

Mizzou Weekly

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Taking the next steps



As an education consultant to the television program *Angelina Ballerina: The Next Steps*, music professor Wendy Sims works in almost every phase of producing the show. Young children learn best when what they are learning is meaningful to them and presented in several different ways, she says. Rob Hill photo

On-air education

Music professor takes curriculum to the airwaves

With her daughter, Rayna, MU's Wendy Sims has welcomed another little lady into her life. She has large pink ears, a tail and a permanent tutu. Her name is Angelina Ballerina, the dancing mouse made famous by the children's book series by author Katharine Holabird with illustrations by Helen Craig.

For the past two years, Sims has been working as an education consultant for the half-hour long TV show *Angelina Ballerina: The Next Steps*, which follows the life of the 8-year-old dancing mouse who attends the performing arts school, Camembert Academy.

Producers from HIT Entertainment called Sims, a professor of music education, after finding her published work online. What she thought was a conference call turned out to be an interview. The result? "We were compatible in our approaches to early childhood education," she says.

Since then, Sims has become integral in almost every phase of producing the show, from ideas through scripts through animation videos. She helps choose songs and offers advice on everything from how a character holds an instrument to what musical

words are appropriate for the intended audiences, which are children ages 3 to 6. In choosing songs, Sims looks for compositions that are famous and repetitive, like the “child-friendly” ballet, The Nutcracker.

“Young children learn best when what they are learning is meaningful to them and presented in several different ways,” she says.

For instance, in one episode a character uses the word “unison” to describe a Rockettes-style kick line. Because the characters were learning to sing together as a chorus, Sims made sure that “unison” was used more than once and in the correct context.

Similarly, when teaching children to compare pitches, “the tones have to be very far apart so that kids notice the contrasts,” she says.

The themes that surround the twirling mouse include music, dance and friendship. But the story, she says, is most important, and Sims helps fit the curriculum around it. One of those stories she wrote herself.

When Sims had an idea for an episode, the head writer told her that she should write it. The recently aired episode is called “Angelina and the Dance-a-thon,” in which Angelina and her classmates plan a dance-a-thon fundraiser to raise money to plant trees. In their efforts to raise money, the class practices their recycling skills until one of the girls recycles the pledge sheets. The message, which is set to the tunes of Motown: “Recycling is good for the earth, but be sure to recycle things that should be recycled.”

Since the show’s first airing, Sims says she’s received positive feedback from friends’ children, mom-blogs and her own daughter. Sims watches the episodes with Rayna, who likes to watch her mother’s name scroll during the credits.

“Angelina Ballerina: The Next Steps” is aired in many markets around the country and in Europe. — *Claire Hanan*

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Faculty Council discusses partner benefits, 'family friendly' campus

Equal access

Issue is one of fairness, proponents say

Calling it “contrary to a sense of human fairness,” a resolution discussed Feb. 18 by MU’s Faculty Council took a first step in expanding the University of Missouri’s current benefits policy, which does not provide benefits to an employee’s domestic partner unless they are married.

Members began discussing the resolution, which was proposed by the council’s diversity enhancement committee. Leah Cohn, that committee’s chair and professor of veterinary medicine and surgery, said the proposal would help level the playing field between employees.

For instance, one employee in a department currently would be able to enroll a spouse of the opposite sex in such University benefit programs as health insurance and tuition reduction, Cohn said, while another employee in the same department would not have that option available for a same-sex domestic partner.

Because of the current policy, “University of Missouri may be less able to attract and retain the best faculty and staff,” the resolution says, and adds “the Faculty Council of the University of Missouri’s flagship campus strongly recommends that same-sex partners of active University employees be allowed access to all of the same rights, privileges and benefits to which opposite-sex spouses currently are entitled.”

The council plans to vote on the resolution in the coming weeks. If they approve it, the resolution would then be forwarded to UM System leadership. Because human resources policies affect all four UM campuses, any policy change would have to be approved by the Board of Curators. Cohn said that the faculty council at UM-St. Louis already has approved a similar resolution.

Several council members asked why the resolution focuses only on same-sex partners and does not mention opposite-sex domestic partners who choose not to marry for whatever reason. Cohn said her committee had discussed that option at length.

“The difference is, with opposite-sex domestic partners there is at least the possibility of marrying,” she said. In Missouri, state law forbids same-sex marriage.

Cohn acknowledged that if the University ultimately changes the policy, it will have to develop a system by which employees can prove domestic partnership. She said her committee looked at how other universities handle that issue. Some require a couple to have lived together for a year, or require the couple to have “integrated financial and emotional lives,” she said.

“Different institutions have different ways of proving it,” Cohn said. “It won’t be as easy as slapping down a marriage license, because there isn’t one. There are plenty of institutions we can use as a template.”

Council member Bill Wiebold, professor of agronomy, asked if the committee had looked into the option of an “employee plus one” benefit plan. Under that type of plan, an employee would have the option of extending his or her benefits to one other individual, who would not have to be a family member or a domestic partner. “That way you don’t have to go through all the proofs,” Wiebold said.

Her committee is continuing to talk about that option with the benefits office, Cohn said, “but that’s a separate issue.”

Right now, the priority is to extend benefits to domestic partners, she said. More than 300 U.S. colleges and universities offer domestic partner benefits, she said, and 51 of the 62 Association of American Universities members offer full domestic partner

benefits while others are exploring the possibility.

Asked about the cost of expanding those benefits, Cohn said her committee's research found that 64 percent of employers who provide those benefits see their costs go up by 1 percent or less; 88 percent of employers see an increase of 2 percent or less.

Cohn said her committee asked UM's Faculty and Staff Benefits office for a cost estimate to provide medical insurance to same-sex domestic partners. The UM System currently spends a total of nearly \$150 million a year on employee health care.

If the University experienced a 2 percent increase in medical costs, that would translate into an additional \$3 million annually. Because employees pay approximately 27 percent of that cost through premiums and co-payments, the estimated cost increase to the University would be \$2.2 million annually.

Cohn also updated Faculty Council on two other issues the diversity enhancement committee is working on. The first issue calls on MU to explore ways to make this a more "family friendly" campus and suggests that Chancellor Brady Deaton form a family friendly task force.

There are a number of ways Mizzou could make the campus more welcoming to faculty, staff and students who have to balance family responsibilities with their jobs and academic lives, she said.

For instance, there are few places on campus where a nursing mother can pump breast milk for her infant. Affordable child care could be more accessible on campus. There is no uniform policy for students to take make-up tests when they have to care sick family members. A family friendly task force could explore those and other issues.

"The same sort of things apply to faculty and staff," Cohn said. "There may be some things that are very simple and inexpensive to do. There are other things that will not be simple to do to improve the situation for families of all types."

The committee also is looking into ways the administration might better coordinate reports of sexual harassment, she said. Currently, there are many campus offices through which sexual harassment can be reported, but they don't necessarily interact closely with each other.

One possibility might be to channel such complaints through one central clearinghouse, such as the MU Equity Office. That office then could produce an annual report that attempts to identify patterns in the harassment complaints. "Collecting data would be a starting point," Cohn said.

Several council members questioned whether a decentralized reporting structure might give people more options as to when and where they file a harassment report. "It's important that we don't interfere and weaken the process," Wiebold said.

"We're not talking about altering the handling (of harassment complaints) at all," Cohn said.

In other action Feb. 18, Faculty Council:

- Voted to allow transfer credit for some military coursework if the veteran has received an honorable discharge.
- Were told that Lori Franz, professor of management, has been appointed to a second five-year term as the campus faculty athletics representative. Her duties in that position include promoting and ensuring academic integrity, student-athlete welfare and institutional control of intercollegiate athletics.

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A summit for science

Accelerating ideas

KC life sciences summit will build collaborations

Scientists often face hurdles when moving their discoveries from the lab to the marketplace and consumer.

This year, participants at the Missouri Regional Life Sciences Summit in Kansas City will come together to identify partnerships between researchers and entrepreneurs.

“The goal of the summit is to accelerate the movement of new ideas from the lab to the marketplace. Our region must emerge as a world leader in bioscience research and job creation; the economy depends on it,” says Chancellor Brady Deaton.

On March 8-9, the University of Missouri will lead the summit in conjunction with the Kansas City Area Development Council on the UM-Kansas City campus

MU researchers who will speak at the summit include:

- Gabor Forgacs, professor of physics, who has worked on printing tissue structures that could lead to building organs.
- Carolyn Henry, associate professor of veterinary medicine and surgery, is part of a National Cancer Institute project to test new cancer drugs on animals.
- Randall Prather, professor of animal sciences, who has worked to breed pigs with characteristics scientists can use to investigate human diseases.
- Peter Sutovsky, associate professor of animal sciences, who has improved fertility rates among animals and whose work has translated to include human fertility.
- Jerry Taylor, professor of animal sciences, who has found new uses for genetic research devices.

For a complete schedule and to register for the summit, go to MissouriSummits.com (<http://MissouriSummits.com>).

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The sounds you hear are spreading cancer cells

Photoacoustics

Breakthrough speeds search for cancer

Knowing the stage of a patient's melanoma is important when choosing the best course of treatment. When the cancer has progressed to the lymph nodes, a more aggressive treatment is needed. Examining an entire lymph node for cancer takes much effort and time; a new technique might help make the process more efficient.

MU researchers in the Bond Life Sciences Center are studying how photoacoustics — a laser-induced ultrasound — could help scientists locate the general area of the lymph node where melanoma cells could be residing. This new technology could help doctors identify the stage of melanoma with more accuracy.

"This method can be used to determine if the cancer has spread from stage 2, where the melanoma is still just in the skin lesion, to stage 3, where the melanoma has spread to the lymph nodes," says John Viator, assistant professor of biological engineering and of dermatology. "If the cancer is still at stage 2, a simple procedure can remove that lesion. If the cancer has progressed from the initial skin lesion into the lymphatic region and possibly the bloodstream, doctors have to make serious decisions about patient care. The cancer may have possibly spread to other organs, such as the liver, lungs or brain."

Currently, pathologists must perform several specific and detailed tests to determine if there is cancer in the lymph nodes. This new technology could make the search less time-consuming by identifying a general area of the lymph node that might contain cancer.

"It's very similar to identifying a prize inside a cake," Viator says. "Instead of looking through the entire cake, we can use our ultrasound to pinpoint a slice or two that might contain the 'prize.' In the case of the lymph nodes, when you get a signal, this alerts the pathologist that this is an area of the node that might contain cancer cells. At that point, a pathologist would be able to narrow down the search, saving time and money."

In the photoacoustic method, a tabletop device scans a lymph node biopsy with laser pulses. About 95 percent of melanoma cells contain melanin, the pigment that gives skin its color, so they react to the laser's beam, absorbing the light. The laser causes the cells to heat and cool rapidly, which makes them expand and contract. This produces a popping noise that special sensors can detect. This method would examine the entire biopsy and identify the general area of the node that has cancer.

"This method is quicker and simpler and could be used to improve the efficiency of how doctors determine if the cancer has spread from the original skin lesion into the lymphatic system," Viator says. "This technology could be an important tool in our fight against cancer."

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Time for a tune-up?

Sure, low temperatures have been inching down toward single digits recently, but living in the Show-Me State sometimes requires a healthy dose of optimism. The days are getting longer now, and before you know it birds will be singing and your grass will be green and growing — and growing and growing and growing.

When that happens, students in MU's Agricultural Systems Management Club want to make sure you have the right tool for the job. That's why each year at this time, they offer their popular lawnmower tune-up clinic.

Customers can drop off their push-type mowers at the east end of the Agricultural Engineering Building on East Campus Road from 7 to 9 a.m. or 4 to 6 p.m. on March 11 and 12. Pick-up times will be during the same hours on March 15 and 16. Over the weekend, club members will power wash the mowers, sharpen blades, clean the air filter and change oil and plugs for \$30. If necessary, additional shop labor is \$30 an hour. With questions, call 882-2731.

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Putting the gold in Black and Gold

The Vancouver 2010 Olympics are underway, and once again, Mizzou is represented. Lindsey Vonn, who has already won Olympic gold in the downhill competition and a bronze in the Super G, attended MU High School through the University of Missouri Center for Distance and Independent Study.

In what some fans are dubbing the “Vonncouver” Olympics, Vonn has the chance to add more medals to her collection. On Friday, Feb. 26, she competes in the slalom.

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Taste of A&S

Learning is a lifetime pursuit, so MU's College of Arts and Science extends a warm invitation to take part in an unusual intellectual treat. On March 6, the college will bring you a day of entertaining lectures and comfortable conversations by faculty members, an opportunity to reconnect with the college and experience the engaging style of its award-winning professors. At lunch and dinner you will savor the speakers' wit and wisdom.

Seating is limited and registration is required by Feb. 26. A complete list of speakers and cost and registration information is available at coas.missouri.edu/events/taste.html (<http://coas.missouri.edu/events/taste.html>).

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