THE DAILY CLIPS

April 20, 2012

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The goals of East Carolina University’s division of Health Sciences include growing programs to admit and graduate more students and helping to meet the growing needs of health care, said Phyllis Horns, vice chancellor of the division, on Thursday.

Horns told the Health Sciences committee about the goals stated in an updated strategic plan at the meeting on the campus.

Several students spoke to the committee before Horns made her presentation, discussing their academic experiences at ECU. Three of them requested more collaborative learning with students in other disciplines since in their professional lives, teamwork is a necessity. Students from the newly formed Health Sciences Leadership Council recently gave a presentation to Horns on this topic.

Horns told the committee that working to develop the mechanisms for more collaboration learning between students in different disciplines is part of the plan’s student development goal.

Another goal is to produce more graduates, which also has an effect on job growth in the area. “The health care industry employs a lot of people who are not necessarily clinical people,” she said. “So it’s a very important part of the economy, and we take our work seriously in needing to attend to the workforce needs.”

Horns said the division also needs to strengthen its research infrastructure to attract more research dollars. This is “not just because it advances knowledge across an array of knowledge … but also because it’s a revenue stream for ECU.”

Other goals include teaching students how to work with different cultures, and advancing technology and innovation like electronic health records.

Horns said in the fall, serious discussion could begin on the development of the School of Public Health, a long-range goal that’s been in the works for years.
In other matters, Dr. Paul Cunningham, dean of the Brody School of Medicine, told the committee about a preliminary report by an accreditation board that listed some areas where Brody needed improvement, although none were considered serious issues.

The Liaison Committee on Medical Education’s report included observations that Brody needs to make student grades available sooner, ensure adjunct clinical faculty have faculty appointments, and put more of a focus on integrated teaching about the body’s systems. Students in the first- and second-year of medical school also should spend less time in lectures, allowing for other ways to learn, he said.

Cunningham said the report also noted Brody’s strengths: the mission of its students to serve rural, underserved populations; its dedicated faculty, and its social mission to train primary care doctors.

The final report should be released in June.

“And we look forward to a full eight years of accreditation as we have in the past,” Cunningham said.

In other matters, Dr. Nicholas Benson, vice dean, and professor emergency medicine, gave a financial report that reflected a rosier outlook since ECU Physicians, the clinical practice of Brody, became eligible along with University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for higher Medicaid reimbursements.

That infusion of Medicaid dollars, including retroactive payments, totaling $6.7 million, has helped shore up the practice’s finances. As a result, the practice has about $4.9 million in revenue, compared to a loss of $3.9 million last year.

“It’s a reasonable projection that we will end up in the black this year,” Benson said after the meeting.

The practice so far this year is showing a loss in operations of $4.6 million, higher than last year’s $3 million, due to rising costs, Benson said. The non-operating loss was $0.8 million, less than last year’s $0.9 million.

Without payments, including the higher Medicaid reimbursements, the practice would have had a loss of $5.4 million.

Contact K.J. Williams at kwilliams@reflector.com or 252-329-9588.
ECU Biology Professor Carol Goodwillie looks for different plant species in a long-term experimental plot that will be part of the Earth Day activities at ECU West Research Campus Center on Saturday. (Rhett Butler)

Events to celebrate Earth Day
By Michael Abramowitz
Friday, April 20, 2012

Mother Earth is calling and Greenville and Pitt County residents will be among those responding this weekend to celebrate Earth Day.

The event, founded in the United States by Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson and first celebrated in 1970, is sanctioned by the United Nations as “Mother Earth Day” to call attention to the ecological relationship people have with the planet.

Several local events focused on ecological and environmental topics will highlight the celebration, including many presented by East Carolina University’s biology department.

The documentary film, “Tapped,” which explores issues surrounding the bottled water industry and the privatization of water, will be shown at noon today in Room 1415 at Joyner Library, 1000 E. Fifth St.

The Tipsy Teapot in Greenville will host a benefit from from 8-11 p.m. for the Pamlico Tar River Foundation’s annual River Jam and Riverkeeper Cup cleanup competition. Local singer Ben Griffith and the Cooper Tones will perform. A $10 donation will be accepted to help support the event, promoters said.
An Earth Day Expo in ECU’s Howell Science Complex, scheduled from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, will have interactive activities, tours of biology research labs, a community art project, and exhibits by environmentally-focused local organizations. Sponsors include the North Carolina Center for Biodiversity and the Department of Biology.

From 1-4 p.m. Saturday, visitors to the West Research Campus on Voice of America Site “C” Road off of N.C. 43 west can tour bluebird boxes in areas where controlled vegetation burns have been conducted, visit the long-term plant diversity experiment and help remove invasive plant species.

From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. people can visit the Queen Anne’s Revenge artifact preservation lab, located adjacent to the West Research Campus.

Go on guided nature walks, participate in a pond exploration and view live plants and animals. From 1-4 p.m. Saturday at A Time for Science at the Bray Hollow Conservation Easement on Contentnea Lane near Grifton. There, visitors can visit www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/biology/nebiodiversity/ for more information.

Beginning at 8 a.m. Saturday at the Town Common boat ramp, Franklin County and the city of Louisburg will try to repeat their gold medal performance as annual Riverkeeper Cup Cleanup champions. The event is organized by the Pamlico-Tar River Foundation and supported locally by Pitt County Recycling program and East Carolina University’s Adventure Program.

The Tar-Pamlico River is the fourth largest river system in North Carolina and home to more than 400,000 people. Since 2006, semi-annual cleanups have netted more than 12 tons of trash. Each year, the competition has crowned a new champion. Greenville captured the cup in the inaugural year. The second annual challenge was won by the city of Washington, N.C.

The River Jam continues from 2-9 p.m. at the Greenville Town Common on Saturday. This event is in honor of the Tar River and will feature live entertainment, free kayaking, cook-out style food and more.

Events include free paddling in kayaks and canoes along the river, thanks to ECU Campus Recreation and Wellness Center. Local nonprofits and environmental groups will be on board to share more information about the community and surrounding natural resources.

To learn more about Earth Day, visit http://www.earthday.org/
Marvin Burke, the head football coach at Richburg (S.C.) Lewisville High, is the new head football coach at Southeast Raleigh High.

Burke said he was coming home.

“To me, Southeast Raleigh is home,” Burke said.

Burke graduated from Jacksonville (Fla.) Raines and played linebacker at East Carolina. He graduated in 1996 and began his coaching career in Florida, but returned to Eastern North Carolina at Edenton Holmes.

He was an assistant at Washington High for three years before joining current Southeast athletics director Daniel Finn as an assistant football coach at Winterville Conley. Burke came to Southeast with Finn in 2006.

Burke was the defensive coordinator at Southeast under Finn for three years. Burke resigned after the 2008 season to take the head coaching job at Lewisville, which has made the playoffs the past three years.

“He knows our program,” Finn said. “He knows the foundation and how the program was built because he helped build it. He believes in this school.”

Finn said Burke has exceptional knowledge in strength training and stresses strong, physical play.

“He was a college linebacker,” Finn said. “He believes in being hard-nosed and playing hard.”

Burke said defense and work in the weight room win championships.

“Somebody will slow down your offense during a 15-game season regardless of how potent it is,” Burke said. “But you can always be good on defense. “At East Carolina (under Coach Steve Logan) we talked about winning games in the fourth quarter because of the effort that we made in the weight room. You earn wins by what you do in the weight room. You have to get bigger, stronger and faster.”

Stevens: 919-829-8910
ECU stages 'The Threepenny Opera'
Friday, April 20, 2012

Many plays or musicals have claimed to be ground-breaking, but for the most part, this is untrue. It is true, however, about “The Threepenny Opera.”

The production introduced political satire and jazz music into the theater and moved away from the typical 1930s old-fashioned operas which were overtly sweet in tone.

East Carolina University’s School of Theatre and Dance will present “The Threepenny Opera” in McGinnis Theatre at 8 p.m. today-Tuesday, except Sunday when the show will be at 2 p.m.

“The Threepenny Opera” is a musical written by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill. It was first performed in Berlin on Aug. 31, 1928 and was a tremendous success with more than 400 shows in two years.

By the time that Brecht and Weill were forced to leave Germany because of Adolf Hitler’s rise in power during WWII, the musical had been translated into 18 languages and performed more than 10,000 times in Europe.

ECU’s Director John Shearin said in his director’s notes that this production is unusual for a number of reasons.

“One, all of its songs and musical numbers and virtually all its text are intact. Two, it is played by a large company of actors, in number appropriate to that called for in the text. Three, it is performed and played in the musical keys and orchestrations originally intended and composed by Weill. Four,
this production contains a musical selection that even the most rabid devotees of the play have likely never seen before — ‘Lucy’s Aria’ in Scene 8.”

“Lucy’s Aria” was written for the original score but cut from the first production because the actor in the role could not sing it. The song remained in the appendix at the end of the Kurt Weill Foundation’s official score — the one used in the ECU production — before it was noticed and appended to a German studio recording.

The musical was adapted from the 18th century English ballad opera “The Beggar’s Opera” by John Gay but also draws from a number of other sources including the work of François Villon, Rudyard Kipling and the Bible.

“The Threepenny Opera” is set in Victorian London. Macheath is the main character and predatory outlaw known as “Mack the Knife.” He secretly marries Polly Peachum who is the daughter of London’s underworld boss. He is soon betrayed and is sent to prison. After being freed by the police chief’s daughter, he is betrayed again, this time by a prostitute, and is sentenced to death. At the final hour Macheath manages a reprieve, providing a menacing finale.

The musical is a blistering commentary on the moral decadence that was then eating away at the fabric of society, not only in Germany but throughout much of Europe. While the socio-political landscape may have shifted, it has remained a cultural juggernaut for decades, challenging social values while continually thrilling audiences.

Weill’s acid harmonies and Brecht’s biting texts created a revolutionary new musical theater that inspired such subsequent hits as “Cabaret,” “Chicago” and “Urinetown.” The show’s opening number, “Mack the Knife,” became one of the top popular songs of the century with recordings by Louis Armstrong, Bobby Darin, Ella Fitzgerald, Lyle Lovett, Sonny Rollins and Frank Sinatra.

Parental discretion is advised due to adult subject matter and language.
Cistola named Research VP at UNT Health Science Center

Published April 19

FORT WORTH, Texas, April 19, 2012 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -
David Cistola, M.D., Ph.D., has been named vice president for research at the UNT Health Science Center, announced President Scott Ransom. Cistola currently serves as associate dean for research and professor of clinical laboratory science in the College of Allied Health Sciences; and professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. He also served for 18 years on the faculty at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis as a tenured Professor.

Cistola will join the faculty on the UNTHSC campus in Fort Worth in July. His responsibilities will include leading the UNT Health Science Center's efforts to provide a healthier future for a changing world with new discoveries through research. He will oversee the UNTHSC research office in identifying research opportunities; securing support and ensuring research, funding policies and compliance for the Health Science Center.

Cistola earned a B.S. in biochemistry in 1978 from State University of New York at Binghamton and the M.D. and Ph.D. degrees in 1985 from Boston University School of Medicine. He was a National Institutes of Health postdoctoral fellow from Biophysics and Cardiovascular Institutes at Boston University and a Juvenile Diabetes Foundation Fellow at both Boston University School of Medicine and Washington University School of Medicine.

UNT Health Science Center

The UNT Health Science Center comprises the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, School of Public Health, School of Health Professions and the UNT System College of Pharmacy (opens fall 2013). Key research areas include aging and Alzheimer's disease, applied genetics, primary care and prevention.
Run is hardly a challenge after losing 100 pounds

By Michael Vitez
Inquirer Staff Writer

The Inquirer is presenting a daily profile of participants in the May 6 Blue Cross Broad Street Run, considered the country's most popular 10-miler, with 40,000 people. See full coverage at www.philly.com/broadstreetrun

When Chad Phillips, 30, graduated from high school, he was already 300 pounds.

"My entire life, I have been in and out of obesity clinics, gyms with personal trainers, dietitians at the hospital, and just about every fad diet you could imagine," he said.

He feared the first day of class every semester at East Carolina University. "I was so afraid of walking into class and the desk being too small or too tight," he said. Many days his legs "would fall asleep because the support bar would cut off the circulation."

He went to Disney. "I couldn't even ride the roller-coasters because the safety bar wouldn't close on the ride. How embarrassing was that after I waited all that time in line just to have to get back out of the coaster car and walk past all those other people in humiliation?"

He had a girlfriend who stuck with him for five years, and they had a son, but the relationship fell apart in February 2011. No matter what she said, he knew the reason: his weight.

"She wasn't attracted to me anymore, and my family was being destroyed because of my obsession for food."

"I was left at 325 pounds, lonely, and single," he said, "heartbroken and torn down to the core. I remembered my mom saying before she passed in 2003 that the sky is the limit. Set your mind to your goals and go get them."

He made up his mind. Lose 100 pounds, and run in the 2012 Broad Street Run.

Check. And check.
He now weighs 212 pounds, his weight in grade school.

"I lost the weight by developing a passion for running," he said. "I would walk for 60 minutes a day - then I started jogging a few minutes at a time. I thought I was going to die! Before you knew it, I was jogging a mile, then two miles, then my speed started getting faster.

"I ran 10 miles the other day in 88 minutes, so I have no doubt that I will complete the Broad Street Run, providing no injuries. I am so pumped. Who would have ever thought I would reach these goals! It's amazing."

Chad lives in Williamstown, N.J., and is general manager of Bertucci’s restaurant in Newark, Del. He said he and his ex-girlfriend tried to reconcile, but it didn't work out.

"I am a new person," he said. "I have changed my eating habits, lifestyle, and all personal and business affairs are better than ever." He said he was now able to be a much more active father and was so proud of the example he had set for his son.

"There are so many people that are facing the same challenges that I conquered," he said. "I want them to know it can be done."

Contact Michael Vitez at 215-854-5639, mvitez@phillynews.com or follow @michaelvitez on Twitter.
A better gauge of community college success

By Daniel de Vise

Here is a guest post from Thomas Bailey, who serves as George and Abby O’Neill Professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and director of the Community College Research Center, along with the National Center for Postsecondary Research and the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment.

The post first appeared in The Hechinger Report.

President Obama speaks at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, on Wednesday. (Carolyn Kaster — Associated Press)

The U.S. Department of Education released an action plan last week to improve how we measure the success of postsecondary students and institutions. The plan is sure to be met with enthusiasm by community-college leaders across the country.

The plan makes recommendations on how to better evaluate and report on community-college performance, many of which came from the federal Committee on Measures of Student Success (CMSS), which I chaired.

Overall, the plan represents a significant improvement over the current system.

Historically, the chief available measure of an institution’s success was its graduation rate. Presumably, the higher the rate, the better the institution. Until now, the graduation rate for community colleges has been based on the proportion of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who graduate within three or four years of enrolling.

For many reasons, though, this rate has presented an incomplete and distorted picture of community college success. The majority of community-college students attend part-time, and many transfer in from other colleges. Both of these sizeable populations have been excluded in traditional
graduation rate calculations. In addition, many students transfer to four-year colleges without first obtaining a community-college credential — and current measures make it appear as if these students haven’t been successful.

The new approach will provide a more complete and accurate measure of community college success by including part-time students, as well as improving the reporting of transfer students and developing methods to measure the success of those who transfer in from other colleges. At a time in which postsecondary institutions are being held increasingly accountable for student outcomes, these are important changes.

The plan will clarify the meaning of “degree-seeking,” a poorly defined term that is nevertheless crucial to calculating graduation rates. It will also improve the collection and analysis of data on students who receive federal financial aid, allowing for a better understanding of this multi-billion-dollar federal investment.

Furthermore, the plan calls for improved state longitudinal data systems, and better communication about collecting and disseminating data on student success.

However, there are some CMSS recommendations that did not find their way into the plan, or that are mentioned with too little specificity.

Take, for example, the idea of publishing an “institutional graduation rate” (as defined in the original Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1990). This rate would include, in a single measure of completion, both students who have graduated and those who have transferred without graduating.

The CMSS recommended publishing this rate, but also suggested that it be disaggregated so as to differentiate between students who transfer and those who complete a credential. Transfer is a key outcome for community-college students, but it is not the same thing as graduating. Our understanding of institutional performance would be strengthened if we could clearly distinguish between the two outcomes, transferring and graduating.

The Department of Education also rejected the CMSS’s suggestion that colleges disaggregate outcomes for community-college students who are deemed ill-prepared for college-level work and are therefore assigned to remedial education. While this might be difficult for colleges to do, it is important — not least because so many students fall into this category. The action plan should recognize the need to develop better information about the success of these students.
Unfortunately, even with the more refined measurements laid out in the action plan, graduation rates reported by colleges will continue to be disappointing and inadequate. It will be a serious challenge for colleges to report their transfer data accurately.

Students, parents, policymakers, educators and researchers still have questions about outcomes — graduation, transfer, employment — based on gender, race and ethnicity, part-time status and financial aid received. The graduation rates reported in the current and proposed systems are unlikely ever to be disaggregated enough to address all of these legitimate concerns.

For this reason, the CMSS recommended the development of a data system that would allow us to track individual students over time as they move around the country and among institutions. This recommendation is controversial. The latest reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act barred the federal government from developing such a system, and it is not included in the new action plan. But absent a system of this kind, our measures of success will remain frustratingly incomplete.

By Daniel de Vise | 12:00 PM ET, 04/19/2012
April is a scary month for high school seniors. They worry about their futures.

In a region with probably a higher concentration of college anxiety than any other, the admissions process dumps on them disappointments that are hard to handle.

My advice: Listen to whatever words of wisdom and consolation parents and older relatives offer. Be polite, no matter how painful it is to listen to people trying to be understanding.

Then seek out people in their 20s to learn what college looks like after you are done with it. If you don’t have a slightly older brother, sister or cousin, look for a neighbor, a member of your church, a former babysitter. They have something to say.

Take, for instance, Christina Zhang, who e-mailed me when she was a student at Towson High School in Baltimore County going through the tortures of applying to college. Her worst moment was applying for an early decision to her first choice, the University of Pennsylvania, and being rejected.

Zhang went to lower ranked Cornell University (number 15 to Penn’s number 5 on current U.S. News list) and now works as a management consultant, specializing in health-care industries. She e-mailed me saying those years in college and the real world changed her thinking about her admission experience.

Her rejection by Penn had been “the biggest deal in the world,” she said. Adults such as me told her “everything was going to be all right, and I was going to get in somewhere great because I am ambitious/driven etc. But I did not care at the time. The only thing I could care about was my defeat/shame” as well as the grief of “trying hard to achieve something and seeing no results.”
The reality of higher education and employment led her to a different view of the power of ranking, the aspect of U.S. culture that makes the admissions process most stressful.

Ranking matters, Zhang said, but not “as much as people think. People at top schools do well because they are hard-working, resourceful and driven. Not just because they have a Harvard attached to their name.”

It didn’t occur to her until she got to college that rank consciousness might inhibit the energy needed to succeed, particularly at an Ivy League school. Zhang saw students “flunk out or do poorly because they thought they could coast on the Cornell name forever. Going to college is like making one move in a chess game. It’s just one step or even a start. Not the end.”

After college, the working world helped Zhang — like other young people I know — shed the love of brand name institutions they had when they were teenagers. As she moved into management consulting, she interned at a national firm in 2010 that she said was “on the top of every ranking list.”

“It was the worst summer of my life,” she said. Despite the astonishment of some friends, she walked away from the big company and took a job at a smaller one full of people she liked. Because she isn’t seeing those prestige-minded friends, “it no longer matters,” she said. “I am doing what I love and making good money.”

Love and money. That is what it usually comes down to.

An education in any of hundreds of colleges will usually be enough, if young people apply themselves, to make a comfortable living.

Finding something you love to do is trickier. It might require settling for less salary than is available, but if you ask old people — grandparents such as me — we will tell you that is the way to go.

By Jay Mathews | 06:00 AM ET, 04/16/2012
Liberty University grads to hear from Romney

April 20, 2012
By Philip Rucker and Michelle Boorstein,

Mitt Romney, on the cusp of making history as the first Mormon to win a major party’s nomination for president, will deliver the commencement address at Liberty University, a bastion of evangelical Christians founded by the late television evangelist Jerry Falwell.

Romney’s address, scheduled for May 12, comes as the former Massachusetts governor is laboring to consolidate the conservative base as he moves from a bruising and divisive primary campaign into a general election against President Obama.

This will be Romney’s first visit to Liberty’s campus in Lynchburg, Va. Several other Republican candidates addressed students there last year, including Texas Gov. Rick Perry and Rep. Michele Bachmann (Minn.).

Liberty is the alma mater of one of Romney’s senior advisers, Mark DeMoss, who has been helping the candidate build bridges to the evangelical community. And Brett O’Donnell, who helped Romney prepare for two critical Florida debates in January, was for many years coach of Liberty’s award-winning debate team.

In the primaries, Romney struggled to win over evangelical voters, who polls show supported rival Rick Santorum.

With Romney the presumptive GOP nominee, new data show him holding a huge edge over President Obama among white evangelicals (73 percent to 20 percent).

— Philip Rucker and Michelle Boorstein
Can You Make Yourself Smarter?

By DAN HURLEY

Early on a drab afternoon in January, a dozen third graders from the working-class suburb of Chicago Heights, Ill., burst into the Mac Lab on the ground floor of Washington-McKinley School in a blur of blue pants, blue vests and white shirts. Minutes later, they were hunkered down in front of the Apple computers lining the room’s perimeter, hoping to do what was, until recently, considered impossible: increase their intelligence through training.

“Can somebody raise their hand,” asked Kate Wulfson, the instructor, “and explain to me how you get points?”

On each of the children’s monitors, there was a cartoon image of a haunted house, with bats and a crescent moon in a midnight blue sky. Every few seconds, a black cat appeared in one of the house’s five windows, then vanished. The exercise was divided into levels. On Level 1, the children earned a point by remembering which window the cat was just in. Easy. But the game is progressive: the cats keep coming, and the kids have to keep watching and remembering.

“And here’s where it gets confusing,” Wulfson continued. “If you get to Level 2, you have to remember where the cat was two windows ago. The time before last. For Level 3, you have to remember where it was three times ago. Level 4 is four times ago. That’s hard. You have to keep track. O.K., ready? Once we start, anyone who talks loses a star.”

So began 10 minutes of a remarkably demanding concentration game. At Level 2, even adults find the task somewhat taxing. Almost no one gets past Level 3 without training. But most people who stick with the game do get better with practice. This isn’t surprising: practice improves performance on almost every task humans engage in, whether it’s learning to read or playing horseshoes.

What is surprising is what else it improved. In a 2008 study, Susanne Jaeggi and Martin Buschkuehl, now of the University of Maryland, found that
young adults who practiced a stripped-down, less cartoonish version of the
game also showed improvement in a fundamental cognitive ability known as
“fluid” intelligence: the capacity to solve novel problems, to learn, to reason,
to see connections and to get to the bottom of things. The implication was
that playing the game literally makes people smarter.

Psychologists have long regarded intelligence as coming in two flavors:
crystallized intelligence, the treasure trove of stored-up information and
how-to knowledge (the sort of thing tested on “Jeopardy!” or put to use
when you ride a bicycle); and fluid intelligence. Crystallized intelligence
grows as you age; fluid intelligence has long been known to peak in early
adulthood, around college age, and then to decline gradually. And unlike
physical conditioning, which can transform 98-pound weaklings into hunks,
fluid intelligence has always been considered impervious to training.

That, after all, is the premise of I.Q. tests, or at least the portion that
measures fluid intelligence: we can test you now and predict all sorts of
things in the future, because fluid intelligence supposedly sets in early and is
fairly immutable. While parents, teachers and others play an essential role in
establishing an environment in which a child’s intellect can grow, even
Tiger Mothers generally expect only higher grades will come from their
children’s diligence — not better brains.

How, then, could watching black cats in a haunted house possibly increase
something as profound as fluid intelligence? Because the deceptively simple
game, it turns out, targets the most elemental of cognitive skills: “working”
memory. What long-term memory is to crystallized intelligence, working
memory is to fluid intelligence. Working memory is more than just the
ability to remember a telephone number long enough to dial it; it’s the
capacity to manipulate the information you’re holding in your head — to
add or subtract those numbers, place them in reverse order or sort them from
high to low. Understanding a metaphor or an analogy is equally dependent
on working memory; you can’t follow even a simple statement like “See
Jane run” if you can’t put together how “see” and “Jane” connect with “run.”
Without it, you can’t make sense of anything.

Over the past three decades, theorists and researchers alike have made
significant headway in understanding how working memory functions. They
have developed a variety of sensitive tests to measure it and determine its
relationship to fluid intelligence. Then, in 2008, Jaeggi turned one of these
tests of working memory into a training task for building it up, in the same
way that push-ups can be used both as a measure of physical fitness and as a
strength-building task. “We see attention and working memory as the cardiovascular function of the brain,” Jaeggi says. “If you train your attention and working memory, you increase your basic cognitive skills that help you for many different complex tasks.”

Jaeggi’s study has been widely influential. Since its publication, others have achieved results similar to Jaeggi’s not only in elementary-school children but also in preschoolers, college students and the elderly. The training tasks generally require only 15 to 25 minutes of work per day, five days a week, and have been found to improve scores on tests of fluid intelligence in as little as four weeks. Follow-up studies linking that improvement to real-world gains in schooling and job performance are just getting under way. But already, people with disorders including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (A.D.H.D.) and traumatic brain injury have seen benefits from training. Gains can persist for up to eight months after treatment.

In a town like Chicago Heights, where only 16 percent of high schoolers met the Illinois version of the No Child Left Behind standards in 2011, finding a clear way to increase cognitive abilities has obvious appeal. But it has other uses too, at all ages and aptitudes. Even high-level professionals have begun training their working memory in hopes of boosting their fluid intelligence — and, with it, their job performance. If the effect is real — if fluid intelligence can be raised in just a few minutes a day, even by a bit, and not just on a test but in real life — then it would seem to offer, as Jaeggi’s 2008 study concluded with Spock-like understatement, “a wide range of applications.”

Since the first reliable intelligence test was created just over a hundred years ago, researchers have searched for a way to increase scores meaningfully, with little success. The track record was so dismal that by 2002, when Jaeggi and her research partner (and now her husband), Martin Buschkuehl, came across a study claiming to have done so, they simply didn’t believe it.

The study, by a Swedish neuroscientist named Torkel Klingberg, involved just 14 children, all with A.D.H.D. Half participated in computerized tasks designed to strengthen their working memory, while the other half played less challenging computer games. After just five weeks, Klingberg found that those who played the working-memory games fidgeted less and moved about less. More remarkable, they also scored higher on one of the single best measures of fluid intelligence, the Raven’s Progressive Matrices. Improvement in working memory, in other words, transferred to improvement on a task the children weren’t training for.
Even if the sample was small, the results were provocative (three years later Klingberg replicated most of the results in a group of 50 children), because matrices are considered the gold standard of fluid-intelligence tests. Anyone who has taken an intelligence test has seen matrices like those used in the Raven’s: three rows, with three graphic items in each row, made up of squares, circles, dots or the like. Do the squares get larger as they move from left to right? Do the circles inside the squares fill in, changing from white to gray to black, as they go downward? One of the nine items is missing from the matrix, and the challenge is to find the underlying patterns — up, down and across — from six possible choices. Initially the solutions are readily apparent to most people, but they get progressively harder to discern. By the end of the test, most test takers are baffled.

If measuring intelligence through matrices seems arbitrary, consider how central pattern recognition is to success in life. If you’re going to find buried treasure in baseball statistics to give your team an edge by signing players unappreciated by others, you’d better be good at matrices. If you want to exploit cycles in the stock market, or find a legal precedent in 10 cases, or for that matter, if you need to suss out a woolly mammoth’s nature to trap, kill and eat it — you’re essentially using the same cognitive skills tested by matrices.

When Klingberg’s study came out, both Jaeggi and Buschkuehl were doctoral candidates in cognitive psychology at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Since his high-school days as a Swiss national-champion rower, Buschkuehl had been interested in the degree to which skills — physical and mental — could be trained. Intrigued by Klingberg’s suggestion that training working memory could improve fluid intelligence, he showed the paper to Jaeggi, who was studying working memory with a test known as the N-back.

“At that time there was pretty much no evidence whatsoever that you can train on one particular task and get transfer to another task that was totally different,” Jaeggi says. That is, while most skills improve with practice, the improvement is generally domain-specific: you don’t get better at Sudoku by doing crosswords. And fluid intelligence was not just another skill; it was the ultimate cognitive ability underlying all mental skills, and supposedly immune from the usual benefits of practice. To find that training on a working-memory task could result in an increase in fluid intelligence would be cognitive psychology’s equivalent of discovering particles traveling faster than light.

Together, Jaeggi and Buschkuehl decided to see if they could replicate the Klingberg transfer effect. To do so, they used the N-back test as the basis of
a training regimen. As seen in the game played by the children at Washington-McKinley, N-back challenges users to remember something — the location of a cat or the sound of a particular letter — that is presented immediately before (1-back), the time before last (2-back), the time before that (3-back), and so on. If you do well at 2-back, the computer moves you up to 3-back. Do well at that, and you’ll jump to 4-back. On the other hand, if you do poorly at any level, you’re nudged down a level. The point is to keep the game just challenging enough that you stay fully engaged.

Play a free online version of the N-back game.

To make it harder, Jaeggi and Buschkuehl used what’s called the dual N-back task. As a random sequence of letters is heard over earphones, a square appears on a computer screen moving, apparently at random, among eight possible spots on a grid. Your mission is to keep track of both the letters and the squares. So, for example, at the 3-back level, you would press one button on the keyboard if you recall that a spoken letter is the same one that was spoken three times ago, while simultaneously pressing another key if the square on the screen is in the same place as it was three times ago.

The point of making the task more difficult is to overwhelm the usual task-specific strategies that people develop with games like chess and Scrabble. “We wanted to train underlying attention and working-memory skills,” Jaeggi says.

Jaeggi and Buschkuehl gave progressive matrix tests to students at Bern and then asked them to practice the dual N-back for 20 to 25 minutes a day. When they retested them at the end of a few weeks, they were surprised and delighted to find significant improvement. Jaeggi and Buschkuehl later expanded the study as postdoctoral fellows at the University of Michigan, in the laboratory of John Jonides, professor of psychology and neuroscience.

“Those two things, working memory and cognitive control, I think, are at the heart of intellectual functioning,” Jonides told me when I met with him, Jaeggi and Buschkuehl in their basement office. “They are part of what differentiates us from other species. They allow us to selectively process information from the environment, and to use that information to do all kinds of problem-solving and reasoning.”

When they finally published their study, in a May 2008 issue of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the results were striking. Before training, participants were able to correctly answer between 9 and 10 of the matrix questions. Afterward, the 34 young adults who participated in dual N-back training for 12 weeks correctly answered approximately one extra
matrix item, while those who trained for 17 weeks were able to answer about three more correctly. After 19 weeks, the improvement was 4.4 additional matrix questions.

“It’s not just a little bit higher,” Jaeggi says. “It’s a large effect.”

The study did have its shortcomings. “We used just one reasoning task to measure their performance,” she says. “We showed improvements in this one fluid-reasoning task, which is usually highly correlated with other measures as well.” Whether the improved scores on the Raven’s would translate into school grades, job performance and real-world gains remained to be seen. Even so, accompanying the paper’s publication in Proceedings was a commentary titled, “Increasing Fluid Intelligence Is Possible After All,” in which the senior psychologist Robert J. Sternberg (now provost at Oklahoma State University) called Jaeggi’s and Buschkuehl’s research “pioneering.” The study, he wrote, “seems, in some measure, to resolve the debate over whether fluid intelligence is, in at least some meaningful measure, trainable.”

For some, the debate is far from settled. Randall Engle, a leading intelligence researcher at the Georgia Tech School of Psychology, views the proposition that I.Q. can be increased through training with a skepticism verging on disdain. “May I remind you of ‘cold fusion’?” he says, referring to the infamous claim, long since discredited, that nuclear fusion could be achieved at room temperature in a desktop device. “People were like, ‘Oh, my God, we’ve solved our energy crisis.’ People were rushing to throw money at that science. Well, not so fast. The military is now preparing to spend millions trying to make soldiers smarter, based on working-memory training. What that one 2008 paper did was to send hundreds of people off on a wild-goose chase, in my opinion.

“Fluid intelligence is not culturally derived,” he continues. “It is almost certainly the biologically driven part of intelligence. We have a real good idea of the parts of the brain that are important for it. The prefrontal cortex is especially important for the control of attention. Do I think you can change fluid intelligence? No, I don’t think you can. There have been hundreds of other attempts to increase intelligence over the years, with little or no — just no — success.”

At a meeting of cognitive scientists last August, and again in November, Engle presented a withering critique of Jaeggi and her colleagues’ 2008 paper. He pointed to a variety of methodological weaknesses (many of which have been addressed in subsequent papers by Jaeggi and others) and
then presented the results from his own attempt to replicate the study, which found no effect whatsoever. (Those results have yet to be published.)

The most prominent takedown of I.Q. training came in June 2010, when the neuroscientist Adrian Owen published the results of an experiment conducted in coordination with the BBC television show “Bang Goes the Theory.” After inviting British viewers to participate, Owen recruited 11,430 of them to take a battery of I.Q. tests before and after a six-week online program designed to replicate commercially available “brain building” software. (The N-back was not among the tasks offered.) “Although improvements were observed in every one of the cognitive tasks that were trained,” he concluded in the journal Nature, “no evidence was found for transfer effects to untrained tasks, even when those tasks were cognitively closely related.”

But even Owen, reached by telephone, told me that he respects Jaeggi’s studies and looks forward to seeing others like it. If before Jaeggi’s study, scientists’ attempts to raise I.Q. were largely unsuccessful, other lines of evidence have long supported the view that intelligence is far from immutable. While studies of twins suggest that intelligence has a fixed genetic component, at least 20 to 50 percent of the variation in I.Q. is due to other factors, whether social, school or family-based. Even more telling, average I.Q.’s have been rising steadily for a century as access to schooling and technology expands, a phenomenon known as the Flynn Effect. As Jaeggi and others see it, the genetic component of intelligence is undeniable, but it functions less like the genes that control for eye color and more like the complex of interacting genes that affect weight and height (both of which have also been rising, on average, for decades). “We know that height is heavily genetically determined,” Jonides told me during our meeting at the University of Michigan. “But we also know there are powerful environmental influences on height, like nutrition. So the fact that intelligence is partly heritable doesn’t mean you can’t modify it.”

Harold Hawkins, a cognitive psychologist at the Office of Naval Research who oversees most of the U.S. military’s studies in the area, expressed a common view. For him, the question now is not whether cognitive training works but how strongly and how best to achieve it. “Until about four or five years ago, we believed that fluid intelligence is immutable in adulthood,” Hawkins told me. “No one believed that training could possibly achieve dramatic improvements in this very fundamental cognitive ability. Then Jaeggi’s work came along. That’s when I started to move my funding from some other areas into this area. I personally believe, and if I didn’t believe it
I wouldn’t be making an investment of the taxpayers’ money, that there’s something here. It’s potentially of extremely profound importance.” A similar view was expressed by Jason Chein, assistant professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia, who published a series of studies — using another method, not N-back, for training working memory — that showed an increase in cognitive abilities. “My findings support what they’ve done,” he says, referring to the work of Jaeggi and her colleagues. “I’ve never replicated exactly what they do. But across a number of labs, using similar but different approaches to training, we have related successes. I think there’s a great deal of work to be done, but on the whole we are seeing positive signs.”

This past winter, I went to visit Jason Chein’s lab in Philadelphia, where he has begun to train subjects with something called a complex working memory span task. “It’s a terrible name,” he said with a laugh. “And you could call it a gimmicky psychological task. But there are 20 years of research behind it.” Chein invited me to try my hand at it. Once he clicked “start” on the computer program, the screen showed a checkerboard of 16 squares, with all of them white except 1; I was supposed to remember the red square’s location. Then it showed a series of three checkerboard patterns; for each, I had to decide whether the pattern was symmetrical or not. This sequence — having to remember the one red square, and then having to decide on symmetry — was repeated three more times. At the end, I had to click, in order, on the location of those four red squares.

I got only three right.

“Everyone gets better with practice,” he said. “Some people get up to being able to remember a string of 11 or higher.”

Of course, the goal is not to get better at remembering the location of red squares on a checkerboard but to expand a subject’s underlying working memory. Doing so, Chein has found, translates into the kind of real-world improvements associated with increases in cognitive capabilities. “We’ve seen, in college kids who do it, improvements in their reading-comprehension scores,” Chein said. “And in a sample of adults, 65 and older, it appears to improve their ability to keep track of what they recently said, so they don’t repeat themselves.”

In addition to working memory, researchers are seeking to improve fluid intelligence by training other basic mental skills — perceptual speed (deciding, in a matter of seconds, whether a number is odd or even), visual tracking (on a shoot-’em-up computer game, for instance) or quickly
switching between a variety of tasks. Ulman Lindenberger and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin used 12 different tasks to train 101 younger and 103 older adults. Compared with those who received no training, those who participated in 100 daily one-hour training sessions (both young and old) showed significant improvements on tests that measured reasoning, working memory, perceptual speed (in young adults only) and episodic memory (the ability to remember a short list, for example). A statistical measure of how those improvements correlated to one another suggested, Lindenberger concluded, systematic improvements “at the level of broad abilities.”

At the University of California, Berkeley, Silvia Bunge, director of a laboratory on the building blocks of cognition, takes what she calls “an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach.” Working with 28 children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, she assigned half of them to play games designed to boost the speed of response times, and the other half to play games that target reasoning skills. “Quirkle,” for instance, challenges children to align tiles on a grid to match shapes and colors. After eight weeks of training — 75 minutes per day, twice a week — Bunge found that the children in the reasoning group scored, on average, 10 points higher on a nonverbal I.Q. test than they had before the training. Four of the 17 children who played the reasoning games gained an average of more than 20 points. In another study, not yet published, Bunge found improvements in college students preparing to take the LSAT.

Torkel Klingberg, meanwhile, has continued studying the effects of training children with his own variety of working-memory tasks. In October 2010, a company he founded to offer those tasks as a package through psychologists and other training professionals, was bought by Pearson Education, the world’s largest provider of educational assessment tools.

Despite continuing academic debates, other commercial enterprises are rushing in to offer an array of “brain building” games that make bold promises to improve all kinds of cognitive abilities. Within a block of each other in downtown San Francisco are two of the best known. Posit Science, among the oldest in the field, remains relatively small, giving special attention to those with cognitive disorders. Lumosity began in 2007 and is now by far the biggest of the services, with more than 20 million subscribers. Its games include a sleeker, more entertaining version of the N-back task.

In Chicago Heights, the magic was definitely not happening for one boy staring blankly at the black cats in the Mac Lab. Sipping from a juice box he
held in one hand, jabbing at a computer key over and over with the other, he periodically sneaked a peak at his instructor, a look of abject boredom on his freckled face.

“That’s the biggest challenge we have as researchers in this field,” Jaeggi told me, “to get people engaged and motivated to play our working-memory game and to really stick with it. Some people say it’s hard and really frustrating and really challenging and tiring.”

In a follow-up to their 2008 study in young adults, Jaeggi, Buschkuehl and their colleagues published a paper last year that described the effects of N-back training in 76 elementary- and middle-school children from a broad range of social and economic backgrounds. Only those children who improved substantially on the N-back training had gains in fluid intelligence. But their improvement wasn’t linked to how high they originally scored on Raven’s; children at all levels of cognitive ability improved. And those gains persisted for three months after the training ended, a heartening sign of possible long-term benefits. Although it’s unknown how much longer the improvement in fluid intelligence will last, Jaeggi doubts the effects will be permanent without continued practice. “Do we think they’re now smarter for the rest of their lives by just four weeks of training?” she asks. “We probably don’t think so. We think of it like physical training: if you go running for a month, you increase your fitness. But does it stay like that for the rest of your life? Probably not.”

If future studies confirm the benefits of working-memory training on fluid intelligence, the implications could be enormous. Might children with A.D.H.D. receive working-memory training rather than stimulant drugs like Ritalin? Might students in high school and college do N-back training rather than cramming for their finals? Could a journalist like me write better articles?

Of course, in order to improve, you need to do the training. For some, whether brilliant or not so much, training may simply be too hard — or too boring.

To increase motivation, the study in Chicago Heights offers third graders a chance to win a $10 prepaid Visa card each week. In collaboration with researchers from the University of Chicago’s Initiative on Chicago Price Theory (directed by Steven D. Levitt, of “Freakonomics” fame), the study pits the kids against one another, sometimes one on one, sometimes in groups, to see if competition will spur them to try harder. Each week, whichever group receives more points on the N-back is rewarded with the
Visa cards. To isolate the motivating effects of the cash prizes, a group of fourth graders is undergoing N-back training with the same black-cats-in-haunted-house program, but with no Visa cards, only inexpensive prizes — plastic sunglasses, inflatable globes — as a reward for not talking and staying in their seats.

The boy tapping randomly at his computer without even paying attention to the game? He was in the fourth-grade class. Although the study is not yet complete, perhaps it will show that the opportunity to increase intelligence is not motivation enough. Just like physical exercise, cognitive exercises may prove to be up against something even more resistant to training than fluid intelligence: human nature.

Dan Hurley is working on a book about intelligence. His last article for the magazine was about a drug being tested to raise intelligence in people with Down syndrome.

Editor: Ilena Silverman
At Binghamton University, Halt to Pledging Amid Hazing Concerns

By PETER APPLEBOME

BINGHAMTON, N.Y. — Binghamton University, one of the Northeast’s top public colleges, has halted all fraternity and sorority pledging this spring after what it called an “alarmingly high number of serious hazing complaints.”

Administrators and students said there was no indication their hazing problem was worse than those at other colleges. But the move at Binghamton is emblematic of an increasingly tough stance on hazing and on other forms of student misbehavior on campuses nationwide.

The University of Connecticut is advising students this weekend to go home and avoid an often-out-of-control party called Spring Weekend, during which a student was killed off campus in 2010. The University of Colorado at Boulder has announced it will close the entire campus to all visitors on Friday to try to stop a longtime marijuana smoke-out held annually that day. The moves follow well-publicized hazing scandals at Boston University and Dartmouth College and student deaths at Cornell and Florida A&M Universities last year.

“The climate on campuses is such that there’s just much less tolerance for aberrant behavior, particularly anything that can result in violence or injuries to others,” said Kevin Kruger, president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

“Stopping pledging altogether is not so common, but there’s a huge focus on managing liability and sending a very clear message to students and alumni that this kind of behavior will result in removal of the chapter.”

The concerns are not new, and educators cite three main reasons for the actions: concern for student safety, legal exposure and efforts to avoid embarrassment. Binghamton was widely faulted for its slow response to irregularities and criminal behavior surrounding its basketball team a few years ago.

But Binghamton officials said that their overriding concern was the health and safety of students and that the situation was clear: For the second year in a row, they received an increasing number of reports, mostly anonymous
phone calls or e-mails from pledges, friends of pledges or parents, about hazing during the eight-week pledge period.

Lloyd Howe, the dean of students, said the university took action before it faced a serious episode.

“For us, any hazing is of concern, even if it seems to be at the low end of the range, because that can often escalate into a situation that becomes more dangerous,” he said.

About 12 percent of Binghamton’s 14,700 students are members of the 52 sanctioned professional and social fraternities. After it halted all pledging, the university said the organizations could petition to admit new members based on a review of their pledging activities.

At least 10 fraternities and sororities are under investigation, officials said. No criminal charges have been filed or disciplinary action taken against individual students.

Many fraternity and sorority members say there is no indication that any activity occurred that came close to putting students in danger, like forced drinking, which killed a Cornell student, or beatings, which caused the death of a drum major in the Florida A&M band. Instead, they said, the university has overreacted based on an open-ended definition of hazing.

“This has all been blown out of proportion based on anonymous reports,” said Samantha Vulpis, a junior from Commack, N.Y., on Long Island, and president of Binghamton’s Panhellenic Council. “It’s like hazing now is considered anything that isn’t optional. The way it’s being enforced is that anything you could ever think of is now considered hazing.”

New York is among 44 states with antihazing laws. Under New York’s laws, a person can be found guilty of a misdemeanor by conducting initiation and affiliation activities that cause physical injury or create a substantial risk of injury.

Officials at Binghamton, which is part of the State University of New York system, have not disclosed specific complaints under investigation. But indications are that alleged episodes range from relatively minor cases of enforced physical activity or time-consuming rituals to physical violence resulting in cuts or welts.

“Hazing has become a part of fraternity life,” said Zach Stein, a junior from Woodmere, N.Y., also on Long Island, who is president of the Interfraternity Council. “That’s not what it’s supposed to be, but it’s there, and something
should be done about it. But, to be honest, I think it’s not as out of control here as at some other schools."

There are no fraternity or sorority houses on Binghamton’s campus, and no off-campus houses are registered with the university. Instead, fraternity and sorority members often live together in off-campus houses. As a result of that distance from campus and the secrecy that is part of the pledging process, there are more rumors than facts about hazing.

One freshman, who declined to give his name, said all the students in his pledge class at a fraternity they sought to enter dropped out because of a two-hour regimen of push-ups and crunches. “There wasn’t any drinking, and I didn’t think it was so bad, but one by one everyone dropped out,” he said. “You can’t have a pledge class if there’s no one left.” He said he had not heard of any pledging rituals he considered dangerous.

Emily Fish, a senior from East Brunswick, N.J., said her sorority was one of two that lost its university sanction over the past year. The sorority, she said, was cited for “sleep deprivation,” which she said amounted to giving pledges multiple tasks. She said it might have been excessive but was not dangerous.

“What you end up with is like brainwashing,” she said. “It’s a long process where you eventually think the sorority is everything, pledge class is everything, you’ll do anything to please them. You eat, sleep and breathe our sorority, and I think it does become extreme to a certain point.” She added: “But we did it, and we still love the sorority. If it was so bad, we wouldn’t have done it.”

She and others said the university’s definition of hazing was now so broad that it was hindering compliance, because few students took the admonition seriously. The university’s antihazing policy cites activities most likely to produce “mental or physical discomfort, harm, stress, embarrassment, harassment or ridicule” from activities that could include “engaging in public stunts or buffoonery,” inappropriate scavenger hunts or road trips or wearing clothes likely to subject the wearer to embarrassment or ridicule.

But administrators say the problem is not the policy but a lack of cooperation from people in the Greek system. When Brian Rose, vice president for student affairs, spoke to students last week, he predicted that investigating facts and sanctioning organizations would be difficult because “nobody is going to tell us anything, and most people that say something to us are just going to lie through their teeth.”
Mr. Kruger, of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, said the focus on hazing and dangerous behavior on campuses nationwide did not mean the problems were disappearing. “It’s staggering to me it is still the problem it is,” he said.

Even if there is disagreement on the approach at Binghamton, there is widespread agreement that something needed to be done. “If even half of the rumors swirling around campus are half-true, then the jig needs to end,” the campus newspaper, The Pipe Dream, wrote in an editorial. “The university no longer has plausible deniability.”

_Nate Schweber contributed reporting._
Student Loan Interest Rates Loom as Political Battle

By TAMAR LEWIN

President Obama begins an all-out push on Friday to get Congress to extend the low interest rate on federal student loans, White House officials said, an effort that is likely to become a heated battle along party lines. If Congress fails to act, the interest rate on the loans, which are taken out by nearly eight million students each year, will double on July 1, to 6.8 percent.

White House officials said the president was planning a sustained effort through the spring: On Friday, Education Secretary Arne Duncan will discuss the issue at a White House briefing, and on Saturday in his weekly address, the president will call on Congress to pass legislation preventing the rate hike.

Next week, Mr. Obama will again hammer the issue — during visits on Tuesday to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Colorado at Boulder, and on Wednesday at the University of Iowa. The White House also plans a social media campaign through Facebook, Google+ and Twitter, using the hashtag #DontDoubleMyRate.

At a time when Americans owe more on student loans than on credit cards — student debt is topping $1 trillion for the first time — and the Occupy movement has highlighted the rising furor over spiraling student debt, the issue has moved higher on the political agenda. But the question of what to do about the looming interest rate increase has landed deep in the chasm separating Democrats from Republicans, who accuse the president of using the issue in a fiscally irresponsible way, in an attempt to buy the youth vote.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that a one-year freeze on the interest rate for subsidized Stafford loans would cost $6 billion.

“Bad policy based on lofty campaign promises has put us in an untenable situation,” said John P. Kline Jr., the Minnesota Republican who is chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

The low interest rate stemmed from the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act, which reduced interest rates on subsidized Stafford loans over the following four academic years — from 6.8 percent to the current 3.4 percent — with the proviso that the rates would revert to 6.8 percent this July. Extending the low rate would be too costly, Mr. Kline said. “We must
now choose between allowing interest rates to rise or piling billions of dollars on the backs of taxpayers,” he said. “I have serious concerns about any proposal that simply kicks the can down the road and creates more uncertainty in the long run — which is what put us in this situation in the first place.”

Mr. Kline, who earlier this year called the interest-rate hike a “ticking time bomb set by Democrats,” said he was exploring other options in hopes of finding a solution that served borrowers and taxpayers equally well.

When the 2007 law was passed, 77 Republicans — most of whom are still in Congress — voted for it. But in the current climate of fractious partisanship, new legislation introduced by Representative Joe Courtney to extend the lower rate has 127 co-sponsors, all of them Democrats.

Mr. Courtney said he was hopeful that some Republican support would be forthcoming as the political stakes became more apparent.

“The visibility of this issue is going to continue to grow as we get closer to the deadline,” he said. “The response of students and parents is one of disbelief that interest is going to double at a time when interest rates are so low, and I think it’s very politically dangerous for Republicans to stonewall this.”

Rich Williams, the higher education advocate for U.S. Public Interest Research Group, said he thought about 14 moderate Republican senators might support the effort to keep the interest rates down.

“This should be a bipartisan issue,” he said. “It’s something everyone gets.”

Outside Congress, even some of the strongest student-aid advocates debate the question. While nearly everyone is in favor of the broad goal of college affordability, some experts wonder whether it is worth risking cutbacks in the Pell program for low-income students, a possible result of using more federal money to keep interest rates low on the Stafford loans, which are in wide use by middle-income students.

But student advocacy groups say it is wrong to view financing for Pells and Staffords as a zero-sum competition.
Penn State Pays Millions to Paterno’s Estate

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Penn State has agreed to provide millions in payments and benefits to Joe Paterno's estate and family members under the late football coach's employment contract, although a family lawyer says the Paternos did not sign away their right to sue.

The school turned over four checks Thursday worth more than $3 million for bonuses that covered the season, bowl game and entire career, according to a university spokeswoman.

A breakdown provided by Penn State included the use by Paterno's family of a Beaver Stadium suite for 25 years and $900,000 from television and radio revenue from last season. Half the broadcast revenues were paid in February, and the rest will be paid later this year, the school said.

Paterno family lawyer Wick Sollers issued a statement Thursday saying there has been no settlement but rather "a straightforward payment of moneys indisputably owed to the Paterno estate. The university had requested that the family agree to a full release in return for the payments under the contract. That request was declined and no release was signed."

Without a release, Paterno's estate could still sue under the contract or some other reason, if it wishes.

School spokesman Bill Mahon described it as the university and Paterno's estate finalizing the remaining payments that were due to the longtime coach, who was fired in November in the wake of former assistant Jerry Sandusky's arrest on child sexual abuse charges.

Paterno died of lung cancer in January at age 85.

The university also said it would pay the coach's widow, Sue Paterno, $1,000 a month for life, and provide her with on-campus parking and access to university hydrotherapy equipment.

Other elements of the package include a final paycheck of $34,000, a death benefit of $51,000 and $350,000 — payable over five years — under a 1986 consulting agreement. The university also agreed to forgive $350,000 in
outstanding loans and debt. No explanation was provided regarding Paterno's debts to the school.

While the school said in a news release that the total value of the package was "over $5.5 million," added together the various elements are worth about $6.7 million. The stadium suite was valued at $1.5 million.

The university's breakdown said his contract was amended in August to include a $3 million career bonus if he retired at the end of the season, the payment that constituted the largest part of the money his estate received Thursday. After Sandusky was arrested, Paterno announced he planned to retire at the season's end, but he then removed as coach by the trustees, who have said a "failure of leadership" on his part contributed to their decision.

Mahon said the trustees decided to honor the terms of Paterno's contract as if he had retired at the end of the 2011 season.

"That contract recognized Coach Paterno's decades-long contributions to our football program and to the entire university," Mahon said.

Paterno spent six decades at Penn State and 46 seasons as head coach, winning two national championships and becoming the face of the university.

Sandusky is awaiting a June trial on 52 charges for alleged abuse of 10 boys over a 15-year period, allegations he has repeatedly denied. Also charged were athletic director Tim Curley and vice president Gary Schultz, accused of lying to a grand jury and failing to report suspected child abuse. They also await trial and have denied the allegations.

The scandal also led to the departure of university president Graham Spanier, who remains a faculty member.
There’s an atmosphere of grand fragility hanging over America’s colleges. The grandeur comes from the surging application rates, the international renown, the fancy new dining and athletic facilities. The fragility comes from the fact that colleges are charging more money, but it’s not clear how much actual benefit they are providing.

Colleges are supposed to produce learning. But, in their landmark study, “Academically Adrift,” Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa found that, on average, students experienced a pathetic seven percentile point gain in skills during their first two years in college and a marginal gain in the two years after that. The exact numbers are disputed, but the study suggests that nearly half the students showed no significant gain in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills during their first two years in college.

This research followed the Wabash Study, which found that student motivation actually declines over the first year in college. Meanwhile, according to surveys of employers, only a quarter of college graduates have the writing and thinking skills necessary to do their jobs.

In their book, “We’re Losing Our Minds,” Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh argue that many colleges and universities see themselves passively as “a kind of bank with intellectual assets that are available to the students.” It is up to students — 19 and 20 year olds — to provide the motivation, to identify which assets are most important and to figure out how to use them.

Colleges today are certainly less demanding. In 1961, students spent an average of 24 hours a week studying. Today’s students spend a little more than half that time — a trend not explained by changing demographics.

This is an unstable situation. At some point, parents are going to decide that $160,000 is too high a price if all you get is an empty credential and a fancy car-window sticker.

One part of the solution is found in three little words: value-added assessments. Colleges have to test more to find out how they’re doing.

It’s not enough to just measure inputs, the way the U.S. News-style rankings mostly do. Colleges and universities have to be able to provide prospective
parents with data that will give them some sense of how much their students learn.

There has to be some way to reward schools that actually do provide learning and punish schools that don’t. There has to be a better way to get data so schools themselves can figure out how they’re doing in comparison with their peers.

In 2006, the Spellings commission, led by then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, recommended a serious accountability regime. Specifically, the commission recommended using a standardized test called the Collegiate Learning Assessment to provide accountability data. Colleges and grad schools use standardized achievement tests to measure students on the way in; why shouldn’t they use them to measure students on the way out?

Many people in higher ed are understandably anxious about importing the No Child Left Behind accountability model onto college campuses. But the good news is that colleges and universities are not reacting to the idea of testing and accountability with blanket hostility, the way some of the members of the K-12 establishment did.

If you go to the Web page of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and click on “assessment,” you will find a dazzling array of experiments that institutions are running to figure out how to measure learning.

Some schools like Bowling Green and Portland State are doing portfolio assessments — which measure the quality of student papers and improvement over time. Some, like Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, use capstone assessment, creating a culminating project in which the students display their skills in a way that can be compared and measured.

The challenge is not getting educators to embrace the idea of assessment. It’s mobilizing them to actually enact it in a way that’s real and transparent to outsiders.

The second challenge is deciding whether testing should be tied to federal dollars or more voluntary. Should we impose a coercive testing regime that would reward and punish schools based on results? Or should we let schools adopt their own preferred systems?

Given how little we know about how to test college students, the voluntary approach is probably best for now. Foundations, academic conferences or
even magazines could come up with assessment methods. Each assessment could represent a different vision of what college is for. Groups of similar schools could congregate around the assessment model that suits their vision. Then they could broadcast the results to prospective parents, saying, “We may not be prestigious or as expensive as X, but here students actually learn.”

This is the beginning of college reform. If you’ve got a student at or applying to college, ask the administrators these questions: “How much do students here learn? How do you know?”
Student-loan debt is having a sharp effect on people's lifestyles. Four-figure monthly loan payments are handcuffing grads at all levels of the work force. Sue Shellenbarger has details on Lunch Break. Photo: Jon Lowenstein for The Wall Street Journal

To Pay Off Loans, Grads Put Off Marriage, Children
By SUE SHELLENBARGER
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Between the ages of 18 and 22, Jodi Romine took out $74,000 in student loans to help finance her business-management degree at Kent State University in Ohio. What seemed like a good investment will delay her career, her marriage and decision to have children.

Ms. Romine's $900-a-month loan payments eat up 60% of the paycheck she earns as a bank teller in Beaufort, S.C., the best job she could get after graduating in 2008. Her fiancé Dean Hawkins, 31, spends 40% of his paycheck on student loans. They each work more than 60 hours a week. He teaches as well as coaches high-school baseball and football teams, studies in a full-time master's degree program, and moonlights weekends as a server at a restaurant. Ms. Romine, now 26, also works a second job, as a waitress. She is making all her loan payments on time.

They can't buy a house, visit their families in Ohio as often as they would like or spend money on dates. Plans to marry or have children are on hold, says Ms. Romine. "I'm just looking for some way to manage my finances."

High school's Class of 2012 is getting ready for college, with students in their late teens and early 20s facing one of the biggest financial decisions they will ever make.

Total U.S. student-loan debt outstanding topped $1 trillion last year, according to the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and it continues to rise as current students borrow more and past students fall
behind on payments. Moody's Investors Service says borrowers with private student loans are defaulting or falling behind on payments at twice prerecession rates.

Most students get little help from colleges in choosing loans or calculating payments. Most pre-loan counseling for government loans is done online, and many students pay only fleeting attention to documents from private lenders. Many borrowers "are very confused, and don't have a good sense of what they've taken on," says Deanne Loonin, an attorney for the National Consumer Law Center in Boston and head of its Student Loan Borrower Assistance Project.

More than half of student borrowers fail to max out government loans before taking out riskier private loans, according to research by the nonprofit Project on Student Debt. In 2006, Barnard College, in New York, started one-on-one counseling for students applying for private loans. Students borrowing from private lenders dropped 74% the next year, says Nanette DiLauro, director of financial aid. In 2007, Mount Holyoke College started a similar program, and half the students who received counseling changed their borrowing plans, says Gail W. Holt, a financial-services official at the Massachusetts school. San Diego State University started counseling and tracking student borrowers in 2010 and has seen private loans decline.

The implications last a lifetime. A recent survey by the National Association of Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys says members are seeing a big increase in people whose student loans are forcing them to delay major purchases or starting families.

Looking back, Ms. Romine wishes she had taken only "a bare minimum" of student loans. She paid some of her costs during college by working part time as a waitress. Now, she wishes she had worked even more. Given a second chance, "I would never have touched a private loan—ever," she says.

Ms. Romine hopes to solve the problem by advancing her career. At the bank where she works, a former supervisor says she is a hard working, highly capable employee. "Jodi is doing the best she can," says Michael Matthews, a Beaufort, S.C., bankruptcy attorney who is familiar with Ms. Romine's situation. "But she will be behind the eight-ball for years."

Private student loans often carry uncapped, variable interest rates and aren't required to include flexible repayment options. In contrast, government loans offer fixed interest rates and flexible options, such as income-based repayment and deferral for hardship or public service.
Steep increases in college costs are to blame for the student-loan debt burden, and most student loans are now made by the government, says Richard Hunt, president of the Consumer Bankers Association, a private lenders' industry group.

Many private lenders encourage students to plan ahead on how to finance college, so "your eyes are open on what it's going to cost you and how you will manage that," says a spokeswoman for Sallie Mae, a Reston, Va., student-loan concern. Federal rules implemented in 2009 require lenders to make a series of disclosures to borrowers, so that "you are made aware multiple times before the loan is disbursed" of various lending options, the spokeswoman says.

Both private and government loans, however, lack "the most fundamental protections we take for granted with every other type of loan," says Alan Collinge, founder of StudentLoanJustice.org, an advocacy group. When borrowers default, collection agencies can hound them for life, because unlike other kinds of debt, there is no statute of limitations on collections. And while other kinds of debt can be discharged in bankruptcy, student loans must still be paid barring "undue hardship," a legal test that most courts have interpreted very narrowly.

Deferring payments to avoid default is costly, too. Danielle Jokela of Chicago earned a two-year degree and worked for a while to build savings before deciding to pursue a dream by enrolling at age 25 at a private, for-profit college in Chicago to study interior design. The college's staff helped her fill out applications for $79,000 in government and private loans. "I had no clue" about likely future earnings or the size of future payments, which ballooned by her 2008 graduation to more than $100,000 after interest and fees.

She couldn't find a job as an interior designer and twice had to ask lenders to defer payments for a few months. After interest plus forbearance fees that were added to the loans, she still owes $98,000, even after making payments for most of five years, says Ms. Jokela, 32, who is working as an independent contractor doing administrative tasks for a construction company.

By the time she pays off the loans 25 years from now, she will have paid $211,000. In an attempt to build savings, she and her husband, Mike, 32, a customer-service specialist, are selling their condo. Renting an apartment will save $600 a month. Ms. Jokela has given up on her hopes of getting an
M.B.A., starting her own interior-design firm or having children. "How could I consider having children if I can barely support myself?" she says.

When Debt Takes Over

Potential consequences of taking out too many student loans
--Delays in buying a car or purchasing a home
--Postponement of marriage and childbirth for financial reasons
--Parents feel pressure to take out loans or otherwise help with payments
--Risk for parents who co-sign loans of losing homes, cars and other assets
--Little ability to discharge student loans in bankruptcy
--Inability to get credit cards or home or car loans
--Inability to rent a home because of high debt-to-income ratio
--Being forced to deal with private collection agencies in the event of default
--Having liens placed on bank accounts or property in a default*
--Facing collection fees of 25% of amount owed in a default
--No statute of limitations on collection efforts
--Having wages garnisheed
--Possible loss of state-issued professional licenses
--Reduction of Social Security payments**
--Seizure of tax refund**
*Used primarily by private lenders
**Government loans only

Source: WSJ reporting
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