

The Boston Globe

THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 2019

Question cut from MCAS amid concerns

Students, teachers, writer say essay prompt about response to a slave is inappropriate

By James Vaznis
GLOBE STAFF
When 10th-graders sat down for the MCAS this spring, many confronted an essay question that struck them as inappropriate and insensitive: They were asked to write a journal entry from the per-

spective of a white woman who uses derogatory language toward a runaway slave and is conflicted about helping her.

The essay question — based on a passage from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “The Underground Railroad” — sparked a range of

questions among students, including whether using racist language would win them points for historical accuracy or deductions for inappropriateness. Some Boston school administrators, including interim Superintendent Laura Perille, contacted state education officials last Friday to voice their objections.

In response, the state Department of Elementary and Second-

ary Education informed superintendents on Sunday that students would not be scored on the question and that students taking the makeup exam this week would be instructed not to answer it — a rare move by the department. Commissioner Jeffrey Riley did not reveal the specific question in his note.

Riley said in an interview this
MCAS, Page A9

Neal asks IRS for Trump's tax forms

Request for personal and business returns sets stage for prolonged legal battle

By Danny McDonald
GLOBE STAFF
Representative Richard Neal, the Springfield Democrat who is the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, on Wednesday formally asked the Internal Revenue Service for six years of President Trump's tax returns.

The request is the first such demand for a sitting president's tax information in 45 years. The move is likely to set off a huge legal battle between Democrats controlling the House and the Trump administration.

“Congress, as a coequal branch of government, has a duty to conduct oversight of departments and officials,” Neal said in a statement. “The Ways and Means Committee in particular has a responsibility to conduct oversight of our voluntary federal tax system and determine how Americans — including those elected to our highest office — are complying with those laws.”

The request comes after Trump's former fixer and attorney Michael Cohen provided testimony earlier this year that suggested the president lied on his financial disclosure forms. Cohen's testimony gives the committee a stronger argument that it needs the returns to investigate a potential crime instead of for a political fishing expedition.

TAX RETURNS, Page A7

Living through grief's legacy

A father's suicide highlights lasting pain in Newtown

By Jenna Russell
GLOBE STAFF
NEWTOWN, Conn. — Tucked into a quiet corner of this close-knit town, among the rolling hills and tidy woodpiles and stone walls, the Resiliency Center of Newtown still hums with purpose, six years after the mass shooting that led to its creation.

In rooms well stocked with paint and brushes, toys and musical instruments, young survivors of the Sandy Hook school shooting still engage in art and play and music therapy. And staff members at the center say they are still welcoming new clients, people showing up for the first time to ask for help.

“I tell people, it's going to bubble up when your brain is ready,” said Jennifer Sokira, a music therapist at the center, which was started with a federal grant to serve people directly affected by the shooting. “As people hit milestones — becoming a teenager, going to college — they may have to process the trauma again.”

In Newtown — maybe more than anywhere else in the country — the persistence of traumatic grief is widely recognized, a reality woven into the fabric of everyday life.

That reality engulfed the town again last week, with the devastating news that Dr. Jeremy Richman had died by suicide. Richman, 49, was a neuroscientist and activist, well known and much loved here.

NEWTOWN, Page A8



Clockwise from top: Gordon Thompson petted Maggie, a comfort dog, at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Newtown, Conn.; a basket of rocks painted with encouraging phrases was outside the Resiliency Center; Jennifer Hensel and Jeremy Richman (left) a month after the Sandy Hook attack.

Northeastern hosted a talk by Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Ind., who is running for president. B1.

Massachusetts needs about twice as many apartments affordable to low-income renters than it has, a study found. C1.

Sun spots

Thursday: Sunny, cooling down. High: 51-56. Low: 30-35.

Friday: Clouds, cooler still.

Comics and Weather, C10-11.

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Harvard researcher has alien hypothesis

Theory that extraterrestrial culture sent mysterious object is ridiculed

By Dugan Arnett

Like a lot of people, Avi Loeb, the chairman of Harvard University's renowned astronomy department, does his best thinking in the shower.

It's where he has hatched ideas for papers on black holes and the future of the universe, and where, last year, he spent some time pondering a notion that would eventually make him — in some circles, at least — the subject of considerable ridicule.

He'd been thinking about the phenomenon of ‘Oumuamua, a mysterious object that hurtled close to Earth in 2017. It had become an instant sensation in the scientific community, the first known object from outside the solar system, and astronomers and astrophysicists had jumped

ASTRONOMER, Page A12

THEIR DAY IN COURT



Actresses Lori Loughlin (top) and Felicity Huffman were in court in Boston Wednesday for their part in the college admissions scandal. B1.

Wynn Resorts is a new place, executives say

CEO apologizes over failure to address problems early

By Mark Arsenault

With the company's casino license under harsh scrutiny, Wynn Resorts executives Wednesday told state regulators they have cleaned house in the year since sexual misconduct allegations against the company's billionaire founder came to light, ousting employees who mishandled the complaints and building a new company culture from scratch.

“We launched a full back-of-house campaign, ‘We are Wynn,’” chief executive Matt Maddox told the Massachusetts Gaming Commission. “We are about 25,000 people, we're not about a man.”

Maddox, who replaced Steve Wynn as chief executive in February 2018, apologized to the commission that the company's failures had necessitated the hearing.

“What I'm hoping is our actions going forward will allow you to build trust in us,” he said.

Maddox's remarks came on the second day of hearings on how Wynn Resorts handled sexual misconduct complaints against Steve Wynn and whether the company remains fit to hold a Massachusetts casino license. At stake is the future of the company's \$2.6 billion hotel and casino complex in Everett, Encore Boston Harbor, which is scheduled to open in June with a workforce of

WYNN RESORTS, Page A8

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Science or science fiction? Harvard astronomer stands by his alien theory



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Avi Loeb with the 15-inch telescope known as "The Great Refractor," which was installed at Harvard in 1847.

By [Dugan Arnett](#)

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 03, 2019

Like a lot of people, Avi Loeb, the chairman of Harvard University's renowned astronomy department, does his best thinking in the shower.

It's where he has hatched ideas for papers on black holes and the future of the universe, and where, last year, he spent some time pondering a notion that would eventually make him — in some circles, at least — the subject of considerable ridicule.

ADVERTISING



He'd been thinking about the phenomenon of [‘Oumuamua](#), a mysterious object that hurtled close to the Earth in 2017. It had become an instant sensation in the scientific community, the first known object from outside the solar system, and astronomers and astrophysicists had jumped to analyze and explain the anomalous object. Theories were developed. Papers were published.

Loeb had a theory, too, and late last year, he detailed it, along with co-author and postdoctoral researcher Shmuel Bialy, in an article for *The Astrophysical Journal Letters*. Perhaps, he reasoned, the structure had been an artificial object sent from an extraterrestrial civilization.



AFP PHOTO / EUROPEAN SOUTHERN OBSERVATORY / M. KORNMESSE

This photo released by the European Southern Observatory on Nov. 20, 2017, shows an artist's impression of the first interstellar asteroid: ‘Oumuamua.

Almost immediately, the piece ignited the kind of firestorm rarely, if ever, seen in the buttoned-down world of modern-day astronomy.

In the months since the paper's publication, astrophysicists from across the country have spoken out against Loeb's theory, painting him as a sensationalist and worse. The researcher who first discovered 'Oumuamua — Hawaiian for "messenger from afar arriving first" — via telescope has called Loeb's suggestions "wild speculation." Another compared Loeb's logic to that of flat-earthers.

But even as criticism has continued to pour in, Loeb — who is short and slight and wears a near-constant half-smile — has refused to back down, digging in his heels against what he considers unjust appraisal.

He has brushed off much of the negative feedback as the jealous or prejudiced grumblings of scientists he doesn't respect, adding that the researchers whose opinions he does value have offered support for the idea — even if they've been wary of putting their names to it publicly.

His work, he insisted, is not the result of some half-baked sci-fi fantasy; in fact, of the nearly 700 papers he's written during the course of a decades-long career — including some that have touched on the possibility of alien life — he does not consider this one to be among his most speculative.

In the case of 'Oumuamua, Loeb said, he is simply using the available data to draw an evidence-based conclusion; namely, that the object — whatever it is — did not behave like it should have if it were a typical comet or asteroid.

If it were a comet, Loeb said, its excess acceleration would have likely been apparent in the form of a tail of dust or gas. Another anomaly? Its extreme shape, which is unlike any asteroid or comet observed before.

"Let's put all the possibilities on the table," Loeb said.

Part of the high-profile response, certainly, can be attributed to Loeb's academic pedigree.

Irwin Shapiro, the former longtime director of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, called Loeb "brilliant." Stephen Hawking once dined at his home. In 2012, Loeb was named one of the 25 most influential people in space by Time Magazine.

Loeb's office looks the way you'd imagine an astrophysicist's to look: textbook-lined shelves, a whiteboard filled with mathematic equations. He subsists on a diet made up largely of sugar-free dark chocolate, which he credits with helping him drop a third of his body weight. He admitted that his wife once told him that she suspected he was left behind by aliens — and that when they return to retrieve him, she would appreciate it if the spacecraft doesn't mess up the backyard lawn.

His approach to science, he said, was forged during a childhood spent in an Israeli farming village. Growing up, he passed his days reading philosophy books in the village hills and writing notes to himself, and that early interest in philosophy — he didn't move into the field of astrophysics until the age of 26 — has been critical in shaping his current work, providing a big-picture lens through which to view the world.

“The reason I'm different from my colleagues,” he said, “is because I was different from the beginning.”

Indeed, in the case of 'Oumuamua, he has used his peers' backlash to argue that scientific study has become far too conservative — avoiding controversial or unpopular examinations in favor of safer subjects that might earn a scientist an award or induction into a prestigious society, but are not necessarily conducive to substantial scientific advances.

Others aren't so sure.

Rob Weryk, a planetary defense researcher at the University of Hawaii and the person who initially spotted 'Oumuamua, said in an interview last week that there isn't “any reason to believe that it's anything but a natural object.” Paul M. Sutter, an astrophysicist at Ohio State University, went further, arguing that while Loeb's paper itself is mostly harmless, the widespread attention it has received threatens to damage the field's long-term credibility.

“Here's yet another thing where people think that astronomers are just hunting for aliens,” said Sutter. “The next time we go out to Congress or the public asking for money, there's going to be a lot of people shaking their heads saying, ‘Oh, you guys are just nutballs.’”

Even within the hallways of Harvard's Center for Astrophysics, where Loeb's reputation is that of an efficient and prolific researcher, the report has been met with mixed opinions. Though many considered it a sound scientific piece, some have balked at Loeb's premise — or the colorful language he's used in subsequent interviews, including comparing himself to Sherlock Holmes.

Some worry, too, that their association with Loeb — who is established enough in his career that taking a controversial stance poses little professional risk — could become a detriment in a field where controversial ideas can stain reputations, not to mention job prospects. (It's no coincidence, perhaps, that Bialy, the article's co-author, has avoided the limelight brought about by the piece.)

"Even now, it has consequences for those of us who work with him," said John Forbes, a fellow at the Institute for Theory and Computation at Harvard. "People sort of understand that he's a package deal — he has a ton of ideas, and some of them will be less conservative, and they're fine with that. But it certainly ..."

He paused.

"There's more negative attention around him than I wish there was."

For his part, Loeb appears to have little interest in demurring. In the few months since the piece's publication, he said, seven different filmmakers have reached out about the possibility of doing a film. He has been happy to field calls from media outlets across the world and is on the cusp, he said, of signing a deal for a book on 'Oumuamua.

As for his theory, he insisted he would be happy to back down, if and when it is proven invalid.

"If someone would show me evidence — a photograph of 'Oumuamua, or clear evidence that it's natural in origin — then I would admit it and move on," he said.

Until then, he is happy to serve as a kind of modern-day Carl Sagan — enduring a few welts in the name of existential progress.

"In the military, there is a saying: 'If you're a good soldier, you put your body on the barbed-wire so that others can pass over it,'" he said.

“I’m willing to put my body on the barbed wire.”

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