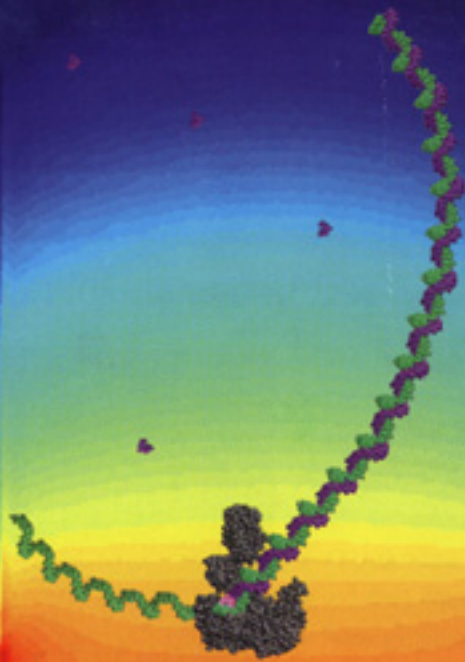


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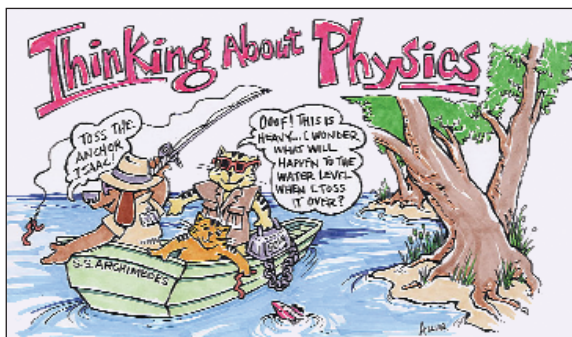
Commuter Physics Is a Hit

A retired Amherst College physics professor has found a novel way to get people in western Massachusetts thinking about physics: He's teamed up with a cartoonist to create problems for the public to chew on while riding the bus. And the response has been gratifying.

This month, Robert Romer and artist Bruce Aller posted their first problems in buses serving the five-college area, including this chestnut about whether the water level will go up or down if a weight is thrown out of a boat. Others ask about the behavior of a helium balloon in a moving car and whether a box of flying bees weighs less than one with the insects at rest. A Web site includes suggestions for home experiments (www.amherst.edu/~physicsqanda).

Although some of the material seems a bit heavy, Romer says people have been eating it up. The site received 5000 separate visits on its first day, he says, and now gets 500 a day. Readers are even offering their own puzzlers, including:

"Will your coffee be hotter if you add milk to it or pour the milk first?" and "Will jumping up and down reduce your chances of being injured in a falling elevator?"



Bus lesson on mass vs. weight.

RANDOM SAMPLES

PEOPLE

edited by Constance Holden

SCAMS

Bogus education. There's a new "scientist" in Congress—if you don't look too closely at her credentials.

Last year, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) asked the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) to investigate diploma mills and shed light on their unsavory practices. So GAO bought Collins an undergraduate degree in biology and a graduate degree in medical technology—all for only \$1515. "It was easy as pie," says GAO's Robyn Stewart, who chose the fields "to show how easy it is for someone to get a science degree."

The institution of which Collins is now alumna—Lexington University of Middletown, New York—is nonexistent. But Degrees-R-Us, the company that "educated" Collins, not only has a Web site (lexingtonuniversity.org) but also a telephone answering service to handle credential checks from not-too-diligent potential employers.

JOBS

New Arecibo head. Robert Brown has signed on for 5 years as the new director of Cornell University's Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, the world's largest and most sensitive single-dish radio telescope. The 59-year-old Brown, who has spent his entire career at the National Radio

Astronomy Observatory in Charlottesville, Virginia, says he plans to spend a third of his time on location, bolstering morale among the 100-person

staff and working for a budget hike that will allow the facility to take full advantage of a recent upgrade. The National Science Foundation has asked Cornell to keep closer tabs on the NSF-funded facility, whose current director, Cornell professor Paul Goldsmith, stepped down in December.

Nobel leader. New York City's Rockefeller University chalked up another Nobel

winner last week (bringing the total currently on staff to six) by recruiting cell biologist Paul Nurse, 54, as its new president. Born and educated in the U.K., Nurse

takes charge of the 102-year-old research institution a year after former president, Arnold Levine, resigned following an indiscretion involv-

ing a female grad student in the campus bar. Like Levine, Nurse studies the molecular biology of cancer; he received the Nobel Prize in 2001 with Timothy Hunt and Leland Hartwell for work on

"checkpoints" that regulate cell growth. Nurse will quit his post as CEO of the charity Cancer Research UK and start up a lab at Rockefeller.

Image not available for online use.

SIDELINES

At top speed. Don't try telling Richard Tapia that drag racing and mathematics don't mix. At this month's Joint Mathematics Meetings in Baltimore, Tapia (pictured at right), a math professor at Rice University in Houston, presented evidence that peeling rubber heats up tires and improves drag racers' acceleration. He also offered calculations that demonstrated the surprisingly large margin of error—6.5 km/h or more—in timing races.

Tapia's finding builds on a lifelong love affair with drag racing. As a young man, he built a car with his twin brother, Bobby, that in 1968 set a world record. That ride fueled a career that took Bobby into the National Hot Rod Association's Hall of Fame. "Cars helped me with math and math helped me with cars," says Tapia. "They came together."

