

The Public Purpose

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DOUBLE SECRET PROBATION: THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA – ATLANTA DRIVING AND OBESITY STUDY

Faber College's Dean Wormer is fabled for having placed the Delta House on "double-secret probation" when he either couldn't or didn't choose to specify the reasons that action was being taken against the fraternity. The Dean's characterization from the popular movie *Animal House* seems appropriate for what might be called the latest "suburbs make you fat" publicity campaign masquerading under the cover of university research.

Over the last 10 days, one can hardly have missed the news. One cable network ran three messages in a row along its bottom-of-screen headline marquee to tell us the news. Driving makes us obese.

The press reported that Dr. Lawrence Frank of the University of British Columbia and his associates determined that every additional minute spent daily in a car increases the likelihood of obesity based upon work conducted in Atlanta. Many of us who study these things looked hard for the study on the Internet. It was not to be found. Only a summary was found, which advises that study will appear in August, but that the publishers had allowed the findings to be made public for the "Time-ABC News Obesity Summit."

Hmmm.... The release came conveniently on the Memorial Day weekend, where there was little hard news for the press to report. Hmm.... One stands in awe at the press marketing expertise of that the taxpayers of the province seem to have established at the University of British Columbia.

Time magazine dutifully reported the findings, along with last year's well-publicized "sprawl and obesity" report by Smart Growth America in its special issue. The Smart Growth America report showed a relationship between sprawl and obesity, but not one that's very important (see analysis with Dr. Ronald D. Utt at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/wm337.cfm>). Richard Lacayo, who wrote the fawning *Time* article was apparently unaware that a "Google search," would have reviewed considerable criticisms of that report. Richard... call me and I'll give you a quick course on the Internet.

There was, of course, no Lawrence Frank study to critique. This is not the first time. Little more than a year ago, Professor Frank's work had been trumpeted in the press, at the same time that the actual work has virtually been kept secret --- rather like Dean Wormer's "double-secret probation." Last time it started with a story in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where the reporter forgot to ask for a copy of the study (of course, there apparently was none).

There are some hints however in the summary. The phantom report appears to have been limited to the impact of land use and physical exercise on obesity. One can conceive of other factors that might, perhaps, be more important. One issue that leaps to mind is “diet,” a word that does not appear in the entire 11-page summary. Another is “food,” which does appear three times, but only in the context of the physical location in the community of “good food choices.” Sort of like a study by a religious order seeking to determine the impact of prayer on the regularity of the sunrise. There may be more important issues. Of course, all this is premature. Dr. Frank’s double-secret probation marketing plan makes it impossible to know what, if anything, about diet may have been included in the actual study. If there is one.

Can’t wait until August.



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