

Study: Community college students do poorly in online classes

By Danya Perez-Hernandez, Chronicle of Higher Education

While the use of online courses is increasingly widespread in California's community colleges, the success rate of students in the courses lags behind that of their peers taking in-person courses, according to a report released last week by the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonprofit and nonpartisan think tank that focuses on the state's public programs.

The report, "Online Learning and Student Outcomes in California's Community Colleges," says online-course enrollment reached close to one million in the 2010-11 academic year, up from 114,000 in 2002-3. Almost 530,000 California community-college students enrolled in online courses during 2011-12, nearly 20 percent of all students taking credit courses, the report says.

The institute's researchers found that students were less likely to complete online courses than traditional courses, and were less likely to complete online courses with passing grades. But when it comes to long-term impact, measured by the likelihood of students' earning degrees or transferring to four-year-colleges, those who combined traditional and online courses were more successful than those who took face-to-face courses alone.

According to the report, in 2011-12, 79.4 percent of students completed online courses they started, compared with 85.9 percent of students completing traditional courses. The findings are based on student and course data collected from the 112 community colleges in California.

Brown wants Calif. to be in front of climate change

By Jennifer Medinamay, New York Times

LOS ANGELES — Portraying California as the front line of climate change, Gov. Jerry Brown said Monday that the effects of man-made global warming were devastating the state, drawing a direct link between climate change and both the record-setting drought that has left the state parched and the early-season wildfires that broke out across California last week. He declared that people must find a way “to live with nature, not collide with it.”

Saying that California was at the “epicenter” of the impact of climate change, Brown said that states and nations in general were “not on a sustainable path” when it came to global warming and the harsh weather patterns and other problems it brings.

“We have to adapt because the climate is changing,” Brown said in a speech to scientists gathered in Sacramento for a conference on the drought’s impact on state agriculture. “Now there’s no doubt that the evidence has been strong for quite a while, and it is getting even stronger.”

Brown has made battling climate change one of the centerpieces of his tenure, traveling as far as China to marshal support for efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. He has pressed for continued enforcement of the state’s cap-and-trade program — which places limits on emissions from major polluters —

despite some critics' calls to scale back amid the weak economy. And he has repeatedly criticized Congress for not doing enough to take action.

Read the whole story

Smokey Bear turning 70, joining social media



Smokey Bear teaching kids.
Photo/LTN file

By Meg James, Los Angeles Times

Smokey Bear turns 70 this summer. But instead of kicking back in retirement – whacking golf balls or sniffing around for early-bird dinner specials – the bear in bluejeans is returning to work to educate people about wildfires.

Last year, there were 47,579 wildfires nationwide, according to the federal government. Typically, 9 out of 10 are caused by humans. Fire danger is expected to be high this summer, particularly in the parched Western states.

So, with the help of local ad agencies, Smokey Bear has been

enlisted for a new marketing campaign to remind humans to be more careful.

Handlers of the iconic animal have decided he needed a younger and fresher look. They want him to fit in with the millennial generation of teenagers and young adults.

Read the whole story

Whittell parents want their concerns addressed

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – A committee consisting of parents and Douglas County School District staff may be formed this fall to investigate and suggest solutions to some of the long-term issues facing Whittell High School.

Superintendent Lisa Noonan, in an update at the May 21 board meeting regarding the school's staffing, said she needed the summer to plan for what she called a study group, which then could be launched at the start of the new school year.

The goal of the group would be to look at how other small schools have dealt with such issues as declining enrollment, budget cuts and reduced curriculum, and find answers for Whittell's ongoing problems.



More than 50 people fill the room May 21 at the Douglas County School District meeting. Photo/Anne Knowles

Enrollment at Lake Tahoe schools has dropped from a high of 942 students during the 1997-98 school year to 385 students this year.

The task force was one of the requests made by the public during a May 9 meeting of the board, where about two dozen teachers, parents and others spoke mostly about a threat to Whittell's music program.

"The launching pad is the conversation next week," Noonan said at this week's board meeting. "We need more listening and conversation. We don't have the answers tonight."

Noonan has scheduled a meeting with parents at 4:30pm May 27 at the high school, prior to a 6pm awards ceremony there, to talk further about their concerns.

About 10 parents and teachers spoke at the May 21 meeting, most reiterating the same worries voiced at the previous meeting.

Kelly Gardner, for example, said parents were very excited about meeting with Noonan next week. But she said parents had been blindsided before by unexpected changes and needed to first build trust with the school district.

"I am hopeful you have empathy for our lack of trust and that we need commitment to run our schools from decisions of what is best for our kids and not from an accounts' perspective," said Gardner during public comment. "I look forward to building a truly trusting environment to work toward a plan that works for all the students at the lake."

In a May 6 email to the board and district office staff, Noonan said, "The number of students requesting music for next year was enough to fill one class – which is a 0.20 allocation. Rather than post a job for a 20 percent contract, we added a drama class and will use the music stipends for hiring someone to offer a music club.

"We also increased the fine arts teacher from a 60 percent contract to an 80 percent contract.

"The overall reduction at WHS for next year is a 0.40 allocation."

During her presentation, Noonan also emphasized that the district budget, which the board approved at the meeting, does not end the discussion.

"The first concern I want to alleviate is when the board sets the budget they report to the state, that is different than my role helping with allocations," said Noonan. "The board is never asked to approve at a granular level."

Noonan said deciding how to spend the money allotted is an ongoing process and a school's master schedule of classes is a "living, breathing document."

The passed budget freezes most spending categories, except for an additional \$25,000 for testing of 11th-graders, \$4,450 for software, \$50,000 for special education and \$577,125 for salaries and benefits.

There are eight employee groups and the district has

negotiated contracts with all of them except for the largest group, teachers.

Several teachers spoke during public comment and two held up homemade protest signs saying, among other things, "Negotiate Don't Arbitrate," and "Transparency, Honesty, Question the Budget."

Noonan, during her update, asked that a task force of parents and staff not overlap with or negate the work of school performance plans, which are required by law and address some of the same issues in the short-term.

Board President Tom Moore said that the board could not yet approve the proposed committee because it was not an item on the board's May 21 agenda.

Nev. fires Xerox, joins federal health exchange

By Kyle Roerink, Las Vegas Sun

Nevada will abandon its state-run health exchange, sever ties with software contractor Xerox and switch to the federal system for one year to enroll its residents in health care, a state board voted Tuesday.

The Silver State Exchange's board of directors proclaimed it had "no confidence" in staying with Xerox, citing the company's inability to fix 1,500 technical glitches in the current exchange. Xerox had a \$75 million contract with the state and has spent \$12 million of that money, according to the state.

Xerox executives testified at the May 20 meeting and lobbied the board to keep the company on the project. But they did not sway the decision.

“The current system is intolerable and is not the best we can do,” said Lynn Etkins, the board’s vice chair.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Rim Trail a continual work in progress

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – It’s never done – the work, the hiking, the enjoyment.

That was the message of Mary Bennington. For the past four years she has been executive director of the Tahoe Rim Trail Association. The motto of the nonprofit is “A Trail Like No Other”.

While it is 165 miles around, with the connectors there are more than 180 miles to the trail. It keeps growing to allow better access. And improvements are continually being made to existing sections.

In her talk May 21 to Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe at Harrah’s Lake Tahoe, Bennington explained how last year the 3.4-mile connector trail from Van Sickle Bi-State Park to the Rim Trail was finished.



TRTA Executive Director Mary Bennington talks to volunteers on a National Trails Day. Photo/LTN file

Another South Shore project that enhanced the hiking experience took 10 years to complete. That was the Kingsbury North and Kingsbury South sections. It used to be paved, go through a neighborhood, was steep and windy. There is also a loop for that section that has been rerouted out of Heavenly's Stagecoach Lodge.

Most of the work for the last two years has been focused on the 24½-mile Rim to Reno trail. The last mile to the summit of Mt. Houghton will be built this summer.

Most of the work to build and maintain the trail network has come from volunteers. About 500 volunteers put in nearly 15,000 hours of work each year.

It was Glen Hampton with the U.S. Forest Service who had the vision for a trail along the ridgetops. The TRTA was formed in 1981 and work began three years later. The 165-mile trail was finished in 2001.

"As you hike the whole trail you see different ecology," Bennington said. "Desolation is different than the East Shore. The West Shore is a lot rockier." This is because of the glaciers that formed the area.

Bennington said it's estimated 100,000 people are on the TRTA

a year. A survey will be taken this summer to gather better data about TRT users.

While two weeks is the average time it takes someone to backpack the trail, many people divide it up into sections. The association says it can be hiked in eight sections, but those are often shortened by hikers, bikers and equestrians.

- Tahoe City to Brockway (20.2 miles) is often the best place to start in the spring because it has the lowest elevation. This means the snow is gone faster than at other locations.
- Brockway to Mount Rose (20.2 miles) has the highest point – Relay Peak at 10,338 feet. “On a clear day you can see to Lassen,” Bennington said.
- Tahoe Meadows to Spooner (23.1 miles) has a 1.2 mile interpretive loop at the beginning that is wheelchair accessible. Farther along, this section looks down on Sand Harbor.
- Spooner to Kingsbury Grade (12.2 miles for the north, 18.5 miles for south route) has a wide panoramic view four miles in.
- Kingsbury Grade to Big Meadow (23.4 miles) includes Star Lake. Freel Peak would mean taking a side trip.
- Big Meadow to Echo Lake (17.5 miles) includes Showers Lake.
- Echo Lake to Barker Pass (32.7 miles) can be broken up by popping out at Bayview Campground.
- Barker Pass to Tahoe City (16.7 miles) has few views of Lake Tahoe, but includes Paige Meadow.

The TRTA has various memberships available, guided treks, and volunteer opportunities. More info is available online.

Judge: Vail Resorts has rights to Park City ski resort

By Jason Blevins, Denver Post

A Utah District Court ruled Wednesday that Park City Mountain Resort officials failed to renew their historic lease for a majority of their ski terrain and the landowner is allowed to lease the ski area's upper terrain to a new operator.

That means Vail Resorts just won the rights to more than two-thirds of the land beneath Utah's most popular ski area. And it means that Park City Mountain Resort owner Powdr Corp. will go down in history as captaining the ski industry's most costly clerical error: a days-late filing to renew their decades-old, sweetheart lease could forever change their flagship ski area, which has seen Powdr invest more than \$100 million.

Powdr Corp. argued it was an "honest mistake" when the resort operator was a couple days late filing paperwork to renew its lease for land beneath Park City Mountain Resort. It was paying landowner Talisker Corp. about \$150,000 a year for the land, per the series of 20-year leases first forged in the 1970s. For comparison, Vail Resorts is paying Talisker \$25 million a year plus a percentage of revenue every year to lease the adjacent 4,000-acre Canyons ski area.

Talisker refused to sign a new lease with Powdr and went looking for a new tenant. Powdr sued Talisker to force a new deal. Talisker leased Canyons to Vail Resorts on the condition that the continent's largest resort operator takes over the

Park City Mountain Resort legal battle, calling Vail Resorts a “dramatically better operator” than Powder.

Read the whole story

Siding a contentious issue for SLT, developer



Plywood on a back wall of the Chateau project is likely to be temporary.
Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

In a rare moment, the South Lake Tahoe City Council said “no” to a request by attorney Lew Feldman when it came to the Chateau project.

While the discussion May 20 was civil, in the end Feldman did not get everything he requested in the “major design review permit revision.” He wanted part of the siding to be changed from cedar to plywood.

Mayor Hal Cole was the lead advocate to keep the cedar. For

the time being the T-1-11 siding can stay.

The compromise is that if the pillars come out or future development is such that the 30-foot high siding would be visible, the cedar siding will have to be put on.

Feldman's contention was, "If nothing happens and the columns remain, it would seem punitive." Cedar is much more expensive than plywood.

The retail-nightclub project is costing \$11 million.

Other changes allowed include increasing the window sizes along the highway, reducing the width of the Stateline Avenue sidewalk from 8½ feet to 6 feet, and modifying the door and window locations to appease retailers.

What retailers will occupy the more than 18,000-square-feet of space is still being withheld from the public. Stores should open this summer.

McP's has served its last meal in its current location before it moves to the other side of the Chateau project in the round building at the corner of the highway and Stateline Avenue. Soon the old structure will be demolished.

Also to be taken down this summer is the Holiday Lodge.

Feldman said the entire site would be cleaned up this building season.

All of the parcels being built on now have been consolidated into one map. That is not the case for the properties that Owens Realty Mortgage bought early this year for \$6 million from City National Bank. It does, however, make the 11-plus acreage site controlled by one owner for the first time.

Feldman said the owners have no intentions of selling off the parcels piecemeal.

“We now have site control, which is vital to advance future phases,” Feldman told the council.

While he would not promise future phases would be built next year, he said it is likely things will progress sooner rather than later.

When the project was first approved it was to include two hotels, a convention center, retail and open space. The city was going to be the operator of the center and take care of the common areas. Since the original developer filed for bankruptcy the city no longer has a financial stake other than collecting taxes.

S. Tahoe loosens sex offender ordinance

By Kathryn Reed

Sex offenders in South Lake Tahoe will get to roam a little freer starting next month – including near parks, schools, arcades and other places children congregate.

This is all because the California Supreme Court refused to review a case from the Fourth Appellate District Court that ultimately made 40 local sex offender ordinances illegal.

“We as a city cannot regulate sex offenders in our community. That is pathetic,” City Attorney Tom Watson told the City Council on May 20.

The other choice was to be sued. The city had already been put

on notice by the California Reform Sex Offender Laws group.

"The sex offender ordinance adopted by the city of South Lake Tahoe violates both the federal and state constitutions," Janice Bellucci, president of that group, said in a statement last month. "The South Lake Tahoe ordinance is based upon two myths: (1) that registered citizens have a high rate of re-offense and (2) that strangers commit most sexual assaults."

According to the Megan's Law website there are 27 registered sex offenders in South Lake Tahoe. For a town that is 16.6 square miles, that equates to more than 1.5 sex offenders per square mile. But not every sex offender has to register.

The council agreed with Watson's characterization of the need to amend the ordinance. They said it was with reluctance they were removing the part of the city's ordinance that prohibited registered sex offenders from being within 300 feet of public parks and like areas or living within 2,000 feet of such an area.

Schools, via the state, have separate rules keep to sex offenders off school grounds.

One of the problems with the city's ordinance is that a sex offender would be violating the law simply by driving past a school or even someplace like McDonald's that has a play structure.

"We can't regulate their free movement," City Manager Nancy Kerry said.

Watson added, "We were in essence criminalizing their right to travel."

The council and staff talked about the importance of educating parents and children to the threat of predators and that "when you see something, say something" should be the mantra.

El Dorado County in January revised its sex offender

ordinance.

The council's vote was 3-1-1. Councilman Tom Davis voted no and JoAnn Conner abstained. Neither explained their vote. It will come back as a second reading and final vote in June.

Rich families face a marriage problem

By Liz Moyer, Wall Street Journal

Being born to the manor is one thing. Marrying one of its occupants is something else altogether.

Just ask Steven Siig, a self-described "ski bum" and extreme-sports documentary filmmaker who was living near Lake Tahoe and scraping by as a landscaper when he met his wife, Melissa, in 2001.

Unbeknown to him, she was the oldest granddaughter of Richard Bloch, the co-founder of the tax-preparation firm H&R Block Inc. Melissa Siig, now 41 years old, didn't tell him this right away. "We're very guarded about it," she said.

"It was kind of intimidating," said Steven Siig, 45, when he learned of her background. "I said, 'Wow, it's someone I use to do my taxes when I do my taxes.' I didn't even know if I had done taxes the last few years."

The couple was engaged six months after they began dating, and Siig began a rapid-fire process of education and assimilation into the family — a move some financial consultants call

“onboarding.” Bloch family members gave him personal finance and career advice, and the couple later started meeting with a UBS AG financial adviser. Steven Siig joined the RA Bloch Cancer Foundation board, along with his new wife, and started attending twice-a-year family gatherings in Aspen, Colo., and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

The onboarding process is one way wealthy families are trying to smooth intrafamily relations and safeguard their fortunes for future generations. As the scions of the patriarchs grow up and get married, the importance of teaching about wealth and its preservation rises, according to families and their advisers.

Read the whole story