Can CUNY Career Programs STEM Income Inequality?

By Marc Bussanich | 2 hours ago
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Giancarlos Llanos-Romero stands in a lab at Queensboro Community College where a technology program teaches students how to operate traditional machines and use cutting-edge technology.
Giancarlos Llanos-Romero just graduated from Queensborough Community College and is aiming high for a technology career. He's enrolling at Stony Brook University in the fall and then wants to work for NASA putting his mechanical engineering skills to work.

While at Queensborough Community College, which is part of the City University of New York and boasts a 16,000-student body, Llanos-Romero learned the basis for a mechanical engineering degree through the college's STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—program. It offers students an array of courses in a variety of fields such as biotechnology, engineering science and computer technology.

"As far back as I can remember, in my home country Columbia, I was always fascinated with the interconnectedness of mechanical systems and the different advancements in technology," says Llanos-Romero. "Upon my arrival here, the CUNY system was the first university system that I encountered and I was just delighted with the different opportunities and curriculum they offered."

In early May, Mayor de Blasio announced at the TechCrunch Disrupt Conference (http://techcrunch.com/events/disrupt-ny-2015/events-home/) that the city would be allocating $29 million in this year's budget, and $51 million next year, to bolster CUNY's STEM programs.

"We need a broader approach that gets more and more people, especially young people, the skills that will give them opportunities of all kinds in this industry, and CUNY is the perfect tool for realizing that," de Blasio said.

The commitment to CUNY is one component of de Blasio's multi-pronged effort to reduce the city's growing income inequality gap. He penned a piece (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hill-de-blasio/bridging-nycs-income-inequality-gap_b_3428231.html) for the Huffington Post during the 2013 mayoral race explaining how CUNY's STEM program can play a vital role in helping graduates "fill all available local nursing jobs and a majority of skilled tech jobs."

While de Blasio has described CUNY "as the engine that drives New York's economy", some observers say that CUNY isn't living up to its full potential to connect students to work that provides real economic security. David Jason Fischer of the Center for an Urban Future, a New York City-based think tank, recently wrote an op-ed (https://ny.future.org/research/publications/fulfilling-cunys-workforce-promise) arguing that while CUNY is very good at providing economic advancement for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers vis-à-vis its adult and continuing education programs, it has yet to emerge as a vehicle for providing workforce solutions on a larger scale.

"The reasons why CUNY has fallen short of its workforce potential range from how workforce programs are structured and funded, to the organization and culture of CUNY itself. Indeed, one challenge in assessing CUNY's institutional progress toward effective workforce development is the premise that CUNY functions as a singular institution," wrote Fischer. "Within the CUNY system, no central funding source exists to support workforce programs, nor does CUNY require its schools to report their employment or training outcomes."

But recent developments, according to Fischer, bode well for CUNY strengthening its workforce development programs. One is a $20 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program that helped launch CUNY's CareerPATH (Preparation for Adults Through Training and Higher Education).

CareerPATH, Fischer wrote, facilitated the kind of cross-campus collaboration CUNY needs. But, he added, still more coordination is needed. And the coordination among CUNY institutions would have to be accompanied with alignment between what CUNY teaches and what industry is looking for.

One of Giancarlos Llanos-Romero's professors (the recent Queensborough graduate), Prof. Nick DiZinno, while standing in front of traditional metal lathe and milling machines in the college's Technology Center, says the program works hard to stay abreast of evolving technological trends.

"We're always looking at the industry to see what is the cutting edge. We are continually upgrading our lab equipment and our software. We make sure we're communicating with our colleagues in the industry so that we know the skills our students need to learn," he says. The machine shop, for instance, "will become an advanced manufacturing center where students will work on lathe and milling machines to build things the old fashioned way and then move onto 3-D printing and computerized numerical control and other things that are the wave of the future," DiZinno adds.
Students must also learn to adapt along with their chosen sector, he notes. "Students who graduate from Queensborough need to have a good work ethic, be a conscientious worker and be adaptable because technology is always changing. You can't leave here and say, 'My learning is done.' You have to be able to learn throughout your entire career and adapt to new things."

Llanos-Romero is confident that he's got what it takes to get his dream job at NASA.

"Listen, I've already learned both traditional and modern manufacturing processes, and I also know how to work with 3D CAD software that communicates with 3D printers thanks to the great courses here and professors like Professor DiZinno. I know I'll be able to help develop fuel-efficient technologies, if not with NASA, then with another great employer when I enter the workforce," Llanos-Romero says.
Paul Krugman Sticks It To Poor People With $225,000 Salary To Study Income Inequality
Posted By Eric Owens On 10:13 AM 07/01/2015 In | No Comments

This week, trustees of the cash-strapped, taxpayer-funded City University of New York (CUNY) system approved a hefty annual salary as well as the fancypants title of “distinguished professor” for Paul Krugman.

New York City’s public college system pays Krugman $225,000 each year to analyze the vexing problem of income inequality at the CUNY Graduate Center’s Luxembourg Income Study Center, Gawker notes.

Krugman’s $225,000 salary — which is $18,750 per month — does not include his undisclosed earnings from other ventures, the sum of which could be substantial.

The decidedly left-leaning economics professor is also employed by Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs as well as by the London School of Economics. Additionally, he works as a columnist at The New York Times. He has written books, too. His publisher is W. W. Norton & Company.

In 2008, Krugman won a Nobel Prize as well (cash value: roughly $1 million).

The $225,000 annual salary Krugman receives from the public CUNY system to study income inequality places him squarely in the top five percent of all American earners.

The total amount of wealth he derives annually from all of his various income sources is unclear.

Krugman’s estimated net worth was $2.5 million in 2012, according to TheRichest.

In September 2014, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen noted that the bottom 20 percent of America’s households has a median net worth of only $6,400, according to USA Today.

Thus Krugman, who has long criticized substantial wealth inequalities in the United States, has a net worth that is over 39,000 percent of the net worth of the poorest quintile of Americans.

The $225,000 Krugman receives from taxpayer-funded CUNY is 312 percent more than the $54,620 average salary of a plumber in the United States, 453 percent more than the $40,620 salary of an average locksmith and 780 percent higher than the salary of a typical baker. (Figures come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

Krugman’s financial situation is somewhat similar to — though far better than — the one in which ultra-progressive economist Robert Reich has found himself. Reich (who is actually just a mere law school graduate) raked in an impressive income of $242,613 from the taxpayer-funded University of California. Berkeley in 2013 despite teaching just a single course during one semester of the school year. (RELATED: Robert Reich Sticks It To Poor People With $242,613 Salary For Teaching ONE CLASS This Semester)
In This Alternative Universe, Harvard Law Ranks No. 1

Karen Sloan, The National Law Journal

July 1, 2015

Yale Law School has landed at the top of U.S. News & World Report’s annual law school rankings for years, but Harvard Law School reigns supreme on an alternative list released by University of North Carolina School of Law Professor Alfred Brophy.

He set out to create a stripped-down version of the U.S. News formula, which incorporates nearly a dozen factors.

“I thought, ‘Maybe a simpler way of calculating things is better,’ “ Brophy said. “I decluttered it. I’m not looking at library resources or bar-pass rates.”

Brophy counts just three criteria, based on publicly available information: incoming students’ median Law School Admission Test scores; the percentage of recent graduates in full-time legal jobs not funded by the school itself; and the number of citations to the school’s flagship law review during the past seven years.

The LSAT scores capture a school’s selectivity and student quality; the employment figures reflect graduate outcomes and the quality of education they received; and the citations indicate standing in the legal community, Brophy wrote in “Ranking Law Schools, 2015: Student Aptitude, Employment Outcome, Law Review Citations,” posted on the Social Science Research Network.

The simplified formula produced results markedly similar to the U.S. News rankings. In fact, the same top 15 schools land on both lists, just a handful moving more than a few spots.

After Harvard, Columbia Law School and Stanford Law School round out the top three. Yale landed at No. 10, which Brophy attributed to the relatively high percentage of graduates who go on to further education or take school-funded jobs—neither of which he counts, even if at Yale such jobs are highly sought after.

U.S. News ranks the University of Chicago Law School No. 4, but it’s No. 8 on Brophy’s list, primarily because its flagship law review is narrowly focused on law and economics and publishes less frequently.

Brophy identified schools in the middle and lower ranks that either greatly outperformed or
underperformed compared to U.S. News. In most cases, that boost or decline reflects graduate employment rates, he said.

For example, Albany Law School; William Mitchell College of Law; DePaul University College of Law; Hofstra University Maurice A. Deane School of Law; the University of Missouri School of Law; Campbell University Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law; and Washburn University School of Law each landed 20 spots or more higher on Brophy’s rankings than on U.S. News’s.

Conversely, the University of Arkansas School of Law; Samford University Cumberland School of Law; the City University of New York School of Law; University of Maine School of Law; Santa Clara University School of Law; and the University of California, Irvine School of Law each ranked 30 spots or lower on Brophy’s list than on U.S. News’s.

For the most part, however, for most schools in the midrange those differences were small.

“Students can use this as a caution for the places that are really overvalued or undervalued by U.S. News,” Brophy said. “And it shows that there really isn’t much difference between schools in the vast middle. People should look closely, with a cold, calculating eye, at the schools they are considering. Make sure you’re picking something that works for you.”

Contact Karen Sloan at ksloan@alm.com. For more of The National Law Journal’s law school coverage, visit: http://www.facebook.com/NLJLawSchools.
Vermont’s Independent Voice  July 2, 2015

NEWS + OPINION + POLITICS

COLOR BLIND: OUTSIDE VERMONT, CAN SANDERS TALK RACE, IMMIGRATION?

By KEVIN J. KELLEY

Wanda Hines wasn’t in the crowd at Sen. Bernie Sanders’ (D-Vt.) official campaign kickoff, during which a series of local celebs — all white — talked up the former Burlington mayor turned presidential candidate. The African American activist skipped the festive event on the waterfront. There was no sign of Saint Michael’s College professor Traci Griffith, Curtiss Reed of Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity, and several other Vermont black or Latino leaders.

A young Bernie Sanders attends a meeting with right activists at the University of Chicago.

The absence of such figures reflects one of Sanders’ greatest challenges in the race for the Democratic nomination. His growing momentum won’t be sustained, many black and Latino Vermonter warn, unless he begins explicitly addressing issues centered on race.

The strong support Sanders is generating in the mostly white states of Iowa and New Hampshire, the first to respectively caucus and vote in 2016, stands in contrast to his dismal nationwide polling among nonwhites.

Just 3 percent of blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans polled recently by the Wall Street Journal and NBC News said they favored Sanders. More than 90 percent of the same group supported Hillary Clinton’s candidacy.

Former governor Howard Dean, Sanders’ predecessor as a presidential candidate from overwhelmingly white Vermont, got only 5 percent of the vote in the 2004 primary in South Carolina, where blacks accounted for about a quarter of the Democratic electorate. Dean received 18 percent in Iowa and 26 percent in New Hampshire.

Clinton herself was undone in the 2008 presidential campaign by Barack Obama’s unshakable grip on the black vote.

Sanders’ tiny degree of support in minority communities reflects his scant name recognition there in contrast with Clinton’s. But it also stems from Sanders’ general silence on race issues during his eight years as Burlington mayor, 16 years as a U.S. House member and nine years in the U.S. Senate.

The 73-year-old socialist has focused on class inequities throughout his career, and that emphasis encompasses many of the fundamental concerns of African Americans and Latinos. But Vermont’s 95 percent white makeup means “he hasn’t been forced to look at these issues through the lens of color,” says Hal Colston, the African American director of Partnership for Change, a Burlington-area group advocating greater inclusiveness in public education.

Amé Lambert, a Nigeria national who works as chief diversity officer at Champlain College, points out that Sanders is “like all politicians in that he speaks to his audience.” And in the second-whitest state in the nation, after Maine, “race is an especially tough thing for a politician to take on,” Lambert observes.

Sanders isn’t an innocent victim of his state’s demographics, suggests Brattleboro-based Reed. “He’s from Brooklyn and grew up with black and brown folks,” he notes. Sanders’ record of largely avoiding the topic of race “is simply a choice on his part that invalidates the presence of black and brown people,” contends the African American activist. “Sen. Sanders suffers from a disease called color blindness.”
Colston adds, "If his career had emanated from Brooklyn, he'd have a completely different perspective" on race.

Clarence Davis, a black Burlingtonian who worked for Sanders in the House, adds that he would like to see "more discussion of race" in which his former boss would participate. It's wrong to regard the country as having achieved a post-racial consciousness, Davis suggests. "We don't live in a color-blind society and never have," he says.

The national campaign will likely push Sanders to be more forthcoming on race. Up until now, however, it has been "as if he's running again for office in Vermont rather than for national office," says Rafael Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican from the Bronx who works as a student services administrator at the University of Vermont. "He's not explicit about racism."

Sanders had a poor record as mayor in appointing minority-group members — as well as women — to high-level positions, says Hines, who has lived in Burlington since 1963. The core of his progressive entourage has been entirely white and almost exclusively male, Hines adds.

"I have a great amount of respect for Bernie," she says, "except I wouldn't vote for him." Hines is supporting Clinton, whom she regards as preferable on issues of concern to women and African Americans.

Reed offers a similar perspective, saying, "Hillary Clinton makes an effort to engage people of color wherever she is."

Sanders, by contrast, failed to consult black and brown Vermonters as he planned his presidential bid, Reed says. "Many of us have one foot in Vermont and one foot in places like D.C., New York and Philadelphia," he says. "We'd have something to offer in terms of connecting him to urban African Americans."

Reed's Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity is seeking to make the state "the epicenter of inclusive thought and practice in the United States," he adds. "Bernie does not reflect that at all. He just doesn't come across as antiracist."

Sanders' call for removing the Confederate flag from the grounds of the South Carolina capitol was welcome, if belated, Reed continues. "It would be really good for Bernie to tell Vermonters to get rid of that flag. You see it all the time in southern Vermont."

Rachel Siegel, director of the Burlington-based Peace & Justice Center, says Sanders' preoccupation with class inequities makes him one of the most consistently progressive figures in U.S. electoral politics. "One of the great things about Bernie's campaign is that he stays on message," Siegel comments. "And one of the biggest drawbacks is that he stays on message."

Speaking on behalf of her organization, which includes a program devoted to race-related issues, Siegel, who is white, says, "Economic justice and racial justice are so entwined you really can't talk about one without talking about the other." But Sanders hasn't had much to say about specifically racial concerns, Siegel finds.

Sanders' reluctance to acknowledge the color line may not be solely a product of myopia or electoral exigencies. It could reflect his socialist ideology.

As a teenager, Sanders was exposed to Marxist analysis via his older brother, Larry, then a student at Brooklyn College. At the University of Chicago, where he majored in political science, Bernie Sanders joined the Young People's Socialist League, a Marxism-influenced group that was explicitly anticommmunist. Although he has never been a dogmatist or an ideologue, it's clear that Sanders' thinking reflects the socialist tradition of putting primacy on issues of economic class.

Many socialists see "identity politics" — which give precedence to skin color, gender and sexual orientation — as a potentially divisive element within the ranks of the working class. From this perspective, placing primary emphasis on race hinders progress toward the fundamental socialist goal of "uniting all who can be united" in opposition to the ruling class.
Sanders came close to staking out that position in an interview on National Public Radio in 2014. "You should not be basing your politics based on your color," he said then. "What you should be basing your politics on is, how is your family doing?"

In the same interview, conducted shortly after the Republican triumph in midterm congressional elections, Sanders suggested that the white flight from the Democratic Party resulted from its failure to confront "big-money interests." The socialist senator had nothing to say about the role racism plays in white voters' majority support for Republican candidates.

While acknowledging that Sanders "does approach things from a class background," campaign manager Jeff Weaver points out: "Bernie's origins in politics are in the civil rights movement." Sanders signed up at the University of Chicago with the Congress of Racial Equality. He was arrested while a student at a sit-in against housing segregation in Chicago. Sanders also took part in the 1963 March on Washington that culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

As mayor of Burlington 25 years later, Sanders endorsed Jesse Jackson's candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. The mayor also took part in the Vermont Democratic caucus that year that gave the African American candidate a nationally headlined victory.

Sanders got slapped in the face for his efforts. Helen Malloy, a Democratic stalwart, was enraged that a vehement critic of the party's record participated in its caucus.

No one suggests that Sanders has taken stands in opposition to blacks' and Latinos' views during his decades in Congress. Weaver notes that his boss "works closely with the Congressional Black Caucus," and most of the sources of color interviewed for this story say they appreciate Sanders' consistent and outspoken advocacy of social and economic equity.

Abel Luna, an organizer for the Burlington-based Migrant Justice organization, says Sanders has been "very supportive of immigration reform." The senator has responded commendably to many of the concerns of the state's 1,600 immigrant farmworkers, "but he could be doing more," Luna comments, adding: "He often speaks of American workers in ways that don't recognize the situation of undocumented workers."

Sanders does have at least one unequivocal fan among African Americans who have known him well. Dolores Sandoval, a Democrat who lost to Sanders in the race for the U.S. House in 1990, says, "It's always been my impression that he's been good on racial issues." She singles out his 2002 House vote opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which Sandoval describes as "a racist endeavor."

Sandoval predicts that Sanders "is going to get support in the black, Latino and other minority communities because he's talking about jobs."

Cornel West, a leading public intellectual and African American activist, also confesses to a bromance with the grumpy Vermonter. "I love brother Bernie," West gushed in a recent interview with Laura Flanders of GRITtv. "He tells the truth about Wall Street. He really does."
But the political relationship may not be consummated. West cautioned that he’s not ready to endorse Sanders out of fear his bro could wind up throwing his support to Clinton. He has no love for the former secretary of state. Nor is West pleased that Sanders hasn’t forcefully condemned Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. “I don’t hear my dear brother Bernie hitting that, and I’m not gonna sell my precious Palestinian brothers and sisters down the river only because of U.S. politics,” West told Flanders.

Champlain College diversity officer Lambert, who came to Vermont four and a half years ago, likewise sees reason to admire Sanders. Citing the speech he gave last January as part of Burlington’s tribute to King, Lambert says, “It was clear he had familiarity with racial justice issues.”

Sanders is starting to address those issues as the presidential nominating contest gains momentum. In response to an accused white supremacist’s mass murder in a Charleston, S.C., black church on June 17, Sanders excoriated “the ugly stain of racism that still taints our nation.”

And in a national TV interview on June 28, Sanders said his campaign centerpiece proposal for a massive federal jobs program “applies even more to the African American community and to the Hispanic community.” He also pledged to “make a major outreach effort to those communities, let people know my background, let people know my record.”

The outreach has begun, with Weaver telling Seven Days that the presidential campaign is hiring African American activist Marcus Ferrell as political director for the southeastern states. Sanders aides also say the candidate will speak increasingly and critically in the coming weeks about police brutality, the War on Drugs, corporate prisons and other issues that get close attention from black and Latino voters.

“The best thing he can do is to surround himself with people knowledgeable on those issues,” suggests Griffith, a professor of journalism at St. Michael’s College. If he takes that and other race-conscious steps, she adds, “I don’t think it’ll be impossible for him to make a connection with people of color.”

Partnership for Change’s Coletto is similarly optimistic, and he did attend the campaign kickoff. “He’s going to grow,” he predicts. “He’s already growing.”

Minorities may also find it appealing that Sanders seldom seems patronizing, says Kyle Dodson, an African American member of the Burlington school board. While echoing the misgivings many blacks and Latinos express regarding Sanders’ general quiescence on race, Dodson declares, “I do like the independence of his thought. He’s probably the politician I trust the most.”
DOT Announces Pay-Ahead Meter Rollout

The New York City Department of Transportation is putting their muni where their mouth is: our meters are getting an upgrade.

The new muni-meters currently being rolled out citywide allow motorists to pre-pay for their parking one hour before meter regulations begin. In other words, if payment is required beginning at 9:00 am, a patron can purchase a receipt as early as 8:00 for paid parking beginning at 9:00 am onward. The convenience will prevent motorists from having to return to vehicles when the regulatory time begins. Motorists must observe all other parking regulations before meter hours begin.

So far, Borough Park, Park Slope, Downtown Brooklyn, East New York, Coney Island, Brooklyn College, Flatbush, Brooklyn Heights, Williamsburg, and Bedford-Stuyvesant have all gotten the upgraded meters, and the DOT estimates that all muni-meters citywide will be enhanced by mid-July.

Last summer, muni-meters were updated to deactivate automatically outside of regulatory hours, thereby disallowing New Yorkers from paying for parking unnecessarily. City Councilman David Greenfield (D-Brooklyn) had introduced the legislation on both meter upgrades in 2013, and the city was given two years to implement the changes. Greenfield proposed other legislation earlier this year that would take muni-meters out of service when alternate-side parking is suspended due to banks of snow.

By Eugénie Bisulco

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Energy exec now heads Queens Chamber of Commerce

by Peter C. Mastrosimone / Editor-in-Chief | Posted: Wednesday, July 1, 2015 5:34 pm

The new executive director of the Queens Chamber of Commerce is an Astoria native who most recently worked as an executive for a Nassau County-based company that converts buildings from oil to natural gas heating and offers other services geared toward energy efficiency.

Thomas Grech had been chairman of the chamber’s Energy Committee and organized the group’s Future of Energy Summit, held in February at Queens College. The event brought together industry leaders and area businesses to discuss energy efficiency in the commercial sector.

Before being tapped to lead the chamber, Grech was director of sales for CCI Energy Solutions, handling business development and fostering relationships in the industry. CCI bills itself as “a sustainable energy solutions provider that helps building owners, developers, co-op boards and managing agents plan and implement energy efficiency projects, including natural gas conversion, combined heat and power installation, energy procurement, and energy conservation measures.”

Grech lives in Malverne, LI with his wife and their two children. He holds a bachelor’s degree in accounting and a master’s in international business.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the borough of Queens and the businesses that make up its communities” he said in a prepared statement. “As the most diverse borough in the world, each community has its specific needs, and I am looking forward to working with the leaders in those communities, and our members, to help ensure the borough’s economy continues to grow.”

“Tom brings a wealth of experience to the Chamber and its members” chamber President Albert Pennisi said. “As we continue to serve Queens businesses through our educational seminars, networking events, and advocacy, he has shown to have the knowledge and skills to help small businesses succeed.”
Joey Falcone's incredible path: Iraq to Ivy League to Yankees

By Zach Braziller
July 1, 2015 | 5:44pm

Odds are, the rookie-level Gulf Coast League has never seen a prospect like Joey Falcone.

He's 28 years old, served three tours of service in Iraq and Afghanistan as a medic for the Marines and went undrafted — but the former Columbia University star was given a shot by
the Yankees following a breakout senior season in which he led the Lions to the NCAA Tournament for the third straight year and to within one win of the Super Regionals.

Falcone, the son of former Mets pitcher Pete Falcone, made his professional debut Wednesday with the Single-A GCL Yankees. He went 1-for-4.

For him to even get to this point is remarkable.

He enlisted in the Marine Corps at age 17 — academic woes eliminated Division I baseball at the time — and spent much of the next six years of his life serving overseas. When he returned home to Brooklyn, he walked on at Division III College of Staten Island. He hit .336 that year, was the City University of New York Athletic Conference Rookie of the Year and led the Dolphins to the conference title.

After transferring to Columbia and enjoying a solid first season, Falcone hardly played as a junior, struggling immensely at the plate. He was benched. He considered quitting.

Instead, he played summer baseball with the Monmouth Monarchs of the Atlantic Baseball Confederation, and rediscovered his swing under the tutelage of former Yankees prospect Eric Duncan. He hit .323 with 11 homers and 54 RBI on his way to unanimous first team All-Ivy League honors and spot on the ABCA/Rawlings All-Northeast Region squad.

Still, professional baseball seemed like a longshot. Then the Yankees came calling. Now Falcone is getting his shot — and he’s a decade older than several of his new teammates.
5 Ways To De-Clutter Your Life

His name was Steve Loffredo. I am almost certain he is still alive. So, his name is still Steve. He was my favorite professor at CUNY Law School. He was the smartest man I met during law school. In three years, I only saw him wear two different outfits. For some reason, I thought that was cool. I wanted to be like him, so I donated most of my clothes and all but two pairs of shoes. That was almost 10 years ago, but it changed my life. I did not know how at the time, but it changed me.

I later realized this was the first time I was exposed to the idea of removing clutter. At that time, I did not comprehend the idea of clutter, but the day I donated my clothes and shoes and television and books, I felt better. I felt free. I felt brand new. I then thought of other ways and categories I could de-clutter my life, apart from donating clothes. Here is what I have come up with in the last 10 years. Every time I do these things, my life is exponentially better. I don’t always do this well. But I try. At least I try.
Start and end the day in silence. The average adult speaks 10,000 words per day. That is a lot of words. I talk all the time. Most of the things I say are useless. I find myself uncomfortable with silence. But I am working on it. For the first and last hour of my day, I try and remain silent. No phone calls, no music, no podcasts, no noise. Silence. It does not always happen, but when it does, my day is always more intentional and productive. My day is always less stressful. Always.

No news. People get mad at me for saying this. And that’s OK. I am not trying to tell you what to do. I am just sharing what works for me. The news is just more noise. The prey on fear and negativity. It’s their job to do this. Literally. I have friends that work in the news rooms, and they tell me what goes on behind closed doors. The news is just a business that, like any other business, needs to capture market share and compete with other news stations and sites. I get it, they are just doing their jobs, but it is important for us consumers to at the very least understand what that job is before consuming news. They (the news industry) are banking on the fact that humans are conditioned and drawn to read bad news or fear based reporting before the good stuff. It’s why we evolved as a species. Hundreds of years ago, when there was a lion to our ancestor’s right or a fruit tree to their left, they paid attention to the lion and ran. And it is a good thing our ancestors did this, because otherwise we would not be alive to read or write things like this. But the condition to pay attention to the threats before the benefits is deeply rooted at the core of our beings. The news knows this, and deliver us information based on this knowledge. My life has never, ever, been affected by anything in the news. The financial crisis in Greece. Does not affect me. Ebola. Does not affect me. But there is more. I have zero control over the situations. I can’t do anything to help Greece or cure Ebola. I would rather spend every ounce of my energy on things I can control or help or that affect me. Does that make me selfish? I don’t know. And I don’t care. Hundreds of years ago we were cavemen and now everyone has an opinion about what makes you selfish. Here is what I know. I spend that extra hour a day reading good books or writing things that I hope help people with things they do have control of. If that is selfish, then I hope I can become the most selfish person in the world.

Get rid of clothes you don’t wear. If you have not worn something in 6 months, get rid of it. Just do it. It may feel hard at first, but if you have not worn a shirt or read a book on your shelf in the last 6 months, you are not going to do
it. Clear your living space and watch what happens to your mind.

**No TV.** I can’t believe that the average American watches 4 hours of TV a day. I wrote about this in a previous article, 'The 10 Commandments of Being Your Own Boss,' but I want to mention it again here. If you watch 4 hours a day, just begin by cutting an hour a month. In 4 months, you will be TV free. This gives you more free time to create and do other things that allow you to move your body or challenge your mind or learn the piano. Oh, and there is another important reason to cut out TV. You will be free from the thousands of hidden advertising messages the media plants in your mind. They are so good at it, you don’t even realize they are controlling your life and your choices until you step away from the TV. Then you notice, and your life becomes yours. Not theirs. You want to control your life. You don’t want your flat screen to control it. And it is controlling it. Even if you don’t realize it.

**Unsubscribe.** I get so much junk mail. I honestly can’t even remember how I got onto all of these mailing lists. I get Groupon deals, living social deals, airfare deals from every airline, events in San Francisco, events in New York, events, deals, points, credit cards, ah! How am I supposed to get any real work done? Try this. In the next month, dedicate time to get your inbox to as close to zero as possible. Mine is currently at 24 messages. And that is not bad. Then, every time an email comes in, run the same test you do with your clothes. Ask if you have used this service in the last 6 months? If the answer is no, unsubscribe immediately. The less time you have to sift through unwanted email, the less cluttered your mind feels. I also find it useful to turn off all push notifications to my cell phone. It’s hard to stay clear and focused when your phone is buzzing every time Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram want to talk to you. And they have a lot to say. Again, it is their job to have a lot to say. And they are excellent at their jobs.

Our brains account for 2% of our total body mass but uses 25% of our energy. That means one out of every four calories we consume goes to the brain. Our brain wants to be productive and create amazing things. But it needs our help. It needs us to set it up for success. It wants to be clear and free and innovative and peaceful.

I used to want to be happy all the time. Then I realized that was a lot of pressure. Now, I would rather be at peace all the time. I have a sense of control over my own peace. I get to chose, so I try and chose. I don’t let noise I don’t need or news that scares me or clothes I don’t wear or TV I don’t want to watch or emails I don’t want to receive consume my brain calories.
Ever since that day in Queens, New York, when I gave away all my clothes and shoes and television, I have more peace. I have more clarity. Because sometimes, less is more.

The less I give my brain to process, the more it gives me to produce. It’s like magic, but real.

Poof.
Disclosures show borough presidents' finances

The city’s five borough presidents have markedly different financial situations, apart from their identical city incomes of $160,000 per year, according to 2014 financial disclosure statements released Wednesday by the city Conflicts of Interest Board.

Manhattan’s Gale Brewer holds between $1,453,000 and $3,040,000 in various securities. She also earned between $1,000 and $5,000 teaching at the City University of New York.

Brooklyn’s Eric Adams earned between $5,000 and $48,000 as a landlord. He says he has never raised his tenants’ rent. “I know firsthand that a rent freeze is manageable for small property owners and landlords, because I have managed to provide it for years to the tenants in my own building,” he said in a statement provided by spokesman Stefan Ringel.

Adams also received between $1,000 and $5,000 for expenses for a trip to China sponsored by a group called the Sino-America New York Brooklyn Archway Association Corp.

He has between $250,000 and $500,000 in a retirement plan.

Queens’s Melinda Katz owes between $100,000 and $250,000 in fees to Mintz & Gold L.L.P. for
"services for a civil lawsuit."

"As has been widely reported, last year Melinda, like many other single parents, was involved in civil litigation which centered on child support issues and private family matters," wrote spokesperson Sharon Lee in an email. "These matters involve young children and we will not be commenting further." Mary Sliwa, the ex-wife of Katz's partner Curtis Sliwa, has sued the couple.

Katz owns between $36,000 and $180,000 in various securities and has between $60,000 and $100,000 in an individual retirement account.

The Bronx's Ruben Diaz, Jr. owes Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation between $100,000 and $250,000. "That's a student loan for his son," said spokesman John DeSio.

He also received between $5,000 and $48,000 for travel expenses to Israel from the Jewish Community Relations Council. He has between $60,000 and $100,000 in a deferred compensation plan.

Staten Island's Jimmy Oddo owns between $14,000 and $116,000 in securities, including between $5,000 and $48,000 in Ford Motor Company stock.

He has between $5,000 and $48,000 in an I.R.A. and between $250,000 and $500,000 in a deferred compensation plan.
In social networks, it’s not bigger but smaller that is smarter

NEW DELHI: Upturning conventional wisdom that "bigger is better" in large social networks like Facebook and Twitter, a new study says that "smaller is smarter" when it comes to influential superspreaders of information within these networks.

According to the CCNY researchers, their theory shows that the most influential superspreaders are not the most connected people in the network. Top influencers are highly counterintuitive: weakly connected people strategically surrounded by hierarchical coronas of hubs are the most powerful influencers. Thus, their work provides a theoretical revision to the current view on influence, marking a paradigm shift from "bigger is better" to "smaller is smarter."

The study by City College of New York physicists Flaviano Morone and Hernán A. Makse, published in the 1 July issue of the scientific journal Nature, is a major shift from the widely held view that "bigger is better," and could have important consequences for a broad range of social, natural and living networked systems.

"The problem of identifying the minimal set of influential nodes in complex networks for maximizing viral marketing in social media, optimizing immunization campaigns and protecting networks under attack is one of the most studied problems in network science," said Makse, a professor in City College's Levich Institute and a fellow of the American Physical Society. "So far, only intuitive strategies based mainly on 'attacking' the hubs to identify crucial nodes have been developed."

Morone and Makse set about to solve the problem by applying what they described as "rigorous theoretical solutions and systematic benchmarking." They also proposed a scalable algorithm, called Collective Influence algorithm, that they believe beats all the competing methods in massively large-scale social networks like Twitter and Facebook with more than 200 million users.

"Through rigorous mathematical calculations, employing optimal percolation and state-of-the-art spin glass theory, we solved the optimal collective influence problem in random networks," said Morone. "We show that the set of optimal superspreaders radically differs and is much smaller than that obtained by all previous heuristics rankings, including PageRank, the basis of Google."

These results will appeal to an extensive range of scientists in fields such as networks, physics, mathematics, epidemiology, marketing, as well as to officials monitoring the spread of contagious diseases like the Ebola outbreak, added Makse.
NYC’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice Wins National Steel Building Award

July 2, 2015
by RealEstateRama

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice expansion project at City University of New York in Manhattan has earned national recognition in the 2015 Innovative Design in Engineering and Architecture with Structural Steel awards program (IDEAS2). In honor of this achievement, members of the project team will be presented with awards from the American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC) during a ceremony at the building on Thursday, July 9, at 10:30 a.m.

July 1, 2015 from American Institute of Steel Construction

(Chicago, IL) – The John Jay College of Criminal Justice expansion project at City University of New York in Manhattan has earned national recognition in the 2015 Innovative Design in Engineering and Architecture with Structural Steel awards program (IDEAS2). In honor of this achievement, members of the project team will be presented with awards from the American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC) during a ceremony at the building on Thursday, July 9, at 10:30 a.m.

Conducted annually by AISC, the IDEAS2 awards recognize outstanding achievement in engineering and architecture on structural steel projects across the country. The IDEAS2 award is the highest, most prestigious honor bestowed on building projects by the structural steel industry in the U.S. and recognizes the importance of teamwork, coordination and collaboration in fostering successful construction projects.

In recognition of its particular accomplishments in structural engineering, the John Jay College expansion project has been selected to receive the IDEAS2 award’s Presidential Award of Excellence in Engineering, the only project in the competition to receive this honor.

The building’s project team members include:

Owner: City University of New York; Dormitory Authority of the State of New York
General Contractor: Turner Construction Co., New York
Architect: Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP, New York
Structural Engineer: Leslie E. Robertson Associates, New York
Steel Fabricator and Detailer: Owen Steel Co., Inc., Columbia, S.C. (AISC Member/Certified fabricator)
Steel Erector: Cornell and Co., Westville, N.J. (AISC Member/Advanced Certified steel erector)

Although the John Jay College expansion project was singled out for its engineering achievements, projects entered in the IDEAS2 competition are judged on their use of structural steel from both an architectural and structural engineering perspective, with an emphasis on: creative solutions to project’s program requirements; applications of innovative design approaches in areas such as connections, gravity systems, lateral load resisting systems, fire protection and blast; aesthetic and visual impact of the project; innovative use of architecturally exposed structural steel (AESS); technical or architectural advances in the use of the steel; and the use of innovative design and construction methods.

"A handsome urban tower on a tight city site, made remarkable by the cantilevered engineering of its floor plates and its ingenious accommodation of the rail infrastructure running under one corner of the project,” commented IDEAS2 awards judge, Cathleen McGuigan, editor-in-chief of Architectural Record, as well as editorial director of Dodge Data Analytics’ GreenSource and SNAP.
The John Jay College expansion project is a new 625,000-sq-ft. $400 million academic building in Midtown Manhattan. The City University of New York (CUNY) facility consists of a 15-story tower on 11th Avenue and a four-story podium with a garden roof that connects to the college’s existing Haaren Hall on 10th Avenue.

However, there is a nearly two-story change in grade between 10th and 11th Avenues. To design for this condition, the perimeter columns—in an area that supported heavy loads from the building’s rooftop garden—were eliminated and an entrance on 59th Street was pulled back to allow room for the steps and ramps. Story-deep trusses were fit inside the walls of the fourth-floor classrooms to efficiently accomplish the 40-ft cantilever out to the tip of a V-shaped tapering canopy.

In response to a shallow Amtrak tunnel that cuts through a corner of the site, the building’s structural system is distinguished by a grid of rooftop trusses that hang the perimeter of eight floors below.

The IDEAS2 award dates back more than 70 years to the earliest years of AISC’s existence. And about this year’s Presidential Award of Excellence winner, Roger E. Ferch, P.E., president of AISC, said, “The entire John Jay College expansion project team has shown how structural steel can be used to create structures that combine beauty and practicality. The result is an academic building that serves its purpose extremely well, while providing an example of what can be achieved when designing and constructing projects with steel.”

High-resolution images of the John Jay College expansion project are available upon request by contacting AISC’s Tasha Weiss at 312.670.5439 or weiss (at) aisc (dot) org. For more information about the IDEAS2 awards and to view all of this year’s winners, please visit www.aisc.org/ideas2.

American Institute of Steel Construction
The American Institute of Steel Construction, headquartered in Chicago, is an not-for-profit technical institute and trade association established in 1921 to serve the structural steel design community and construction industry. AISC’s mission is to make structural steel the material of choice by being the leader in structural steel-related technical and market-building activities, including: specification and code development, research, education, technical assistance, quality certification, standardization, and market development. AISC has a long tradition of service to the steel construction industry of providing timely and reliable information.

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Category: News | Education & Training | Events, Housing & Development | No Comments
Tagged as: AISC
CUNY Dominican Studies Institute presents junior scholars

New York - The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute is committed to nurturing and guiding young scholars in the field of Dominican Studies. As a part of this commitment, CUNY DSL offers extended research opportunities to junior scholars, most of which take place in the summer.

Over the years, CUNY DSL has hosted junior researchers from various colleges, including Bard and Bergen County Community College. This year we welcome young scholars ranging from high school seniors to master's candidates.

These rising scholars become directly involved in major academic projects in development at the Institute, doing research, working on federal grants, and participating in meetings with senior-level staff and important visitors. CUNY DSL seeks to offer junior researchers a dynamic and enriching experience in the day-to-day operations of an academic research institute, while simultaneously contributing to their individual development. Junior researchers work on two projects while they are at CUNY DSL one related to their own research interests and the other a research project currently underway at the Institute. We are happy to share an update featuring all of our rising scholars for the summer of 2015.

Zoraida Colon

Zoraida Colon is a recent graduate of LaGuardia Community College and will continue on to Smith College in the fall of 2015. She will major in Sociology and earn her B.A. in May 2018. At CUNY DSL, Zoraida will work on Beschrey's research project studying Dominican women in politics in the United States.

Jocelis Dista

Jocelis Dista will earn a B.S.B.A. at Boston University's Questrom School of Business in May 2017. At CUNY DSL, she is currently working on an educational resource guide for Dominican immigrants. This guide is part of a larger initiative undertaking in collaboration with the Dominican Consulate of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania.

Sandra Mejia

Sandra Mejia is an MFA candidate in Advanced Photographic Studies at the International Center of Photography. She is an artist who was raised between New York City and Santo Domingo. At CUNY DSL, she is working on an exhibition identifying archival materials for an exhibition about Dominican veterans who served in World War II, as well as a website on the history of Dominican music in the United States.

Her work explores identity, class dynamics, and familial relationships. She has exhibited internationally, with her first solo show held at the New York Public Library. Her work has been published in Nuestra Luz and Latin American Magazine. To learn more, visit her website at www.sandrajimenez.com.

Alexandra Reyes

Alexandra Reyes will graduate from Yale University in May 2016 with a B.A. in Sociology and a minor in Statistics. Alex is currently assisting CUNY DSL Director Dr. Ramona Henríquez with her research projects. One project explores the early migration of Dominicans to the U.S., while the other documents Dominicans' current internal mobility to states outside of their usual migration patterns.

She also assisted in the development of the aforementioned educational resource guide. Her research interests include the myth of the American Dream, the intersection of race and poverty, and intersectional theory. After completing her undergraduate career, Alex plans on earning a Master's degree in Statistics.

Christopher Rodriguez

Christopher Rodriguez is a senior at Commack High School in Commack, NY. At CUNY DSL, Christopher will serve as the second co-principal investigator of the educational resource guide for recent Dominican immigrants. He will collaborate with his fellow researchers to maintain and update the guide, finding new information and verifying data about ESL classes, GED programs, and other services. He is an accomplished football team and will join the Spanish language and culture club, as well as his high school's Art National Honor Society, in the upcoming academic year. He hopes to major in Business during college and pursue a career in the field after graduation.

Emily Saltz

Emily Saltz is a junior at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where she studies Sociology and Spanish. This summer she received Bowdoin College's Lifsoon Family Summer Research Fellowship and is working on a project that explores the connection between food and identity of first- and second-generation Dominicans living in New York City. While at CUNY DSL, Emily will supplement her research by investigating the food practices of New York Dominicans prior to 1980 and comparing them with the findings of her present-day research. She will also supervise Christopher Rodriguez for the duration of his time at CUNY DSL. Emily's research interests include immigration and transnational identity, post-coloniality, foodways and consumption.
Citizen Preparedness Training at Baruch College in Manhattan on July 8

MANHATTAN, NY (07/01/2015) (readMedia)— New York National Guard troops will be giving free disaster preparedness classes at the Baruch College at 55 Lexington Avenue, New York City at 1:30 p.m. on July 8.

The event is part of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's continuing Citizen Preparedness Corps Training Program, which gives citizens the knowledge and tools to prepare for emergencies and disasters, respond accordingly, and recover as quickly as possible to pre-disaster conditions.

Working with the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (DHSES) and local emergency management personnel, troops are conducting these training events across the state.

Citizens should register for the event at http://www.prepare.ny.gov/training-events.

Since the program's launch in early February 2014, troops have held more than 200 events statewide, and taught over 28,000 citizens how to be better prepared for emergencies and disasters.

The program, designed by DHSES, covers a broad range of emergency-preparedness topics, like developing a family emergency plan, stockpiling on emergency supplies, and registering for NY-Alert, the state-wide emergency alert system.

The Citizen Preparedness Corps has equipped thousands of New Yorkers to respond better to emergencies and disasters, he stressed.

Emergency preparedness is part and parcel of the New York National Guard's mission and experience, according to New York State Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Patrick A. Murphy.

"The men and women of the New York Army and Air National Guard, who have responded to help their fellow New Yorkers during floods, hurricanes, and snow storms, know first-hand the value of being prepared for emergencies," Murphy said.

"Our Soldiers and Airmen are proud to be part of Governor Cuomo's effort to help our fellow citizens prepare to cope with disasters and emergencies."

Participants will receive a training certificate, a wallet-sized "Z-Card" with emergency preparedness information, and a free Citizen Preparedness Starter Kit (one per family). The kit includes a first-aid kit, face mask, pocket radio with batteries, food bars, emergency blanket and other key items to help citizens in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The classes include information about what other supplies and items citizens should add to their kits.

For more information on the program and emergency preparedness, visit www.nvprepare.gov.
Participatory Budgeting Swells, and so do Questions About Impact

By Linell Ajello | 42 mins ago

In fall 2011, four New York City councilmembers distributed posters and emails asking "How would you spend $1 million to improve your neighborhood?" These were invitations to a direct democracy initiative called Participatory Budgeting, and they encapsulated the highly appealing design of this program, in which residents meet in assemblies to share ideas, develop proposals with the direction of the councilmember’s staff and city agencies, present them in expositions, and decide on the winners in a district-wide vote.

Typical “PB” projects include playground upgrades, community center renovations and Smart Boards for public schools.

In the four years since those first posters appeared, PB has spread from four to 24 districts, accepted as a tool to increase political participation and government transparency.
But getting PB to live up to its promise of inclusivity requires a significant investment of labor from the council members and their staff. Without strategic outreach, PB draws largely from the "usual suspects": The Urban Justice Center reports that without targeted outreach, those who identify as white, with incomes over $50,000 tend to be overrepresented in PB sessions, while those who identify as Asian, Latino/s, and African American, with incomes under $35,000 tend to be underrepresented.

The Urban Justice Institute notes that community groups may be a pivotal way to draw often marginalized groups into the process. In Councilman Stephen Levin’s District 33 (which includes Brooklyn Heights, DUMBO, Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Boerum Hill, Vinegar Hill, Downtown Brooklyn, and Bedford–Stuyvesant), "participation from low-income people and people of color was fairly robust," according to the UJC, and this was at least partly due to targeted outreach to seven public housing developments, and the help of Furee (Families United for Racial and Economic Equality) and Community Voices Heard.

**Shared stewardship**

In areas of high inequality, PB does bring together people who may otherwise pass silently on the street.

This year, Councilmember Antonio Reynoso’s office (District 34, covering Bushwick and Williamsburg in Brooklyn and Ridgewood in Queens) led 15 assemblies. Several volunteers went on to become budget delegates, honing proposals in response to city agencies. Among them were Charlotte Binns, who grew up on the Upper West Side and in London before moving to one of what she called the "gentrifying condos" in Williamsburg; and Lavonne Mc Lamb, who grew up in Ten Eck (or Williamsburg) Houses. Both women have two young children, and both have civic stakes beyond PB: Mc Lamb recently became Vice President of the Tenants’ Association. Binns created and recently sold a company that provides technology development for nonprofits, and is a community organizer for Transition North Brooklyn, an Occupy-inspired community program focused on environmental sustainability.

Mc Lamb focused on a proposal to renovate a playground in Williamsburg Houses that currently consists of one jungle gym on a concrete surface and a seal sculpture that shoots out a thin, sad arc of water in the summer. Several years ago, a dumpster appeared near the jungle gym, to catch debris from reconstruction of the roof. It was never removed, and though a concrete wall separates the dumpster from the jungle gym, Mc Lamb and other residents say the dumpster smells and attracts rats.

Binns worked on a proposal with the Brooklyn Arbor School, whose principal Eve Irizarry and others had already been thinking of how improve the outdoor area of the school, to green it and to provide play space for students as well as public space for the neighborhood. Binns contacted architect Derrick Borowski and artist and designer Marta Lavin, and together they created an illustration that would allow people to have a sense of how the space could take shape: a green wall to shield the neighborhood from the exhaust off the BQE, which runs along one side of the school, a garden, and a basketball court and benches open to public.

**'No bad ideas’**

Many delegates come into PB with a project in mind that would benefit themselves and those close to them. But some delegates show up as blank slates, and reach out to various communities to gather their ideas and shepherd their proposals. Binns worked on two proposals along with the Arbor School, and Mc Lamb spread the word and invited people to bring their own ideas, doing outreach in Ridgewood as well as Williamsburg.

Binns, Mc Lamb and about 12 others met regularly with Reynoso Chief of Staff Jennifer Gutierrez, trekking out on cold, snowy January and February weeknights to the empty, fluorescent cafeteria of the Diana Jones senior center in Bushwick, where they all quietly honed the wording on their proposals, and to the basement of the Bushwick library where they plotted out voting locations along with staff members and volunteers.

As they attended meetings and workshops throughout the winter, budget delegates quickly got a sense of the range of needs across their districts. Several of the delegates I spoke with emphasized that "there are so many good projects" and that they would definitely participate again, whether their project won or not. But at one point at a February meeting, Mc Lamb said "This is exciting, but it’s also frustrating. Some things you shouldn’t have to compete for."

Josh Lerner, who heads up the Participatory Budgeting Project, adapted the program from a larger one in Puerto Allegre, Brazil. He says the initiative can bring about "more equitable spending." Relative to the 20 percent of overall budget that the residents of Puerto Allegre have determined through PB, the million dollars of capital funds per district here could be seen as training wheels.
Along with improvements such as green walls, bioswales, and Smart Boards, PB expos feature less cutting-edge proposals like fixing toilets and providing air conditioning in schools. Delegates and staff have heard from parents who have to keep their asthmatic children home from school on hot days. And Council staff have heard from parents whose children contracted bladder infections from holding their pee.

Nell Mermin participated in PB in Councilman Brad Lander’s District 39 (District 39, covering Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, Columbia Waterfront, Gowanus, Park Slope, Windsor Terrace, Kensington, and Boro Park) for the second time this year, honing a proposal for air conditioning for the P.S. 124 cafeteria, along with principal Annabel Burrell.

The disparity in projects up for the vote bothers her: "Do I want to fund a green roof, or a bathroom for preschoolers?" Mermin said. "What is PB, and what are we supposed to be funding here? Aren’t there departments that should be funding these projects? And I think that is a larger issue."

Facilitators at the events tell participants that "There are no bad ideas," and offer a quick directive—"Step up, step back"—for the sessions in which people share their ideas in groups: thus curbing those who may go on too long, and encouraging those who tend to hesitate. All ideas are written on a board and discussed, and then each group votes to determine the top three proposals. Group winners are presented to everyone at the assembly at the end of the event.

In Reynoso’s district, Members of Scout Troop 26 (the "Sea Bees") came to an assembly thinking of funding for trips out of the city, or for tech equipment to learn about robotics. But these ideas did not even make it onto the spreadsheet of proposals for their table at the Williamsburg Community Center assembly. When I asked the Sea Bees what happened to their ideas, one of the young men said that their table had been joined by a few older people, who were concerned about safety. "This is for the community, and safety comes first for the community," he said. So they scrapped their ideas and proposed security cameras and street light installations for a few very dark streets within the housing complex.

**Can it scale up?**

Councilman Lander, according to Mermin, took toilet repair off the PB ballot and shifted the issue to the City Council, asking for a separate budget line for bathroom upkeep. The councilman’s move points out how PB could act as a kind of on-ramp, establishing a pragmatic, engaged relationship with a local politician that could move civic engagement from a discrete project to more systemic change. While Josh Lerner advocates for scaling up the program in New York through the allocation of more funds, PB may also act as a kind of on-ramp to citizens’ involvement in more systemic issues.

But the degree to which PB works to bring a diverse population into engagement in larger, more systemic issues is hard to track. Lisa Bloodgood, a staffer for Councilman Levin, has run the program for three years. She says she has not yet seen the program act as a transition to political involvement on a more systemic scale.

"The closest I’ve seen is [on the issues of] bathrooms: People writing letters to the Chancellor, talking to the Department of Education." She says through PB the councilman’s office has at least established communication, and is hearing from people about these issues. "I feel it is very much a pilot," she says, "so it is hard to say where it is going to take us, or what people are going to do with it. I don’t think it has found its solid footing."

One problem that has emerged is the slowness with which agencies implement some of the winning projects. Bloodgood says, "Each project needs one to two years to be fully implemented and the agencies, such as NYCHA or Parks, don’t move until all the funding is there and available."

Lavonne McMillan coaxed people who told her "They’re never going to do anything for us. They don’t care about us," that they had to at least try. She and other Williamsburg Houses residents were thrilled when the project won. But Carrie Gadsden, who campaigned for a renovated community center in Gowanus Houses, and others have waited while their hard-earned PB projects remained in limbo for years. Bloodgood notes "Even the most passionate people can be frustrated after the third year." Without oversight and follow-through, the very people that PB so effectively drew in to local politics may end up feeling more hopeless than they did before.

And as with many district-level agreements, PB lacks legal protection, leaving unfinished projects vulnerable if a new council member leaves office.
On the other hand, as PB delegates get some exposure to the workings of government agencies, they are less likely blame council members for things beyond their control. While agencies responsible for the projects (such as Parks and NYCHA) held hour-long presentations for delegates, their selection criteria—agencies reject PB projects they find unworkable—remained opaque. "There was a giant wall," Binns said, while noting that the upside for council members is that their constituents become "more sympathetic to the council member’s realities."

Speaking on the value of "scaling up" PB, Lerner referred to the Puerto Allegre example, where, in an area of high inequality, the program doubled sanitation coverage and the number of students in schools. In New York, Lerner's goal for PB’s equity effect—"One person one vote, rather than how much money you have or how much power you have deciding on what gets built in your neighborhood"—references the intense concerns over inequality and displacement.

Asked if he thinks PB can draw people into engaging on more systemic issues, Reynoso said "I think that is absolutely possible." He noted "The most popular idea we received for how to spend $1 million was "affordable housing." That is without a doubt, the number one need, however, PB could not meet that need. What they then began to ask was why not, and why was there so much luxury development in their neighborhood that wasn't for them, and finally, what could they do to change that? This shift in conversation opened up the opportunity to discuss zoning rules, ULURP, et cetera."

Many participants report that their involvement in PB is the first time that they have taken part in "solving a community problem," according to the Urban Justice Center. Shehab Chowdhury, who studied political science at Baruch College, was excited when his father, who is active in the Bengali community, told him about PB in Kensington. Before PB, Chowdhury said, there had been a strong distrust of government within the Bengali community, and a real lack of communication among residents of different incomes and ethnic backgrounds. "These discussions would not be happening without Participatory Budgeting," Chowdhury said. "It is a receptive process, and people are being heard."

Lander, who shows up at almost every PB assembly in his district, describes in his blog posts the program in a way that seems to reflect his experience of the best and worst of political work in general. He says PB both inspires creativity in the service of a common good and is a lesson in the difficulties of getting things done in government. What those lessons may lead to remains to be seen.
The 40-Year Plan Of A 22-Year-Old Financial Advisor

July 1, 2015 • Jeff Schlegel

Much can change between today and tomorrow, let alone in 43 years. But Leon Baburov, a 22-year-old financial advisor with Northwestern Mutual in New York City, already has penciled in a long career at his current employer, when he'll retire and what his next job will be after he retires. In other words, the preternatural Baburov isn't like most 22-year-olds still wondering what to do with their time on Earth.

"I always thought I'd be an engineer because I took advance math and physics classes in high school and really enjoyed it and thought that's what I'd be doing the rest of my life," he says. "But I took an intro to economics class my senior year and fell in love with the subject and decided to apply to business schools instead."

His altered trajectory took him to Baruch College in Manhattan, where he graduated in three years with a finance major and a triple minor in humanities, physics and computer information systems. While looking for an internship during his freshmen year, his then-girlfriend, now-wife Aleksandra introduced him to a financial advisor working at Northwestern Mutual, the Milwaukee-based company formally known as the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. He interned for that advisor doing marketing and investment research, and after a couple of summers as an intern he joined the company out of college in August 2013.

Baburov seems to be on the fast track to somewhere, but even so he was still feeling very much like the newbie that he was when he started in the business. While still an intern, he attained the CLTC (certified in long-term care) designation to bolster his chops. "I thought it would give me credibility with retirement market clients," he says.

He also studied for—and attained—the certified financial planner designation. "I saw it as a benchmark of excellence and, admittedly, because I had a little bit of an inferiority complex because of my age. I wanted to be perceived as being a professional," Baburov says. "And after taking those courses and being able to speak more intelligently [about financial planning topics] and having that mark behind my name, it's very rare that I'm asked questions about my age."

As an insurance agent and CFP license holder, Baburov currently oversees more than 80 clients for both insurance and investments. He has roughly $1 million in assets under management on the investment side.

About 40% of his clients are young professionals among millennials and Gen Xers. That demographic "probably generates negative net income, but it's still worthwhile because I know where those young professionals will be five, 10, 15 years from now, and I tell them I want to grow together with them." Baburov says the other 60% of his clients are all over the map, including doctors, nurses and college professors. Most of his clients come via word-of-mouth advertising, though he has cultivated professors as a client group via cold calling by focusing on a few select universities in the New York metro area.
Baburov's long-range plan is to retire at 65 (because that's Northwestern Mutual's mandatory retirement age) and then teach physics at his old high school. For now, he's excited about growing his practice. "At this point, I feel pretty well established," he says. "Obviously, there's a lot of room for me to grow."
National Youth Orchestra’s Big Day at Carnegie Hall

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER  JULY 1, 2015

Writing last year in The Times, Anthony Tommasini praised the National Youth Orchestra of the United States for its “fresh, urgent” and “weighty, richly characterized” playing. Not bad for an ensemble whose members range in age from 16 to 19. The orchestra, founded in 2013 by the Weill Music Institute, has already worked with eminent conductors and soloists. On Saturday, it returns to Carnegie Hall for a program led by Charles Dutoit and featuring Berlioz’s “Symphonie Fantastique,” Tan Dun’s “Passacaglia: The Secret of Wind and Birds” and Beethoven’s “Emperor” Concerto, with the pianist Yundi Li as soloist. (8 p.m., Saturday, carnegiehall.org.)

There’s youthful operatic talent on display this week, too, courtesy of the Martina Arroyo Foundation, directed by the American soprano for whom it is named. Each year the foundation offers fully staged productions featuring talented young singers from its Prelude to Performance training program. This season the lineup includes “Madama Butterfly” (on Thursday and Saturday) and “La Fille du Régiment” (on Friday and next Sunday). (7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. next Sunday, Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, martinaarroyofdn.org.)
Why many in this New york City neighborhood are obsessed with Greek crisis

By Jillian Berman
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In this Greektown 'everyone has their own opinions' on the crisis

They may be 4,000 miles away from Greece, but the people sitting in Astoria's Athens Square Park on a recent afternoon have opinions on the country's economic crisis, according to 82-year-old Constantine Makris, who catching some sun on a bench outside the park.

"Everyone you ask around here is going to give you a different answer," to the question of what to make of the news out of Greece this week, Makris said.

That's because the Mediterranean country's financial turmoil is particularly relevant to many in Astoria, one of the nation's many so-called Greektowns, where people of Greek descent make up 8.8% of the population. Much of the Greek immigration to that area took place in the 1960s, but for many of these Greek-Americans the connection to Greece is still quite strong, according to Nicholas Alexiou, a sociology professor at Queens College, who lives in Astoria.

"Everybody here, they have families in Greece," said Alexiou, noting that many also have investments such as real estate. Despite their strong ties to the country, many Greek-Americans feel powerless to help; many are holding off on booking annual trips to Greece to see how events play out over the next few days, Alexiou said.

"The only thing to do is to show our support to the Greeks in Greece and show them they are not alone," said Alexiou, who launched the Hellenic-American Oral History Project in 2013.

Kimora Lee Simmons aims for new fashion hit

(3:47)
Kimora Lee Simmons, the former designer of Baby Phat, is a launching a grown-up luxury-priced fashion line for working women.

Greece is teetering on financial collapse as officials haggle with the country's creditors over terms to receive a much-needed bailout. Meanwhile, financial institutions have been shut down for days to prevent a bank run and Greek voters will head to the polls on Sunday to decide whether they should accept the creditors' terms, which include austerity measures and increased taxes, in exchange for a renegotiation of its debt and further bailout funds. A "no" vote could also mean lead to Greece's exit from the Eurozone.
“Everyone has got his own opinions,” on the matter Markis said before proceeding to share his.

“It’s so much corruption (in Greece), I don’t believe anything that they say,” Markis, who came to the United States with his family in 1946 as a teen, said of government officials. “I don’t trust them and I don’t like them. Greece is the most historic country in the world and now people are starving in the streets, I don’t believe it.”

About 40% of children in Greece are living in poverty and the jobless rate hovers at around 25%. For Nina Anastasopoulou, Greeks’ economic struggles, which she called “the worst situation,” lead her to a different political conclusion than Markis — that the country’s creditors are to blame.

When asked how her fellow countrymen should vote on Sunday, Anastasopoulos, said “of course no, because we respect our history.” Anastasopoulos is apparently not alone in that opinion in Astoria — a rally in favor of a “no” vote organized by a major Hellenic-American association is slated to take place Wednesday night, according to Alexiou.

Anastasopoulos moved to the United States 11 years ago because “I didn’t have a job in Greece,” she said as she manned the cash register at Pharamakoloji, a Greek-themed wellness store. She still has about 70 members of her family living in Greece — “every Greek family is a big family,” — and she’s regularly communicating with friends, which makes her all the more concerned about the situation there.

A moment later, Anastasopoulos turned around an iPad to reveal a Skype conversation with a friend in Greece, “he’s voting no too,” she said.

Next door at La Mode salon, surrounded by an eclectic mix of electrolysis supplies, consignment furniture and Greek-themed clothes for sale, Joanna Spanos said she also thinks Greece shouldn’t accept its creditors’ terms. “The Greeks are a strong people, they work hard,” the 66-year-old said, but its creditors “don’t let the Greek people live. Greece is going to be slaves to the Europeans.”

The 66-year-old said she wakes up at 1 a.m., 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. to watch the news from Greece and she’s supportive of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s efforts to get her fellow Greeks a break. “This government is excellent,” she said, though she noted that some friends coming in and out of the shop disagree with her take.

Spanos would like the U.S. to back Tsipras up, a scenario that seems unlikely given President Barack Obama’s relatively neutral stance on the issue. He told reporters yesterday that American officials have been encouraging the Greek government and its European creditors to work towards a solution that allows Greek’s economy to grow without leaving the eurozone, noting the crisis won’t have a major impact on the American people.

Savos Nekolaedes said he’s taking comfort in that fact. “I live here, never mind what happens in Europe,” Nekolaedes said sitting on a small bench inside Akropolis meat market, in between gentle ribblings from his friend who works among the baby duck and baby back rib carcasses sold in the shop.

“I came to America for the same reason everyone comes to America, I wasn’t satisfied with my country,” said Nekolaedes, who is in his early 60s. “Now I love it here.”

Even though Nekolaedes came to the U.S. 40 years ago, he still regularly follows news from his home country. When asked to spell his name, he wrote it down on a copy of the Greek language newspaper he was reading. Still, he doesn’t have much of an opinion on the goings on in his home country.

“For me, never mind, whatever happens, happens,” he said. “I don’t have drachmas, I don’t have euros, I don’t care.”
Hacking the brain: can DIY neuroscience make you happier – and smarter?

Using kit purchased on the internet for £60, trend-setters are perking up their brains with low-level blasts of electricity. Lucy Jones tries it out.
The emperor Claudius suffered from the most savage migraines. By 46AD, he was in his late fifties and, presumably at his wits' end from the pain, he agreed that his esteemed doctor Scribonius Largus could try something new and a little off-the-wall.

Largus, who had his work cut out for him looking after a boss with a long list of health problems and a mercurial temper, paid a local fisherman to catch a couple of electric eels from the Mediterranean Sea. Back at the palace, he held them to the emperor's temples in an attempt to quell his excruciating headache. It is the first recorded instance of electrical stimulation being used as a medical treatment.

Fast-forward two thousand years or so to a couple of students in their early twenties in a bedroom in Leeds, using electricity in an attempt to make their lives better and easier. A brain stimulation kit bought on the internet includes the wires, electrode sponges, headband and basic device needed to get them started. A nine-volt battery is not included.

Katie, 23, has suffered from anxiety and depression since she was 18. When her boyfriend Lee told her about transcranial direct-current stimulation (tDCS), a form of neurostimulation that involves administering a low level of electrical current to the brain, she was sceptical. But Lee had heard that it could help people with mood disorders and wondered if she might benefit.

"The first time, I freaked out," she remembers. "I thought, 'I can't cope with putting electrical stimulations in my brain.' Lee put this machine on and, it's difficult to explain, but everything went empty in a good way. I can't remember if I've ever felt like that. I felt relaxed and chilled inside. It was a mad sensation and an out-of-body experience."

She'd tried antidepressants in the past but found they didn't work for her. Now Katie uses the kit regularly. "It's improved my life and improved my mind," she says.

Lee uses the tDCS kit for different reasons. He was intrigued by its claims to enhance learning. Motivated by his general interest in self-improvement, he bought the kit from a website for about £60. The first time he used it, he found it easier to revise for his degree. The information "stuck" better, and for longer. He got a First.

I ask if he is concerned that zapping his brain could be dangerous. He is a bit worried - "At the end of the day, you're frying your brain" - but hasn't noticed any negative effects so far.

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Katie and Lee aren't alone. Small but growing numbers of people are delivering electric currents to their heads at home with online kits. Some in this DIY brain-zapping community build their own machines from scratch. If you've got basic electrical skills and know how to wire a circuit...
board, a kit is relatively easy to make. Garage neuroscientists do it for various reasons: to speed-learn, pick up languages quickly, treat depression, reduce anxiety, increase attention span, soothe migraines, get smarter, improve confidence and memory and motor skills. The claims made for tDCS are varied and seemingly endless.

Its potential is being explored by medical and scientific professionals seeking to help people suffering from a number of diseases and symptoms, from depression to epilepsy. While scientists aren’t completely sure how it affects behaviour – and there are sceptics – we know that a flow of electrical current affects the way the brain works. The basic science is simple and it works like this: administering direct current to a particular part of the brain makes it more likely that neurons will fire under the anode (positive) and less likely they will fire under the cathode (negative).

Roi Cohen Kadosh, a research lecturer at the department of experimental psychology at Oxford University, says: “What we can say about tDCS is that it does change how our brain works. It changes the level of excitability of different brain regions.”

tDCS has been used for over 100 years but was overshadowed for much of the 20th century by electroconvulsive therapy and drug treatments. It became popular again in 2000 with the increased use of new brain-imaging techniques, such as fMRI, and other brain stimulation methods such as transcranial magnetic stimulation. Clinical trials and studies of the effects, veracity, safety and future of tDCS continue to mushroom. This year, it looks like kits might become readily available for the first time.

When I first heard about tDCS, it conjured up stereotypical images of shock treatment from Sylvia Plath’s novel The Bell Jar and the film of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (which the Royal College of Psychiatrists said did for electroconvulsive therapy what Jaws did for sharks). But as I read more about it, I learned that the current normally used is extremely low (1 to 2 milliamps, compared with typically 800 milliamps in electroconvulsive therapy). It sounded, within a controlled environment, safe. Maybe I should try it.

One day I went to University College London’s Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience to act as a guinea pig for a doctoral student, Camilla Nord. She is running a trial on the effects of tDCS when used together with cognitive behavioural therapy — a talking treatment — to treat depression. I climbed the stairs feeling excited. My mood changes these days are limited to coffee and sugar. Would I get a buzz off electricity?

To improve the accuracy of her result, Nord is using a “double-blind” experiment, in which half her volunteers receive sham tDCS. No one, including Nord, knows whether it is a placebo or not.

According to Nord, “tDCS is this amazing tool and a way that neuroscience can help psychiatry”. She is hoping to find that it augments the effect of cognitive behavioural therapy, making both treatments more successful than they are in isolation. She is confident that by directing an electrical current at the neurons in the dysfuctioning area of the brain that causes depression, she can make that area more active.

I sign a form and confirm that I don’t have a history of seizures. Nord takes down my hair and puts a headband on my head. She positions two sponges dipped in saline solution on the front of my skull where the frontal cortex sits under my cranium. A towel around my neck mops up the water dripping down.

She presses the button. “I don’t feel anything.” Zap. “Should I feel something now?” Zap. She explains that there might be some tingling of the skin and continues to administer the current to my cranium. Zap, zap, zap. I feel tingling but it could just be the cold water on my scalp.

Then I’m given a brain-training “N-back” test on a PC in the corner. It’s quite hard and the room is hot. I’m not very good at it, and feel flustered. I expected heightened senses or a sharpening of my brain.

Aren’t I supposed to feel smarter?

“Saying tDCS makes you smarter is an unhelpful myth; but that doesn’t mean that tiny, specific tDCS might not make you better at tiny, specific things,” Nord explains.

We talk about recent studies that have cast doubt on the efficacy of tDCS but Nord remains optimistic that neuroscience can help people with depression and other psychiatric conditions. She is worried about people using the kits at home, however. “tDCS should be more readily available if that means people can buy safe machines. Because of the publicity about it, you get people fabricating their own machines at home with seriously unusual side effects.”

I leave feeling relaxed and a bit spaced out, but that might be tiredness from a few hours spent talking about complex science. I had the electrical current for only about five minutes. Perhaps when I try tDCS with the DIY community in east London they might be a little more cavalier with their dosages and times. But now I’m feeling a little more cautious after Nord’s warnings; I don’t really want skull burn.

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The next morning I talk on Skype to Xavier, a French man who took part in Camilla Nord’s trial. Last summer, while working in the City as a banker, he began feeling depressed. He went to a GP who prescribed him pills. They didn’t work. The doctor offered cognitive behavioural therapy but there was a six-month wait. Desperate, he took up the offer to be part of the UCL experiment that offered cognitive behavioural therapy alongside tDCS.
“My friends thought it sounded a bit crazy, but I thought, ‘I need to find a solution,’” Xavier says.

Although he doesn’t know whether the tDCS he received was real, Xavier believes it was, because he felt burning on his scalp. He’s much better now and looks happy and healthy. I ask if he’d use electricity again. “In a controlled environment,” he says. “The brain is the greatest asset we all have, so you have to be careful.”

It is people like Xavier who Marom Bikson, professor of biomedical engineering at the City College of New York, hopes will benefit from tDCS as it becomes mainstream. Bikson is a leading voice in the field. He says: “I think, I hope, that tDCS has a huge potential to remove human suffering and that’s why I’m very anxious for it to be made available.”

As well as depression, he mentions fibromyalgia, neural pain and status epilepticus as serious health problems that might be treated with electricity. Depression is the area where he has seen the most encouraging results. “That’s why I’m not comfortable waiting 15 years for us to work all the scientific questions. There are people suffering today who could benefit from this technology. Their lives are shattered by their diseases and it’s so unfortunate that something that might – big ‘might’ – be able to help them, and is considered so safe that we’ll use it on college students, is not available.”

But he is confident this is going to change very soon. “What is needed is clinical-grade tDCS, which should be made available for people to use at home. That path needs to open up and I think it will later this year.”

In April, I attend the Magnstim Neuroscience Conference 2015 at Oxford University. (Magnstim is a company specialising in transcranial magnetic stimulation devices, so tDCS is on the agenda.) I meet Nick Davis, a lecturer in psychology at Swansea University, who is studying the effects of tDCS on motor control. I ask him how we can use brain stimulation to improve performance in sport.

Davis gives tennis as an example, and the length of time tennis players spend getting their serve right. Imagine if they could use tDCS to reduce this. “It could free up their time to do other things and make them better players,” he says.

Of course that raises a question of ethics. Would we count that as cheating? Would we put it in the same category as using steroids? And what of the difference between sport and artistic performance?

“Say I give you cocaine and you run faster in a sprint; we would consider that cheating,” he says. “But if I give you cocaine and you write a better song, we don’t think that’s cheating – we just think that’s being in a band. We don’t care that an album was made on drugs. In sport, we care about the effort people put in so anything that improves your effort is cheating.”

The comparison between cocaine and electricity leads me to wonder how addictive tDCS could be. Most of us resort to drugs when we want to change our mood, whether it’s caffeine, a glass of wine or something stronger. I am conscious that my interest in tDCS is triggering a kind of appetite for or excitement about a potential new way of hushing my racing head and balancing my mood. But Davis doesn’t think that electricity could be addictive: “In the same way as performing a ritual can become not addictive but part of your behaviour, there is that potential. Is it addictive in the same way as nicotine and alcohol? I don’t think so.” Bikson agrees, describing the doses being used currently as “baby aspirin” level.

Bikson’s talk at the Oxford conference, “Are We Ready To Go Home?”, is about taking tDCS into people’s houses safely. He argues that it is deployable, simple and safe, that there is considerable patient demand for it, and that we need to stop people resorting to home-made kits, as even low-intensity stimulation can cause harm when applied with bad technology.

The numbers Bikson quotes are persuasive: 40,000 tDCS sessions have taken place over the past 15 years, with no serious adverse effects documented in nearly 1,000 studies published.

He suggests some ways to regulate over-the-counter devices: single-use electrodes, single-position headgear, or one dose stored on a single physical module. A code that unlocks the device could act like a safety lid on a bottle of Calpol.

Finally, Bikson advocates making tDCS freely available in the interests of science. As Davis says, “No one wants to stop people innovating; it’s how things happen. But you’ve got to think about people’s safety.”

For people who want to try tDCS, such as the musician St Vincent, who tweeted in December that all she wanted for Christmas was a tDCS machine, how close is this to reality? “That ship has sailed. It’s just a case of accelerating it,” says Bikson. “People have to get used to the idea of using electricity instead of pills.”

The Thyme System, which went on the market in June, might be the first big step. It doesn’t make medical claims: it’s a cognitive enhancement tool (costing $299) that promises “to deliver pulsed neurostimulation waveforms to modulate psychophysiological arousal for lifestyle or wellness applications”. The manufacturers are quite cagey with information but say the devices “use neuro-signalling to induce shifts in energy and calm states within minutes”. Bikson is a product adviser and a fan, though he struggles to find the words to describe Thyme’s effects: “It’s not how coffee or wine makes us feel, it’s the way electricity makes us feel.”

Although tDCS is already being used in a couple of private hospitals in the United States it won’t be available on prescription from your GP yet. NICE, the UK health regulator, is developing guidance on its use for depression; two pivotal multi-centre trials for treating depression with tDCS are also under way.
The two recurring themes in my conversations with scientists are optimism about TDCS as a tool for treatment, on the one hand, and concern about people experimenting at home on the other. Davis is wary of the activity of DIY enthusiasts. "It's dangerous," he says, "but they tend to know it's dangerous." Contributors to the busy DIY TDCS forum on Reddit, a bulletin-board-type website, discuss recent studies and share personal experiences and tips about which "montages"—how the electrodes are positioned—"to use. That way, you can stimulate the specific parts of the brain governing anything from numerical reasoning and improved socialisation to migraine pain and the reduction of cravings. It is mainly a practical forum for individual users. "Best electrode to avoid skin burn?" is a typical query.

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I visit a hackspace in east London to meet Andrew Vladimirov, a Russian neuroscientist who runs a computer security business. He's a member of Brain Hackers, a group of neuroscientists, electronics engineers and hobbyists. It is a step up from the Reddit DIYers; this group strives to enhance the field of neurostimulation and make it available to others.

There's an old arcade game in one corner and a tuck shop selling penny sweets and Space Raiders crisps, next to an area filled with brewing apparatus. Experts and amateurs interested in hacking, gaming, science, technology and innovation mill around surrounded by sewing machines, 3D-printed octopuses and other animals, Rubik’s Cubes, lab coats, old computers, new computers and a laser cutting machine. Outside, guys fly drones next to a caravan for “Robotics”. The bookshelves read like poetry: Practical Ruby Projects, Drupal, The Definitive Guide to Grails, The Klingon Dictionary, In Code.

Soon after Vladimirov arrives it becomes clear that he views TDCS as boring and is more interested in other ways of altering the brain, such as magnetic fields, lasers, ultrasound and alternating current. He seeks to measure brain activity simultaneously through electroencephalographic (EEG) devices, including the readily available, consumer-friendly Muse and MindWave, as well as more esoteric, DIY headgear.

There is talk of nootropics (smart drugs). Vladimirov wears a locker-type container around his neck containing a couple of doses of placebos for emergencies. Like many others in London's DIY neurostimulation community, he is a transhumanist: one who strives to enhance human life with science, health research, technology and innovation.

I ask Vladimirov if I can try something and he applies a combination of transcranial, pulsed magnetic-field and laser stimulation at alpha-band frequency to the back of my head for ten minutes. He is using a machine produced by a friend in Ukraine (where this device is apparently used to treat depression and anxiety). Afterwards, my vision seems slightly sharper and I have a bit more energy; but I am paranoid I've damaged my brain.

We talk about safety and Vladimirov allows that it would be possible to get into a state you didn’t want to be in — say, highly alert, or very mellow — and not be able to get out. I don't think I'll be rushing to buy a lot on the internet. Later, I have strange dreams. I feel nauseous for the rest of the evening and the next day, though this could be from something I ate.

I catch up on the TDCS Reddit and find a plea from a bipolar patient desperate to find a montage to help him study psychology: "I read a post here, of a guy who used tDCS day before exam, couldn’t study earlier because his grandpa passed away or something. Anyway. He aced on the tests. Tried finding it to know what montage he used. Can’t find it," he says, asking for a "partner in this journey".

Various users offer advice, and then there's a breakthrough. "Hey, that's me!" says the guy whose grandfather’s illness caused him to miss classes. It turns out he’s J D Leadham, the 25-year-old chief executive of Neurolectrics and creator of the Brain Stimulator — the machine used by, among others, Lee and Katie in Leeds. He gives details of the montage he uses and links out to his own Brain Stimulator site.

In a way, Leadham the young entrepreneur, Bilson the eminent scientist and Vladimirov the hackspace pioneer are all coming from the same place: if we can improve the brain, why shouldn't we?

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