

Community and Lifestyles**Study: Test prep courses hardly raise scores**

by Nadin Naumann

Parents and students may be paying big bucks for college and post-graduate test-prep courses that yield results no better than taking the test twice. A recent study conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling states that despite the claims that test scores will increase by 100 points by these expensive test-prep programs, the average gain is closer to 20 to 30 points.

Test prep companies like Kaplan and Princeton Review typically charge about \$1,100 for the class and \$100 to \$200 an hour for individual tutoring, the NACAC report stated. In total, about two million students (and their parents) spend \$2.5 billion a year on test preparation and tutoring for tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, Law School Admission Test and ACT (originally the abbreviation for American College Testing).

Students that do not receive the coaching

"...Anyone will increase the score just by taking it again, so the question is what effect does coaching really have apart from second chance effect?"

--Derek Briggs, study author

that comes in test prep courses will still on average improve their scores just by retaking the test, according to the report.

"Anybody will increase the score by taking the exam a second time," said Derek Briggs, chairman of the research and methodology department at the University of Colorado in Boulder and author of the report. "What companies promise is that you'll increase over what you did before; but anyone will increase the score just by taking it again, so the question is what effect does coaching really have apart from second chance effect?"

The report also criticizes the marketing practices used by the test prep industry that promise big score gains yet with no hard

data to back them up. Kaplan's promise states, "If for any reason you don't raise your overall score, you can study with us again for free or get your money back."

But a Kaplan representative shied away from any improved-score promises.

"Giving an average score increase is a bit like a weight loss program giving an average pounds lost when in reality everyone comes to the program with different body types, commitment levels, and goals," said Kaplan Communications Executive Director Carina Wong. "Our focus isn't on specific point gains, which can be misleading, but rather on students' individual goals, which can vary."

Other companies like Ivy West claim a

certain amount of gain in points.

"We guarantee that your child will achieve a score increase of 200 points or more on the SAT or 4 points on the ACT or we will offer two free refresher lessons," the company claims, though it adds the "small print" that certain limitations apply.

But even a small increase in scores can help a student's chances of admission, the report authors admitted.

"As it has been found that even small test score increases may increase a student's chances of admission at selective institutions. If money and time are no object, commercial coaching or private tutoring may well be worth the cost," said report author Briggs. "However, this will primarily be true for students with above average admission test scores in the first place."

The report also identified as a problem the use of mock SAT tests because they can

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Child Access Center first year garners praise from parents

by Natalie Ferrigno

This October marked the one-year anniversary of the Child Access Center, created in response to the 2007 shooting at the Mill Hall Sheetz when 35-year old Benjamin Barone killed his ex-wife Jodi Barone and then himself. The two were exchanging their then 3-year-old daughter.

The center, located in Bellefonte, provides a place for parents involved in high conflict custody situations to exchange their children in a safe and civil manner.

When the CAC opened in October 2008, Ashley and her children were some of the first to use it.

Ashley, whose last name is withheld by request, is a 26-year-old pastry chef from Spring Mills. She and her former fiancé split in 2006. After a two-year court battle, Ashley won full custody of her two young daughters, aged 3 and 4. Their father is allowed to visit them on certain weekends.

However, due to a protection order, the court required Ashley and their father to

exchange the girls at the CAC.

Ashley said she was nervous about the first exchange. The center was brand new, making Ashley, her daughters, and their father among the first of what are now 17 families using the center.

"The first exchange was him bringing the girls for me to pick them up and I was very leery about that just because they know me better," she explained. "I was worried about them having to separate from their dad to go to strangers." The exchange went without a hitch and the girls quickly grew to enjoy going to the CAC thanks to the ample supply of toys and friendly volunteers, Ashley said.

In fact, the girls have come to enjoy going so much it's sometimes difficult to get them to leave, but the volunteers are good with kids and know how to get them to cooperate, even if mom or dad can't.

"I haven't met a volunteer that hasn't

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Photo by Katie Bennett

The play area at the Child Access Center in Bellefonte gives children a place to occupy themselves while waiting the 15 minutes between when one parent drops them off and the other picks them up.

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been anything but outstanding," Ashley said.

The center has become a place the children look forward to seeing, plus, it seems to make her ex-fiancé happier since they can avoid seeing one another, Ashley said. But the CAC does not yet do exchanges on holidays and has a restricted, three-evening schedule, so the parents still have to exchange on their own sometimes.

Having only one location makes things more difficult as well.

"The location could be better just because of how big this county is," said Ashley. The Child Access Center is currently the only center of its kind in Centre County.

She knows a couple that lived 30 minutes from the CAC, but five minutes away from one another. Due to the inconven-

"I haven't met a volunteer that hasn't been anything but outstanding."

--Ashley,
a parent who uses the center

ience, they signed an agreement with the courts allowing them to exchange their children on their own.

Communication between parents can be a challenge as well, she said, considering they are still trying to raise their children as a team. Letting the other parent know a child is sick or behaving a certain way can get complicated or, at the very least, delayed.

"Unless you are writing notes, you have to wait to have it in an email or a text message," said Ashley, who added that she supports the center and wishes there were more like it.

"If there was one closer, I would defi-

nately rather use that," she said. "I am the primary parent. I'm the one who provides for them 99.9 percent of what they need and what they do. [It is] an inconvenience for me to have to drive the whole way [there]."

In the meantime, though, Ashley will still use the center.

"My daughters enjoy it and that's all that I care about. They don't cry when we have to go there," she said. "Whenever [I] say we have to go to the exchange center, they're excited to play with the toys."

Plus, it's helpful in more intense situations, especially those with dramatic verbal fighting, physical violence, or in cases

where the two parents would rather avoid each other.

"I think it's kind of sad that it took a death to realize that," said Ashley, about Jodi Barone's death, adding that sometimes the worst has to happen before something gets done. However, she still sees the CAC as a positive.

"I can definitely see where it calms down the tension from having to see your ex," Ashley said. She also pointed out that it makes life easier for the children, especially if they are older and aware of why their parents have to use a child exchange center.

The Child Access Center is a joint project of Centre County Government, Centre County United Way, Centre County Women's Resource Center, and Bellefonte Area School District. It is located at 310 North Allegheny Street in Bellefonte. To become a volunteer, call the center at (814) 548-0034.

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MSA, Adults 25-54 AQH. Total broadcast week.

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be formulated to inflate score gains when students take the actual SAT.

Test prep companies respond that some students see substantial gains in their scores as a result of coaching, even if studies show that average test score improvements are limited.

Jacqueline Young is one student who benefited from the courses. Young, who just finished taking an LSAT course at the Kaplan center in downtown State College, said her time was well spent.

"I had studied over the summer under my own supervision with a Princeton Review book and could not comprehend what the authors of the book were attempting to describe and teach me," said Young. "When I took Kaplan, having a real live person explain step by step what to do and answer my 'but why' questions helped me grasp the information more easily."

Young hasn't received her LSAT scores but said her practice test scores significantly improved from the first exam that Kaplan administered to the last one.

Paige Heimark, a freshman at Penn State, said that her SAT scores went up by 400 points after she took the Kaplan course.

"It forced me to study and made me look at the material," said Heimark.

Heimark, who came from an academically competitive high school, explained that she needed to take the course in order to compete against the other students. "Everyone took a course in high school," she said.

Her parents were very willing to pay the \$800 for the course. To them, it was an investment, she said.

"If I did really well on the test, they believed that I could receive scholarship money and in the end they would actually be saving money," said Heimark.

But not every student who takes a test prep course benefits from it. Claire Jacobelli is a student whose parents paid for an SAT course.

"My parents knew that I needed help and they were willing to pay for something that they didn't fully trust," said Jacobelli. "It put them at ease."

After going through the course, though, her scores didn't improve significantly.

The report states that it is important to distinguish between the effect of coaching and the claim that students who prepare for a test a certain way have high score gains.

"The question of interest would not be whether students increase their scores from one testing to the next, but whether such an increase can be validly attributed to the coaching that preceded it," said Briggs in the report.

Why I came to State College: For the money

by Joel Solkoff

I came to State College for the money.

In March 2002, I was sitting in the Office of Professor Elias Mpofu, program head for Penn State's Rehabilitation Counseling Program, a program I was just invited to join.

Professor Mpofu asked, "Why did you decide to come to Penn State?"

"For the money," I said. "No one would give me more money than Penn State."

Professor Mpofu gave me a look of deep understanding. We spent the rest of the visit discussing Professor Mpofu's specialty; primitive African beliefs on illness and disability. Professor Mpofu published a well-received paper about a Tanganyika ritual where the magic powers help a disabled person use secret forces to be liberated from the disability. (Yes, I did ask Professor Mpofu to perform the ritual on me and he is taking a long time getting back to me.)

By accepting Professor Mpofu's academic offer I was agreeing to a career path ending in my becoming an Occupational Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) Counselor for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. My job as an OVR counselor would be to help people with disabilities get jobs. Walking was part of the job description for the job Penn State was training me. I do not walk.

Therefore, no matter how well trained I am there's no way I can become an OVR counselor without being able to walk to people's homes where the home is not



From Where I Sit

accessible. Being able to walk is job critical. With a single stroke of the pen, I had signed up for a grant from the government to make me the moral equivalent of able-bodied when the government had determined just two years earlier (at great governmental expense) that I am permanently disabled.

The attraction for me of being an OVR counselor is best described in the recollections of Abraham Nemeth, a scientist who is blind and who has become a mentor to the still-trendy summer camps specializing in teaching science to low-vision students. Nemeth's biographer Carol Castellano writes, "Dr. Nemeth says that he was discouraged from making mathematics his undergraduate major by vocational counselors because of his blindness and the lack of Braille materials. He acquiesced and switched to psychology instead. But take a look at the courses he chose for his electives at college—analytical geometry and differential and integral calculus..."

I wanted to be a successful vocational rehabilitation counselor. I believe I have a special calling based on my disability experiences to transform my experiences with assistive technology to make it easier for people with disabilities to use new technical equipment to get higher paying jobs leading to a career.

Now, I am on medical leave from the Rehabilitation Counseling Program. My health has not been good, but not as bad as it sounds.

Last year, I was in the hospital three times, once for diabetes that nearly killed me; second for treating difficult pneumonia, and the third time to evaluate a badly damaged right shoulder that requires a shoulder replacement operation where the technology has not kept up with shoulders. The medical field has made great progress with knees and hips, but not with replacing an entire shoulder. The result, no shoulder surgery for at least 25 years and periods of pain.



In my last column, I promised to provide you with my personal financial information. Last year (2008), I earned a total income of \$21,256.80. All my income came through my monthly Social Security check. Out of a monthly check of \$1,688.00, Medicare, my only health insurance (helpful during the period when I was in the hospital last month) deducts \$210 off the top. Rent and electricity costs \$830 and \$145 for phone and high speed computer (I have daughters in two different states).

I have hopes of economic redemption through...

I want out of poverty. And I want a job that will earn me a way out of poverty. [Insert Sylvester Stallone Rocky Theme Song here.]

—Joel Solkoff, author of *The Politics of Food*. Contact him at jsolkoff@gmail.com

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Sudoku

	3	5	9					
9					2	5	4	
	2			6		7		9
			7	2		8		
			8		6			
		8		3	9			
4		2		8			7	
	5	3	1					6
					4	3	1	

Instructions: Fill in the grid so every row, every column and every three-by-three box contains the digits 1 through 9. There is no math involved. You solve the puzzle with reason and logic. Thanks to Peter Morris for contributing this puzzle. The solution to this month's puzzle can be found on page 29 of this issue.

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bicyclist, curious, creative, able, depleted, dilapidated,
caffeinated, thirsty, open minded.

10 a.m. Sundays

Services vary from week to week,
so come often. Stay for coffee, conversation,
and a thought-provoking 1-hour program that follows.

Nov. 1 - 10 a.m. "How Can I Help?", Rev. Mark Hayes
We remind ourselves how much we have to give... and how helping others can lead to the
most joyous moments of our lives. Special collaboration of the UU FCC Choir and Band.

11:30 a.m. 'A Dialog on Race and Ethnicity' (ADORE)
Colina Jordan Seeley leads discussion on the isolation of our Muslim neighbors in
Centre County.

11:30 a.m. 'Getting to Know UU'
Newcomers are invited to learn about Unitarian Universalism and activities at the fellowship.
7:30 p.m. Soulful Sundown Service: 'The Day of the Dead: Remembrance and
Celebration' Helen Volz leads an adaptation of the traditional Mexican holiday for life and
mourning. Music, sharing, and time for reflection.

Nov. 8 - 10 a.m. 'Science, Religion, and UU History', Rev. Mark Hayes
Scientific knowledge and method have been an important part of our liberal religious heritage.
11:30 a.m. 'Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will
Transform Your Life and Our World'. Mark Hayes' continuing discussion on one's personal
sense of the divine, values, and the meaning one makes of life.
11:30 a.m. 'Dream Class' Paula Franklin invites you to explore the meaning of your dreams,
or learn how to remember them.

Nov. 15 - 10 a.m. 'Spiritual Lessons of Failure', Rev. Mark Hayes
How can our failures, large and small, actually contribute to our spiritual growth and maturity?
7:30 p.m. Soulful Sundown Service "Creating Wealth and Abundance: Preparing the
Spiritual Path" led by Jay Searles.

Nov. 22 - 10 a.m. "What Being a UU Means to Me", Lois Durran leads a sharing service
to explore why we are UU's, individually and collectively.
11:30 a.m. - 'Dream Class' Drop-in, if you haven't already.
11:30 a.m. - 'Antarctica!' Joan Creager's presentation and slide show of her trip.

Nov. 29 - 10 a.m. 'Thanksgiving Celebration for All Ages', Rev. Mark Hayes
Cultivate an attitude of gratitude for all we have to be thankful for.

Wonderful Soulful Nights have fun, learn, find your spirit, play games.

Nov. 4. & 18 - 7 p.m. **Meditation Fellowship** Focused on the practice of spiritual living
described in Eknath Easwaran's teachings.

Nov. 6 - 6 p.m. **Wizard of Oz movie/Sing-a-Long** (or *act-along* in costume) for all ages.

Nov. 11 - 7 p.m. **Programs** WomanSpirit (wood carving, women 16 or over) • Our
Universalist Heritage video • for children: Cookie Decorating with Tasha Miles • Games
for all Ages!

Nov. 25 - 7 p.m. 'til late **Game Night** Play word, tile, or moderna Euro board games.

Concerts

Nov. 4, 8 p.m. - **Untangled Strings**. Amy Speace, acoustic soloist/songwriter. Tickets \$15

Nov. 22, 3 p.m. - **Amanda Silliker**, vocal recital of opera, oratorios and lieder, with pianist
Svetlana Rodionova. Tickets \$10.

Visitors are always welcome.

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New store lets parents connect while children play

by Jordan Toronto

“Regina and I used to meet for coffee every Friday morning with our kids,” explained Lisa Strickland, co-owner of Spela Children’s Store and mother of three. “We would make it about 10 minutes before the kids would start screaming and climbing out of their high chairs,” Strickland said. “We thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to go to a place where the kids could play, and we could sit and drink coffee?’”

It was that question that sparked the idea for SPELA, a children’s retail store, café and play area. “We wanted to create a place where caregivers could get at least 20 minutes to relax, and the kids could be entertained and play,” said Regina Brannen, Spela’s other co-owner.

The store’s name is actually the Swedish word for “play.” Strickland’s mother is from Sweden, so the name is a tribute to her heritage.

Spela is set up as a retail store on one side and a café/play area on the other side. With an L-shape of long tables enclosing the play space, adults are able to socialize with one

“A lot of moms are going through the same things as you. Other people’s kids fight them about homework. Other kids won’t let their parents brush their hair.

--Regina Brannen

another over their coffee, tea and muffins, while keeping an eye on their busy and, most importantly, contained children.

“The other thing that is important to us is to be a place where moms and caregivers can get practical things they need everyday,” Brannen said. The retail side of the store is filled with unique merchandise that is not easily found in chain stores. “We carry the kind of items that we were always looking for and couldn’t find in State College, like certain brands of strollers, for example,” said Strickland.

Brannen and Strickland are committed to selling merchandise that is environmentally friendly and safe for their customers such as organic spa products that are not tested on animals.

They carry safe sunscreen, soap and sippy cups. They even use “spudware” in the café (utensils made out of potatoes). All their café and packaging items, including cups, straws, shopping bags and tissue paper, are either biodegradable or made of 100 percent recycled material. Wherever possible, they choose the “greenest” option, they said.

Much of Spela’s merchandise comes from local artists. For example, moms can find stained glass angels and jewelry made by local designer, Heidi Urbanski and her company Everyday Angels. They can also find accessories made by Jen Young through her company DCBaby.

Spela carries everything from bottles to slings to onesies, to help moms care for their kids safely and with style. “If you need a really cool paci-clip or an organic burp cloth, we’re here for ya!” Brannen said.

It is not just Spela’s merchandise that represents local businesses. The artwork on the walls is by local photographer, A.R. Monko. Even the owners themselves are



Photos by Jordan Toronto

Spela co-owner Regina Brannen, pictured above and left, encourages her young customers to join in as others watch on during a recent Spela sing along.

both State College natives. In fact, Strickland’s father attended State High.

“My absolute favorite thing about the store – and the most rewarding part – is connecting with other moms,” Brannen said. “I’m sad when people don’t come in, not because they’re not buying stuff, but because I just love talking to them, and hearing them swap stories as well.”

Moms particularly flock to Spela on Friday mornings at 10:30 for the store’s weekly “Sing Along.” The Sing Along is led by either Brannen, a singer who, even with four kids, still frequently performs around town or Kristina Whitaker, Strickland’s sister, who was a musical theatre major in college and has recorded two CDs with her husband Gary. Gary and Brannen’s husband Patrick, who also performs frequently in community theatre accompany their wives on the guitar. The Sing-Along includes children’s favorites and is always a big hit with the kids and parents too.

“We’ve been to Sing Along many times,” said Miriam Powell, a mom of two young boys. “I actually found out about Spela from Karen Askey, who made a sling for my second baby. The day I picked it up hap-

pened to be the day of Spela’s grand opening. We stopped by that day, and immediately got hooked. We love it there.”

Spela’s grand opening was not long after they first came up with the idea. “It happened really fast, faster than we expected,” said Brannen. “It took on a life of its own.” The idea for the store came in the spring of 2008, they started it as a Web site in the fall, and opened the store in March of 2009.

In less than a year, Spela seems to have found its niche. Brannen hopes her store will inspire moms to understand the important message: “You’re not alone.”

“A lot of moms are going through the same things as you,” said Brannen. “Other people’s kids fight them about homework. Other kids won’t let their parents brush their hair. Potty training does not always happen perfectly, between the ages of 18 months and 2 years old.”

“These are things I’ve figured out from dealing with my own kids,” Brannen said. “I’m just so happy that Spela is a place where moms can find camaraderie and the assurance of knowing that what we all experience as parents is normal and shared by so many others.”

