reduce federal spending.

The House Republican bill would bolster the budget of the National Institutes of Health by $1.1 billion over what the biomedical research agency is receiving this year, to $31.2 billion. That is $100 million more than President Obama requested.

In addition, programs designed to help disadvantaged youth attend college would get a boost, with the bill proposing an increase of $60.2 million (to $900 million) for the TRIO programs and $21 million more (to $322 million) for GEAR UP.

Under the measure, the maximum Pell Grant would grow to $5,915, but that rise would occur because of a previously enacted increase in mandatory budget funds. To the contrary, the House bill would use up to $370 million in surplus Pell funds left over from the 2015 fiscal year to fund other priorities in the legislation, much to the dismay of some college leaders.

"We are deeply concerned about the use of Pell funds to meet other priorities," David S. Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, said via email. Baime said the use of the funds was dangerous for community colleges because when shortfalls in Pell funding occur, as one almost inevitably will, they "have resulted in damaging eligibility changes to our students."

The House legislation would also cut almost 10 percent from the budget for workforce training programs and slash spending for the National Labor Relations Board, which has been increasingly active in trying to expand rights for workers in higher education and beyond.

Another measure approved by a House spending subcommittee Tuesday would keep 2016 funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities at its 2015 level, $146 million.