WE OWE CATERPILLARS FOR SPICY MUSTARD

Posted by Roger Meissen-Missouri on June 23, 2015

The next time you put mustard on a hotdog or horseradish on a burger, thank caterpillars and brassica for that extra flavor.

While these condiments might be tasty to you, the mustard oils that create their flavors are the result of millions of years of plants playing defense against pests. But at the same time, insects like cabbage butterflies worked to counter these defenses, which then started an arms race between the plants and insects.

Researchers recently gained insight into a genetic basis for this co-evolution between butterflies and plants in Brassicales, an order of plants in the mustard family that includes cabbage, broccoli, and kale.

“We found the genetic evidence for an arms race between plants like mustards, cabbage, and broccoli and insects like cabbage butterflies,” says Chris Pires, researcher at the University of Missouri Bond Life Sciences Center and associate professor of biological sciences.

“These plants duplicated their genome and those multiple copies of genes evolved new traits like these chemical defenses and then cabbage butterflies responded by evolving new ways to fight against them.”

OFF-PUTTING FLAVORS

While you might like the zing in mustard, insects don’t.
Compounds, called glucosinolates, create these sharp flavors in plants to defend against caterpillars, butterflies, and other pests. Brassicales species first evolved glucosinolate defenses around the KT Boundary—when dinosaurs went extinct—and eventually diversified to synthesize more than 120 different types of this compound.

For most insects, these glucosinolates prove toxic, but certain ones like the cabbage butterfly evolved ways to detoxify the compounds.

“Seeing the variation in the detoxification mechanisms among species and their gene copies gave us important evolutionary insights,” says Hanna Heidel-Fischer, a lead author of the study who is based at the Max Plank Institute for Chemical Ecology in Germany.

To look at these genetic differences, the team used 9 existing Brassicales genomes and also generated transcriptomes—the set of all RNA in a cell—across 14 Brassicales families. This let the team map an evolutionary family tree of sorts over the millennia, seeing where major defense changes occurred. This family tree was compared with the family tree of 9 key species of Pieridae butterflies, which includes the cabbage butterfly.

Pires and his colleagues identified three significant evolutionary waves over 80 million years, where plants developed defenses and insects evolved counter tactics.

“We found that the origin of brand-new chemicals in the plant arose through gene duplications that encode novel functions rather than single mutations,” says Pat Edger, a former postdoctoral researcher at University of Missouri and lead author of the study. “Given sufficient amounts of time the insects repeatedly developed counter defenses and adaptations to these new plant defenses.”

This back-and-forth pressure resulted in the evolution of many more species of plants and butterflies than in other groups without glucosinolate pressures.

**BUTTERFLIES AND CABBAGE**

About 50 years ago two now-renowned biologists, Peter Raven and Paul Erlich, introduced the idea of co-evolution to science. Using cabbage butterflies and Brassica
plants as a prime example, the two published a landmark study in 1964 advancing the idea that two species can mutually influence the development and evolution of each other.

To explore the genetics of how this works, Pires’ lab partnered with Chris Wheat, professor of population genetics in the zoology department at Stockholm University.

“Using Ehrlich and Raven’s principles and models, we looked at the evolutionary histories of these plants and butterflies side-by-side and discovered that major advances in the chemical defenses of the plants were followed by butterflies evolving counter-tactics that allowed them to keep eating these plants,” Wheat says.

This research provides striking support for the ideas of Ehrlich and Raven published 50 years ago.

“We looked at the patterns 50 years ago, and found conclusions that proved correct,” says Raven, professor emeritus of the Missouri Botanical Garden and a former University of Missouri Curator. “The wonderful array of molecular and other analytical tools applied now under leadership of people like Chris Pires, provide verification and new insights that couldn’t even have been imagined then.”

Understanding more about how plants and insects co-evolve could one day lead to advances in crops.

“If we can harness the power of genetics and determine what causes these copies of genes, we could produce plants that are more pest-resistant to insects that are co-evolving with them—it could open different avenues for creating plants and food that are more efficiently grown,” says Pires.

The findings appear in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The National Science Foundation, the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, and the Academy of Finland provided the funding for this research.
A new study says co-evolution could change condiments taste

Watch story: http://www.komu.com/player/?video_id=29435&zone=2,5&categories=2,5

COLUMBIA - A new study from the University of Missouri and the Stockholm University could change how some of your favorite condiments taste.

The researchers said a co-evolution relationship between Brassicales plants (cabbage, broccoli and kale) and butterflies could potentially create stronger, pest-resistant plants.

Chris Pires, associate professor of biological sciences at the Bond Life Sciences Center, said the research found plants were in what he called "an arms race" with the insects to fend them off.

"We actually identified which specific glucosinolates evolve over evolutionary time, and more importantly how the butterflies have reacted to that defense," he said.

Through these findings, Pires said researchers are trying to find ways to have this arms race benefit plants.

"So one thing we're hoping to do, by being able to identify these genes, is how we could improve either the flavor of condiments, like mustard, or make plants that can better defend themselves from cabbage butterflies," he said.

The new compounds created from the co-evolution process, called glucosinolates, create sharp flavors as a defense mechanism for plants to ward off insects and pests.

Glucosinolates, where mustard and horseradish gets its strong flavor from, is toxic to insects. Pires said cabbage butterflies are able to detoxify the plant's defense mechanisms.

"So we're not sure what the future is going to hold for the taste of mustard, but we do know that it is going to change, and so we'll have to see the results of the arms race is to find out what the future mustard on your hot dog will taste like," he said.
Researchers found the co-evolution process could also provide ways to have better food production.

"So when we talk about better food production we're talking about two things, it can either enhance or change the flavor of condiments. And second, we can create plants that are more resistant to insect pests," he said.

Jeff Spencer, owner of Just Jeff's Hot Dog Stand, said the finding might not affect his business or customers.

"The environmental things that are happening I don't think are going to change it enough to make a difference in the taste," he said.

He said if the change would make a significant difference on the mustards he use, he might need to change the way he makes his hot dogs.

"I sell Chicago hot dogs, and that's the only condiment they want. You can't even put ketchup on it. If it does change the taste of mustard then I'll have to change the hot dog," he said.

But he truly believes his customers won't notice the difference in the first place.

How caterpillars brought us kale and mustard: Study finds plants evolved in an ‘arms race’ to stop themselves being eaten

The next time you squirt mustard on your hotdog, thank caterpillar butterflies for its tangy flavour.

The mustard oil that creates the condiment's distinctive taste is the result of millions of years of plants defending themselves against pests.

Now, scientists have found direct genetic evidence for this arms race - and they say it could help them develop even tastier crops.

'These plants duplicated their genome and those multiple copies of genes evolved new traits like these chemical defences,' said Professor Chris Pires at the University of Missouri.
'Cabbage butterflies responded by evolving new ways to fight against them.'

According to the University's blog, Decoding Science, compounds, called glucosinolates, create these sharp flavours in plants to defend against caterpillars, butterflies and other pests.

Brassicales species – which include cabbage, caper, kale, mustard, turnip - first evolved glucosinolate defences at the time that the dinosaurs went extinct.

They eventually evolved to produce more than 120 different types of this compound.

'Seeing the variation in the detoxification mechanisms among species and their gene copies gave us important evolutionary insights,' said Hanna Heidel-Fischer, a lead author on the study based at the Max Plank Institute for Chemical Ecology in Germany.

To look at these genetic differences, the team used nine existing Brassicales genomes and generated transcriptomes - the set of all RNA in a cell - across 14 Brassicales families.

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This family tree was then compared with the family tree of nine key species of Pieridae butterflies, which includes the cabbage butterfly.

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Understanding more about how plants and insects co-evolve could one day lead to advances in crops.

'If we can harness the power of genetics and determine what causes these copies of genes, we could produce plants that are more pest-resistant to insects that are co-evolving with them,' said Pires.
Editorial: Title IX

Big meeting, no reporters

By Henry J. Waters III

Tuesday, June 23, 2015 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri staged a big meeting on campus Saturday to discuss Title IX enforcement. More than 200 people attended, yet the university saw fit to exclude reporters, as if there was some reason to limit public awareness of the proceedings.

After the meeting, many of those attending did speak with reporters, making one wonder what purpose campus leaders saw in refusing admittance.

In any event, by all accounts the meeting was worthwhile. Attendees discussed ways to limit sexual violence on campus, particularly when sororities and fraternities are involved. Several ideas were floated that received negative reaction, but many expressions of concern resonated favorably. The main benefit, most said, was simply getting everybody in the room talking about the problem.

One idea that received a lot of pushback was banning female guests in frat houses between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. on weekends. Leaders of both sexes objected, making old-timers like myself take notice. When we grew up, the very idea of cohabitation in student housing was unknown. Now it’s routine. Apparently when the sexes mingle on weekends over plentiful booze, bad things sometimes happen (duh), but today’s participants resist old-fashioned rules — fit only, they think, for children.

If they are old enough to go to college, they are old enough to make their own personal choices without meddling from the Office of Student Affairs.

Of course they are right, in the sense that this cat is long out of the bag, and it’s not fair to accuse MU Vice President of Student Affairs Cathy Scroggs of setting up shop in their bedrooms. She walks a fine line between surrogate grandmothers and standby adviser. In recent months as Title IX discussions have intensified, university officials here and elsewhere have jumped to the fore. UM system President Tim Wolfe in particular has gotten out front, trying to make his institution noticeably concerned about sexual violence on campus.
The Saturday group did seem to tolerate the idea of a “beer only” policy banning hard liquor at fraternity houses.

Summit attendees expressed pleasure at their conclave. They think it might become a national model of sorts. They think they will have another.

“That’s how everything starts, said Allison Fitts, president of the MU Panhellenic Association of sororities. Indeed, changing a culture is a long haul. Getting started is the first step.

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**Columbia Daily Tribune**

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**Weaver helps lead opposition to new hospital**

By Jodie Jackson Jr.

Tuesday, June 23, 2015 at 2:00 pm

A familiar face has become part of Boone Hospital Center’s opposition to a proposal for a new hospital in south Columbia.

Barbara Weaver, who served 34 years on the county-owned hospital’s board of directors before stepping down in April, said she has “all these questions and no answers” about a proposed 10-bed, $38 million hospital on a site where two mobile home parks currently are located.

**Officials with Boone Hospital and BJC HealthCare, which operates the hospital through a lease with the county, have adamantly opposed the certificate of need filed by Fulton Medical Center LLC, a partnership formed in December between Nueterra and University of Missouri Health Care.**

Residents of Ed’s and Sunset Hills mobile home parks, located at 4130 and 4150 S. Lenoir St., were notified in April that the parks would close on Oct. 1. The parks are owned by Whirlwind Properties LLC.

Boone Hospital President Jim Sinek said the geographic region to be served by the proposed hospital amounted to “gerrymandering” because it identified Fulton Medical Center — the former Callaway Community Hospital in Fulton — as the only existing hospital within the proposed service area; five hospitals are located within 4 miles of the new hospital site.

The certificate of need application says there would be “no impact” for hospitals closest to the proposed hospital’s service area.
The Missouri Health Facilities Review Committee will consider the certificate of need application at a public meeting July 13 in Jefferson City.

“There has not been an open discussion in our community” about the application, Weaver said. “I find that disturbing.”

The Boone Hospital Center board recently decided to rename the hospital’s “healing garden” in honor of Weaver.

“Over the years I have advocated for Boone in every kind of situation,” she said. “Even though I am no longer on the board, I still feel a responsibility to Boone … and to the health care of Boone County.”

Weaver’s advocacy for Boone Hospital’s position against the application coincides with the launch of a new website, www.standforboone.com, which directs people to an online petition that outlines the reasons for opposing the certificate of need.

Weaver said instead of teaming with Nueterra, MU Health should consider collaborating with Boone.

“They don’t seem to be receptive to that idea,” Weaver said.

MU Health CEO/COO Mitch Wasden has said the proposed new hospital in south Columbia will help MU Health Care address future growth and that University Hospital will be “maxing out our bed capacity” in three to four years. The certificate of need application does not mention absorbing MU Health’s future bed requirements.

Boone Hospital has 397 beds and often has a daily census of around 60 percent of that number. University Hospital, which did not provide a daily census count to the Tribune, has 361 beds. The Fulton hospital has 37 beds.

“I know that Boone has space” for more patients, Weaver said, referring to an unfinished floor in the hospital that is being renovated. She does not see a “compelling need” for additional hospital beds in the community and questions how a hospital in south Columbia will benefit residents in Fulton and Callaway County.

“How is that going to impact the health care in the Fulton community?” she asked. “That is a big concern. How does Nueterra’s profit out of that institution help Callaway and Fulton?”

Nueterra officials contend that the proposed Columbia hospital will be more convenient for Fulton and Callaway County residents.
Steam line breaks in MU campus building

COLUMBIA - University of Missouri Police and the Columbia Fire Department responded to a fire alarm early Wednesday morning in the university's Student Success Center.

According to a fire department official, a steam line broke causing sprinklers to go off. However, no one was in the building at the time.

The University Police were the first to the scene before being assisted by the fire department. The official said there's no word yet on the amount of damages.

Memorial set for former UM president Floyd

By THE TRIBUNE'S STAFF

Tuesday, June 23, 2015 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri will host a memorial for former UM System President Elson Floyd from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesday in the Great Room at the Reynolds Alumni Center, 704 Conley Ave.

System spokesman John Fougere said all members of the university community, past and present, are invited. A short program with guest speakers including current UM System President Tim Wolfe is scheduled for 11:30 a.m.

Fougere said anyone at the ceremony can give remarks in remembrance of Floyd after the program.
Floyd was UM System president from 2003 to 2007, when he left to be president at Washington State University. He died Saturday of complications from colon cancer.

Disputes Made Prevention Panel Stronger, Says Former Leader

For its first 25 years, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force toiled in relative obscurity.

Created by the federal government in 1984, the task force published books and articles in scientific journals that aimed to inform primary care practitioners about which preventive services were effective based on scientific evidence. It assigns preventive services such as screenings, medication and counseling grades from A to D, or an I for insufficient evidence.

In 2010, everything changed.

The massive health care bill that came to be called Obamacare included language requiring that preventive services scoring a grade of A or B from the task force had to be covered by health plans without charging consumers anything out of pocket. In one stroke, this volunteer group of nonpartisan medical experts found themselves thrust into the political hurly-burly. Their recommendations, including a controversial 2009 recommendation regarding breast cancer screening, came under intense scrutiny.

Dr. Michael LeFevre, a primary care physician who is vice chairman of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Missouri, chaired the task force from March 2014 until March 2015 and was a member of it for a decade. We spoke recently about his tenure and how the task force's role has evolved. The following interview has been edited and condensed.

How did the health law change the role that task force recommendations play in health care?

It would be disingenuous of me not to suggest that the link between the task force A and B recommendations and insurance coverage hasn't put an additional focus on our work. There are people who think we are making a coverage decision. We're not. We evaluate the science; we don't look at the costs. If the science doesn't make clear there's at least moderate certainty of net benefit, we don't recommend it. We know if we give it an A or a B, there will be a link to coverage, but we're not saying it should be covered.
Let's talk about the breast cancer screening recommendation. The task force in 2009 and again several months ago in a proposed update did not recommend mammograms for women age 40 to 49. The task force gave it a C rating, which means they should be offered selectively depending on patient preferences and health history in consultation with a physician. Some say this is a big mistake, that women in that age group won't get mammograms that may help detect breast cancer earlier. How do you respond to critics?

In 2009, when we released our recommendation for breast cancer screening, we were in the middle of the debate in Congress about the Affordable Care Act. And it was already written into the bill being considered that A and B recommendations would be covered without a copayment. So we became the focus of debate about the recommendation and coverage. This created a firestorm of publicity that was, honestly, ultimately good.

We were already working to try to improve our transparency and communication. I'd be dishonest to say that it didn't influence us. We realized that we have to be faster and clearer. Our audience is beyond primary care physicians, there are payers, government bodies and patients to consider.

But what about the charges of critics such as Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., a breast cancer survivor, who wrote in The Washington Post, "We know that mammograms are not perfect, but we also know that deferring them until after age 50 is dangerous."

It's important for us to separate out the issue of coverage from the science itself and the benefits and harms. We are well aware that many payers cover not only C recommendations but also D recommendations. All the ACA really does is set a floor and says that A and B recommendations have to be covered.

How do you decide which preventive services to review?

We try to update existing topics every five years, more or less often depending on events. Occasionally we retire a topic.

Anybody can nominate a new topic at any time. We have a work group that looks at it continuously. We have to decide, is it prevention, and is it something that can be implemented or referred by primary care clinicians? For example, we saw that Vitamin D deficiency screening was being promoted widely. We decided it was an important topic to review.

What other task force recommendations have been publicly controversial?

The 2009 breast cancer screening recommendation was the peak of public scrutiny. But the breast cancer screening recommendation for women 40 to 49 is not negative [since it suggests that mammography can be offered based on the views of the doctor and patient]. In contrast, we recommended against prostate cancer screening. We gave it a D. To my knowledge nobody has stopped covering prostate cancer screening. We got a lot of attention for that. We still get a lot of attention and some advocates still want that to change. I am surprised about the depth of feeling about the recommendations.
In your role as the immediate past chairman of the task force, you're involved as a consultant until next spring. What's on the drawing board going forward? How will the task force change and evolve in the next 10 years?

I look for us to continue to try to be transparent in our work. I can't tell you exactly what shape that will take as we go forward. We're not the wizard behind the curtain that makes decrees. We want people engaged in our work and to know how we do that work. Did we miss something, did we reach the right conclusions?

I look for us to increase communications. We are increasingly putting out tools for consumers on the Web. I'm probably not supposed to tell you this, but what the heck. Part of our method now, after we've reviewed the evidence, we actually have somebody from the communications team get up and grill us. A non-clinician. We feel like if we can't explain it, we haven't done our job. We appreciate that our language has to go beyond what a clinician understands.

Transparency, methodological rigor and communications. That's what we're focusing on.

June 24, 2015

Reining in a Fraternity Is No Easy Task, One University’s Leaders Learn

By Eric Kelderman

NO MU MENTION

It was a messy affair when the University of North Carolina at Wilmington closed its chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, in 2012. The group was kicked off campus for providing alcohol to minors, sponsoring a social affair after its activities were supposed to be suspended, and then lying to university officials about having done so.

So far, the fraternity’s return to the campus isn’t going much better.

Now that Sigma Alpha Epsilon’s two-year suspension has expired, university officials are trying to ensure that there is adequate oversight and accountability for its future
members. But the officials feel their efforts are being undercut by a group of the fraternity’s alumni, including a state legislator and an influential local businessman with strong ties to the governor, who have used their influence to protect the fraternity from a university administration they felt was unfair to the group. Further complicating the issue are the group’s ties to a local, private men’s club that played a central role in the city’s violent racial past.

Meanwhile, the national organization of the fraternity has contributed to the university’s sense of frustration by deferring authority over the local chapter to an alumni commission, along with a faculty adviser who has sued the university in the past.

Sigma Alpha Epsilon’s offenses at Wilmington pale in comparison to the bad that other chapters of the fraternity have been charged with—the fraternity has been dubbed the nation’s deadliest. But the case vividly demonstrates one of the main reasons that colleges have a hard time reining in their frats: Along with national associations, institutions struggle to define who is responsible when things go wrong.

William A. Sederburg, who will step down as interim chancellor of the Wilmington campus next month, when a new leader takes office, says the fraternity seems to want high standards for its members, but he worries about how to make sure members comply without getting the university mired in local politics.

"It just seems counterproductive to get into whether they were mistreated or not," Mr. Sederburg says. "My issue is, How do you try and build better relationships with them in the future?"

Sigma Alpha Alcohol

The problems that got the Wilmington chapter into trouble took place in the fall of 2012, during several off-campus parties, according to a review of the fraternity’s alleged infractions and the university’s responses.

In one incident in September of that year, an underage student was brought to the hospital for possible alcohol poisoning after attending a fraternity party. Nine days later, the police were called to a house party being hosted by SAE. (A neighbor had complained about the noise and disturbance.) An 18-year-old student tried to climb into the police car, thinking it was a cab, according to a summary of the events.
At that point, both the national association and the university issued an order for the fraternity to "cease and desist" from hosting any events. But in October other students reported that SAE had joined with a campus sorority in hosting a mixer. Sorority members then revealed that the fraternity had asked them to cover up the SAE chapter’s involvement.

In November, after a hearing before the student-conduct board, the university suspended the fraternity through May 2015. The national SAE organization followed with a similar order in February 2013.

**Phi Beta Backlash**

Then the drama began, fueled by the anger of chapter members and their powerful political connections.

In a deposition filed as part of an outside review of the university’s procedures, Chip Phillips, then the associate dean of students, said that fraternity members and a prominent alumnus, Parks Griffin, had tried to intimidate him. Mr. Griffin was a founding member of the Wilmington chapter of SAE and was chairman of Gov. Pat McCrory’s inaugural committee in 2013.

In local news reports at the time, Mr. Griffin denied Mr. Phillips’s accusation. In a voicemail message last week responding to The Chronicle's request for an interview, Mr. Griffin said that he now has little involvement with the local fraternity except for helping to arrange a venue for an annual alumni gathering.

Later in 2013, the governor appointed two SAE alumni to the university’s Board of Trustees.

Another SAE alumnus, State Rep. John R. Bell IV, a Republican, got involved the following year, introducing a bill to allow individuals and student organizations to bring legal representation to student disciplinary hearings. The measure passed with wide support in both chambers of the General Assembly.

Representative Bell said he would have sponsored the legislation regardless of his past SAE affiliation. "I’ve always been interested in student rights and due process," he said in an interview.

Also last year, amid the criticism of the student-conduct system, the chancellor at Wilmington, Gary L. Miller, left his position after just two years in the job. Mr. Miller
had been dogged by other controversies, including a lawsuit by a faculty member, Michael S. Adams, who sued the university after being denied tenure. Mr. Adams, who argued that he had been discriminated against because of his outspoken conservative views, won after lengthy proceedings.

Now he has been appointed as the faculty adviser to the reinstated chapter of SAE.

**Nu Relationship?**

All of those events set the stage for a very difficult relationship between the fraternity and the university, the chancellor says.

In particular the choice or Mr. Adams as faculty adviser seemed meant to spark a confrontation — the professor of criminal justice maintains a blog that has been considered controversial for its conservative viewpoint and provocative headlines. One column, titled "The KKK Took My Building Away," criticized the effort at UNC's flagship campus, in Chapel Hill, to change the name of a building that had previously honored a 19th-century alumnus who also led the state chapter of the Klan.

Mr. Sederburg, who has been interim chancellor since Mr. Miller’s departure last July, says making Mr. Adams the chapter’s adviser was "a very poor decision."

"This is a person who is committed to a hostile position against the university," he says.

Mr. Adams did not respond to requests for comment.

There have been other missteps along the way, Mr. Sederburg says. Early this year, Representative Bell suggested a meeting with the chancellor at the Cape Fear Men’s Club, the site of the fraternity’s first initiation ceremony in 1981 and a regular meeting spot for the group over the years.

But the Cape Fear club is also a private membership group that served as one of the meeting places for leaders of a violent 19th-century insurrection by white Democrats against Republican city leaders and prominent black citizens.

Mr. Sederburg declined the invitation. When asked about that proposed meeting, Representative Bell says he "honestly doesn’t know anything about it."

Instead, the lawmaker insists the real problem is that administrators have treated SAE more harshly than they treat other fraternal organizations. "When the university
removed the chapter, I was shocked by the process," Mr. Bell says. "When all the evidence was presented" to the national SAE, he adds, "it was very evident that there had been some discriminatory actions."

In response to the criticism from Mr. Bell and others, the university commissioned an independent review of its procedures by a former general counsel of the state’s university system. That report found no wrongdoing by the university and noted that neither fraternity members nor the alumni who protested the actions disputed the actual charges against the chapter.

In addition to the mire of local politics, university officials are frustrated by the stance of the national SAE organization, which they see as deferring responsibility for the local chapter.

Michael A. Walker, associate vice chancellor and dean of students at UNC-Wilmington, says the national association has changed its original stance barring former members from rejoining the fraternity.

And the group has designated a local alumni commission as having primary responsibility for overseeing the chapter. University officials, however, want the national group to take oversight and be the primary contact for issues of health and safety.

"It might not be unusual to have an alumni group in an advisory role," Mr. Walker says, "but not in an authoritative role."

Brandon Weghorst, a spokesman for the national SAE, says he doesn’t know enough about the situation in Wilmington to confirm that previous members will be allowed to rejoin. And typically, the local alumni group is seen as an extra layer of oversight for a chapter that is coming off suspension, he says.

Mark P. Koepsel, executive director of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, says the university will still have a direct line to the national organization to the regional director. "Those local alumni are much better positioned to provide consistent leadership, mentorship, and guidance to the undergraduate members," he says.

Mr. Sederburg’s term ends on July 1, and he will be clear of the controversy that he considers one of his setbacks as interim chancellor. But he also sees the situation as a
lesson for the incoming chancellor and other institutions that are trying to rein in fraternities.

"If you want to have high standards and hold people accountable, it has to go back to the nationals," he says. "You don’t want to get embroiled in local politics."

Class Checkers

June 24, 2015

By Jake New

NO MU MENTION

It’s a common occurrence at many colleges: a player from the basketball or football team is about to enter a classroom when he is stopped by a fellow student asking for his signature.

Signing this autograph won’t land the athlete in trouble with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, however. Instead, his signature is required to remain eligible. The signature is proof he showed up for class that day. The other student is a class checker.

Many colleges employ such attendance monitors. Sometimes they’re paid student employees. Other times, they’re retirees looking for some volunteer work with their favorite college team. Their job is to make sure athletes show up to class.

To coaches and athletic departments facing increasing scrutiny to make sure players are experiencing college as students, not just athletes, the system is a way of guaranteeing athletes don’t play hooky. But to critics, the practice represents a deep lack of trust in an athlete’s ability to accomplish what they see as the easiest part of a course: simply showing up.
“If they’re actually there to be students, you don’t need this kind of approach,” said Richard Southall, director of the College Sports Research Institute at the University of South Carolina. “If you say athletics and college sports are about teaching discipline and leadership and you treat the athletes in this very infantile fashion, they’re going to act like kids instead of leaders.”

The University of Arizona employs undergraduate students to arrive 15 minutes before and after a class’s meeting time to make sure athletes are present for its entirety. Auburn University uses a similar system, as do the University of Georgia and Purdue University, where the checkers are called runners.

At Wichita State University, an athletics attendance policy states that athletes are required to attend all classes, regardless of the course’s own attendance policies. Class checkers are used to monitor the athlete’s attendance, and each unexcused absence carries increasingly harsher penalties with it, though arguably not too harsh at the beginning. If an athlete misses three classes, he or she is fined $25 and withheld from practice if the fine is not paid.

By the fifth absence, the player is suspended from future competition.

In May, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill drew snickers when it posted a job opening advertising a class checker position. The university is still emerging from a no-show-class scandal where about 1,500 athletes, spanning multiple decades, took courses that didn’t require attendance at all. The post said the job required a bachelor’s degree and “the ability to navigate campus buildings.” The employee would “monitor class attendance for designated student athletes” for about $10 an hour. At Texas A&M University, the job requires a high school diploma and “the ability to work in any type of weather conditions.”

Some colleges are now opting for digital class checkers, using athlete-oriented versions of attendance software. An app called Class 120, for example, identifies whether an athlete’s smartphone is in a particular class at the scheduled time. If the student’s device is not detected, the app sends a notification to the player’s coach or academic adviser.

David Ridpath, a professor of sports administration at Ohio University, said the practice of class checking is so common that “if you’re a school that doesn’t do it, you’re thought of as doing something wrong.” Ridpath said as an assistant college wrestling coach, he refused to use class checkers, and now that he’s a professor his disdain for the practice has only grown.

“A lot of people think it’s a positive thing, but when I’ve had these class checkers walk into my classroom, I say, ‘Get out of here,’” Ridpath said. “I tell them, ‘I don’t go onto the field and encroach on your ground. Don’t encroach on mine.’ It’s
absolutely silly to have grown men and women checking on other grown men and women like they’re kindergartners.”

College administrators, however, say that the practice helps busy athletes balance sports and academics. For an athlete who played a late game or practiced 40 hours that week, skipping class to squeeze in an hour of sleep is a seductive temptation. Class checkers are the angel on their other shoulder, nudging them to get out of bed and go to class.

At UNC, class checkers may even help athletes in other ways, such as encouraging them to sit in the front row of a class, said Michelle Brown, the university’s assistant provost and director of the Academic Support Program for Student-Athletes. She said the extent of the class checkers' duties and how they interact with the athletes varies by team and coach.

"We have high expectations that athletes should be successful in class, and that begins with attending class," Brown said. "Coaches and teams take it on themselves to make sure players are attending class at every opportunity they can."

The argument in favor of class checkers is well known to Gerald Gurney, a professor of adult and higher education at the University of Oklahoma and president of the Drake Group, an organization pushing for more emphasis on academics in college sports. Gurney created the University of Oklahoma’s class checking program in 1994, when he was the university’s associate athletics director.

The program worked, he said in 2004, noting that there was a “direct correlation” between monitoring attendance in this way and improvements in athletes’ grades. But a decade later, Gurney said he only created the program at the behest of the football coach, and that he now regrets the decision. He said the practice covers up the underlying causes of athlete absences, including being overworked by coaches or being underprepared due to lax admission standards for athletes.

“If I had to do it all over again, I would certainly not do it,” Gurney said. “This is not how an educational opportunity for intercollegiate athletes is supposed to work. To actually waste money sending people to classes to make sure athletes are attending them borders on the absurd. It goes beyond babysitting. It’s craziness.”
Nursing a Grudge

June 24, 2015

By Doug Lederman

NO MU MENTION

Nurses, like other medical professionals, vow not to harm those in their care. But the leading national association of nurses is in a nasty (and seemingly never-ending) war of words and lawsuits with a nursing education accreditor that threatens to damage the accreditor and harm thousands of would-be nurses trained by programs the agency oversees.

On Thursday, for the third time in four years, the committee that advises the U.S. education secretary on accreditation will again take up the controversy, and this time the stakes are high. A staff report has urged the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) to strip federal recognition from the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, and the panel will decide whether to forward that recommendation to Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

If the agency were to lose its recognition, some of the programs it accredits -- and their students -- would lose their eligibility for federal financial aid.

The reason for the potential revocation: the Education Department staff says the accreditor is not independent enough from the National League for Nursing because the commission cannot change its bylaws without approval from the board of the nursing association, of which it used to be an arm.

That is a problem, the department's report said, because "in the context of NLN's authority granted to it by the agency's bylaws, NLN could legally direct the operation of the ACEN's accreditation business, leading the department to conclude that the agency could not operate in the separate and independent manner required" by federal financial aid laws and rules.
The Nursing Accreditation Landscape

The subject of this article, the Accrediting Commission for Education in Nursing, is one of two accreditors of nursing programs. It accredits all kinds of nursing education programs, from clinical doctorate and master's programs to associate and diploma programs offered by community colleges and hospitals.

The other accreditor, the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, accredits programs that offer only master's and baccalaureate-level nursing degrees at four-year institutions, and its approval does not come with access to federal financial aid funds.

And now the National League for Nursing is creating its own accrediting arm to compete with the two existing agencies.

The nursing group and the accreditor blame each other for the standoff, in increasingly shrill and accusatory language. Pinpointing the precise motivations for the intransigence is difficult, but money, power and competition are all likely factors.

Nursing educators care less about the reasons for the feud than about its potential implications, which are significant. “It would really be catastrophic for nursing programs like mine to deal with the consequences that would result from all of this,” said Linda Miles, nursing coordinator at Daytona State College in Florida, where a state law mandates that all nursing programs be accredited by one of the two existing nursing accreditors (see box).

While the dispute is specific to nursing education, the issue is a larger one in the realm of accreditation, where questions are often raised -- in teacher education, law and other fields -- about whether trade groups and professional societies exert too much control over the regulatory bodies that are supposed to keep them honest.

20 Years of Tension

The dispute between the nursing organizations has a tortured history.

For decades, through the last half of the 20th century, the National League for Nursing was the primary accreditor of nursing programs, in addition to being the main membership organization for nurses in the United States. When Congress renewed the Higher Education Act in 1992, it required accrediting arms of industry or professional groups (like the nursing association) to be “separate and independent” from those groups, to limit conflicts of interest in which the industry groups might exert undue influence on who is accredited, and how rigorously. Professional associations may also focus too much on promoting the profession, potentially forcing institutions to spend more on expanding programs than is appropriate.
Four years later, in 1996, the Education Department’s newly created accreditation advisory panel concluded that the nursing league’s accrediting arm violated the separate and independent standard. That triggered a series of steps that were designed to fix the problem -- but, 20 years later, clearly haven't been, in the department’s view.

In 1997, the nursing league transferred its accrediting functions to an entity called the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, and in 2001, the NLNAC (a precursor to what is now known as ACEN) was incorporated as a separate legal entity. While the arrangement sought to keep the two closely intertwined, giving the NLN numerous powers over the new organization (and making it the “principal member” of the new corporation), the nursing association vowed that it would let the accreditor operate independently.

The two organizations seemed to have reached a satisfactory point during the 2000s, as the federal accreditation panel in 2006 gave NLNAC a clean bill of health for five years, the maximum possible.

But that changed several years ago as the accrediting entity sought to assert its independence from the nursing league. In 2009, the accreditor moved its offices from New York (where it had co-habitated with the NLN) to Atlanta, which triggered lawsuits over the sanctity of the contracts between the organizations. There have been several rulings by New York courts in the case, but the litigation continues.

Meanwhile, the accreditation advisory committee in 2012 questioned whether the arrangement between the two satisfied the federal law’s separate and independent definition, and directed the accreditor to alter its bylaws to comply with that definition. The key problem: the accrediting entity’s bylaws, as written, gave the National League for Nursing the “sole right” to approve changes to the bylaws.

A report on the meeting said at the time, “Of particular concern to the committee... was on the issue of the degree of 'separateness and independence' of the recognized accreditation commission from the trade association National League for Nursing (NLN). The two entities are embroiled in multiple litigations at this time to resolve/dissolve their relationship. After a discussion that updated the committee on the status of the litigations, in the words of one committee member, '[NACIQI] is not in a position to sort out the legal dispute between NLN, on the one hand, and the accrediting authority, on the other hand, and until that's resolved, nothing more can be done. The agency agrees with the staff, and the two primary readers do as well, that under the current relationship of these entities, there is not compliance with the separate and independent requirement.”

Two years later, in June 2014, NACIQI gave the accrediting commission a year to amend the bylaws and make other changes to bring the agency into compliance.
But the staff report released this month noted that "the agency has not provided revised/amended bylaws and remains noncompliant with the requirements of this section," and "department staff is unaware of any progress between NLN and ACEN to address ACEN’s noncompliance with the separate and independent requirements."

The two organizations -- with growing vitriol -- say the other is responsible for the conflict.

"The solution -- the only solution -- is that NLN allows ACEN to have control of our bylaws," Marsal P. Stoll, CEO of the accrediting commission, said in an interview. But "NLN has refused and now our ability to serve as a Title IV gatekeeper and accreditor are in jeopardy," Stoll and the head of the accreditor's board said in an email to constituents this month.

The nursing league's chief executive, Beverly Malone, says her group is willing to give ACEN control of its bylaws on one condition: that the accreditor also commit to remaining closely linked to the nursing group.

"We are very willing to change their bylaws as long as there's something in those bylaws that assures us of a continued relationship," Malone said in an interview. "They have been trying to separate from us for some time, but if you look at their articles of incorporation, they are our subsidiary. And we are just very clear that complete separation is something we are not going to accept. Accreditation has been part of what we do for 50 years, and we're not willing to give up that piece."

ACEN officials assert that the two organizations are already fully separate, by nature of being independent corporations, and that the accreditor expects and wants to retain a strong working relationship with the nursing group. "But we must be able to prove we are independent, and the fact that we need consent from them to change our bylaws demonstrates that we are not independent," Stoll said.

Michael B. Goldstein, who co-leads the higher education practice group at the Cooley law firm, said that while he was not familiar with the intricate details of the agreement between the two nursing organizations, conflicts like this one are common when there has been a parent/subsidiary relationship between entities. "Each side wants to be free of constraints from the other side," he said.

He said it was clearly a problem that the accreditor is unable to change its bylaws without the written approval of the nursing league. But he also said that it should be possible to draft language that would continue to give NLN assurances that the accrediting agency "can't just get up and run away" from the parent organization.
Federal officials are growing clearly frustrated by the conflict. The Education Department's staff report notes that “while the [accrediting] agency blames NLN for the impasse, staff cannot verify that this is the case. In any event, whether ACEN’s noncompliance is voluntary or has been forced upon it,” the government has no choice but to terminate the accreditor’s recognition, the report asserts.

The report speculates that “rather than coming into compliance, the agency appears to be requesting the [federal government] to find it out of compliance so as to force NLN’s hand or support its legal action in New York...

“While the department was hopeful that NLN and ACEN would be able to come to an agreement in which compliance with the secretary's 'separate and independent' requirements would be accomplished within the time frame allowed under the Higher Education Amendments of 1998, the agency remains out of compliance with the requirements of this section.”

The report did not say, “Can't the two of you stop bickering and resolve this, before you put scores of programs and many students in harm’s way?”

But it wouldn't be at all surprising if members of the federal advisory committee said as much tomorrow.

Senate Plan Portends Budget Battles

June 24, 2015

By Doug Lederman

NO MU MENTION

A U.S. Senate subcommittee on Tuesday passed a spending bill for health, labor and education programs that would increase funds for biomedical research and boost
the maximum Pell Grant -- but slash spending on workforce training and AmeriCorps and block the Obama administration from implementing regulations relating to gainful employment for vocational programs and its college rating system.

Like a parallel bill approved last week by a House of Representatives panel, the 2016 spending bill backed by the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies would raise the maximum Pell Grant to $5,915 in the fiscal year that begins in October, up from the current $5,775.

But it would also take a big bite ($300 million) out of the surplus funds that the Congressional Budget Office estimates will be available for the program, shuffling that money for other purposes while potentially leaving the Pell program short in future years. The House bill would snag $370 million in Pell funds.

The appropriations subcommittee released no text or budget table for the legislation, so the details that are available are from news releases, representing what Republican and Democratic leaders on the panel chose to emphasize.

Senate Democrats said that the legislation would cut $29 million from the Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant Program and $40 million from the Federal Work Study Program. Those programs would be held at their current 2015 levels by the House legislation.

Like the House bill, the Senate measure would prohibit the Education Department from using any newly appropriated funds for new or pending regulations that, in its words, expand "the federal government’s role in higher education, until Congress has an opportunity to weigh in through the authorization process, as appropriate." The bill would block the department from acting to implement the proposed college rating system, define gainful employment, establish requirements for state authorization of higher education programs, define the credit hour and change how teacher education programs are regulated.

The Senate Democrats' news release also said the legislation would freeze funds for the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights "at a time when its workload is rapidly increasing -- particularly in the area of campus sexual violence. OCR currently receives about 10,000 complaints per year, up from roughly 6,900 in 2010," the release said, while its budget is below its 2012 level.

Senate Democrats said the bill would cut funding for workforce training programs, but no details were available. They also said the legislation would cut spending on the AmeriCorps national service program by about 20 percent.
The measure would increase spending for the National Institutes of Health to $32 billion, up sharply from the $30.1 billion the biomedical research agency is receiving this year and "the largest increase the NIH has received" since 2003, when an effort to double its funding ended.

The bill would provide "increases to every institute and center to continue investments in innovative research that will advance fundamental knowledge and speed the development of new therapies, diagnostics and preventive measures to improve the health of all Americans," Senate Republicans said in their announcement about the measure.