

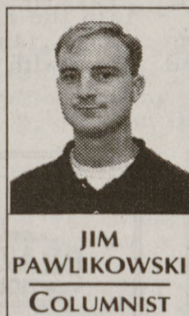
OPINION

THURSDAY
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Page 5

Students find four years not enough

I used to make fun of them, but now I am one. As a cocky freshman four years ago, I shook my head at the number of people who took more than the traditional four years to graduate. What slackers they must be, I thought.



JIM PAWLIKOWSKI
COLUMNIST

My outlook on fifth-year seniority changed, however, as I began my second senior year this week. Although my roommate's diploma hanging on the wall of our apartment room serves as a constant reminder of my delayed graduation, it has not really hit me that I have become one of those whom I used to ridicule. I have completed three cooperative education work terms, so I can easily justify my delayed graduation date. But the feeling that I'm taking longer than I should lingers while many of my classmates have their degrees in hand.

The tendency to hang around for more than four years appears to be unique to public universities, where many people can afford to pay for an extra semester or two. All of my friends at universities outside of Texas have graduated in four years. The most obvious reason for the increased number of semesters it typically takes to graduate is the number of credit hours required to obtain a degree. Earning a chemical engineering degree in four years without attending summer school requires five 17-hour semesters and one 18-hour semester. An electrical engineering degree requires four 17- and two 18-hour semesters. And a liberal arts degree requires 128 total hours, an average of 16 hours per semester.

Most of our professors would tell us that this degree plan was considered a light load when they were in school. Still, something has apparently changed.

Some of our more cynical elders might see our extended college days as a symptom of Generation-X apathy and laziness. However, anyone who has taken 17 hours in one semester can probably testify that he would not have passed if he dared sleep more than three hours a night.

I doubt that courses today are more rigorous than in the past. But both counselors and students share the sentiment that 17 hours is too many. I recall a counselor from my freshman student orientation telling us that enrolling in more than 15 hours our first semester was academic suicide.

So, in reality, a Texas A&M degree requires four-and-a-half to five years of study. Very few people graduate in four years without attending summer school or transferring at least a full semester's worth of credit from AP tests or credit by exam.

The stigma that summer school is only for flunkies has been eliminated. Now, students no longer attend during the summer just to make up a failing grade — the principle reason to attend summer school in the past. For many students, summer is just a regular semester.

The stigma against students who take longer than the traditional four years is also withering. Many serious and successful students now attend summer classes and return for a second senior year. The idea of the sixth- and seventh-year seniors might still conjure up images of John Belushi's Animal House character, but fifth-year seniors are now the norm rather than the exception.

Students who co-op generally take about five years, and co-oping is viewed as beneficial, if not essential, to help a student obtain a job upon graduation.

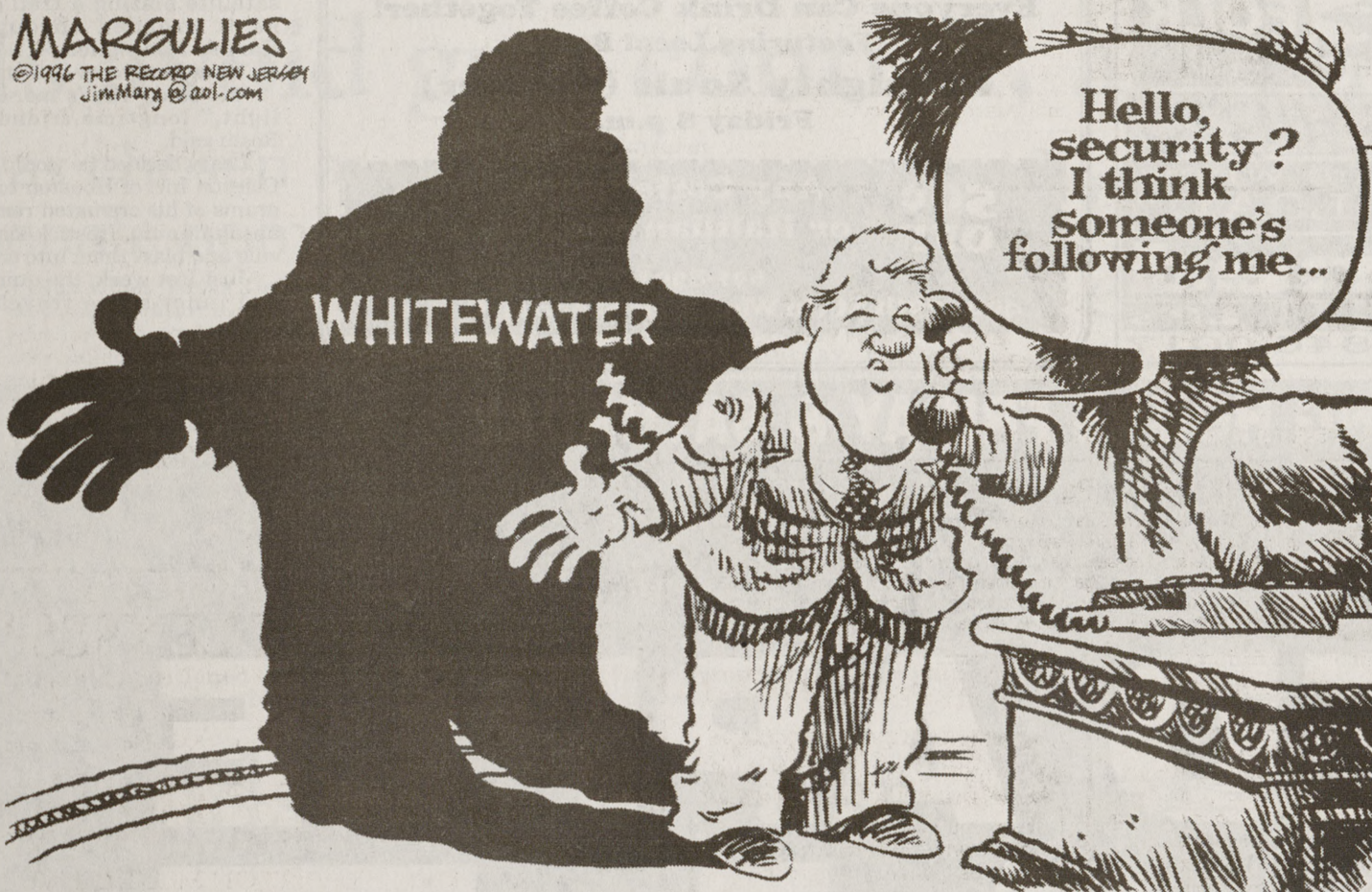
Summer internship experience is vital to those seeking jobs, so students who work during the summers generally have to take classes at night during their summer vacation or attend school for an extra semester.

While some parents may wonder when their child is ever going to graduate and get off their payroll, few will object when presented with the argument that delaying graduation a semester or a year will greatly improve their child's employment opportunities. An employed son or daughter who took five years to graduate will please Mom and Dad more than one who got out in four years but cannot find work.

So times have changed. Extended college careers are not the norm across the nation, but they are becoming commonplace and widely accepted in Texas public universities.

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Mock battles glamorize the unglamorous

My father is applying for the position of colonel within the Texas State Army. Although this organization participates in practical and useful activities, such as escorting the governor at public speaking engagements, one of its main functions is weaponry demonstrations at a slew of battle re-enactments throughout the state.

QUATRO OAKLEY
GUEST COLUMNIST

Every time my dad tells me about the authentic garb, bellowing cannons and other assorted weapons of warfare the army uses in their demonstrations, he gets an unruly glimmer of malice and destructiveness in his eye. It's a truly frightening spectacle to witness coming from a 300-pound man nestled snugly in his easy chair, wearing only a pair of stretched underwear.

Typically, historic battles are re-enacted to visually portray what happened on the battlefield. A large majority of these battles depict American Civil War confrontations and involve gathering large numbers of people who pretend to mortally wound each other on an open field. Great fun can be had by one and all as bystanders watch grown men grunt, push, shove and ultimately play dead with each other in their little hand-stitched costumes.

In addition, there are other types of re-enactments depicting medieval battles. These are generally held at a large gathering commonly referred to as a "rendezvous." Luckily for the spectators of these mock battles, the yahoos prancing around the battlefield in kilts and chain mail are just pretending to fight. If you've seen Braveheart, you know that hand-to-hand combat in those days was not a pretty sight.

But there are wartime scenes that the re-enactments do not depict.

What about the scenes of hundreds of people suffering from typhoid and other diseases during the Civil War? Who decided to leave those parts out of the re-enactment? Or how about the people dreading impending amputations of wounded limbs stricken with gangrene? It appears no one wants to play these roles on bright, sunny afternoons.

To put a strange twist on those re-enactments, what if these people started acting out more timely and modern-day warfare scenes, perhaps from the Vietnam War, complete with entire villages being burnt to a crisp with napalm? Or perhaps they could show scenes of quiet Irish pubs suddenly being blown to bits by terrorist bombs. Better yet, how about some aftermath scenes from Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Pretty sickening, huh?

Once the reality of warfare sinks in, the phrase "War is Hell" takes on a whole new meaning. Unfortunately, these grisly and graphic aspects of battle are often necessary to remind us of war's horrible consequences.

Thankfully, these re-enactments do not show the gruesome realities of warfare. Rather, it seems that the people reenacting them are trying to romanticize battles of yesterday and simply sweep the nasty side of war under the carpet.

If you asked most participants why they do these re-enactments, the majority of them would probably answer that it is camaraderie that brings them together. Strangely enough, there is an entire subculture of society obsessed with inflicting bodily harm upon one another on a massive scale. Hundreds of people often gather for several days at a time to glamorize what they consider to be "quaint" chapters in history's pages.

Apparently, these people claim to be celebrating both the era in which the battles occurred and a more civilized manner of waging war represent-

tative of that particular time period. Thus, they are retelling history by physically displaying it.

Well, if being beheaded with a dull battle-axe or getting one's midsection blown away with nails and chains being jettisoned from a thundering cannon is your idea of fun, then count me out.

What these people don't seem to realize is that even if these battles occurred hundreds of years ago, without today's advancements in swift, modern war technology, they nevertheless depict warfare.

I don't mind people reliving a particular era's trades and lifestyles at these gatherings and rendezvous. They can have their fun trying to start fires with flint and steel for all I care. To each his own.

But a genuine problem arises when war is glamorized to the point that it becomes the highlight of the day's events. It's kind of scary to think that hundreds of people flocking to a particular place cannot think of something more productive and worthwhile to do with their time.

Now if I can just convince my dad to start wasting money on my education instead of gunpowder.

Quatro Oakley is a Class of '96 management major

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Curfew talk leaves logic in the dark

Last week House of Representatives Majority Leader Dick Armey came out of the closet. No longer must anxious hordes of young Republicans wonder what kind of music Dick listens to in his spare time, for he admitted to being a "longtime fan of Boy George." Yeah, I know — his kids were shocked too.



JEREMY VALDEZ
COLUMNIST

Armey revealed this musical preference after calling President Clinton a "karma chameleon" who is attempting to horn-in on the family values and crime issues that the Republicans feel are their own.

One of the most recent examples of what Republicans are calling "me-tooism" occurred last week when President Clinton pledged Justice Department support to cities and towns that wish to impose curfews on teenagers.

The president's new proposal has raised the danders of Republicans who claim they have supported curfew laws all along. The problem is, curfew laws are impractical regardless of who champions them.

Curfews have two problems that make them infeasible.

The first is that they require a crippling number of exceptions; without them, a curfew resembles martial law. So loopholes are made to allow teens to maintain gainful employment, attend school functions, run errands for their parents and so on.

When my home town of El Paso planned an 11 p.m. curfew for people 16 and younger in 1992, several residents expressed concern that teens might not be allowed to attend church functions without parental escort.

So in order to accommodate the unknown number of adolescents who attend late-night prayer-fests, the curfew ordinance granted an exemption to teens who are en route to or from a church event or any other "exercise of a first amendment right." That could include just about anything.

The second problem is that because of the various exemptions, curfew ordinances are always enforced selectively.

Curfew ordinances are not meant to be enforced consistently — they are mostly mechanisms by which police officers can legally question teens and send home those they feel are up to no good.

Most kids cited for violating curfews are young minorities. This probably can't be helped; one of the primary goals of the curfew ordinance is to send urban gang members home before they engage in criminal activities, and the membership of gangs is predominantly non-white.

Unfortunately, even if a curfew works as intended and rounds up only the kids with criminal tendencies, it nabs them for doing nothing other than being on the street. This is definitely contrary to the notion of "innocent until proven guilty." In this way, curfews can create a false perception of racial or class discrimination.

Given the current climate of racial and class divisions, the urban population is not ready to accept a law that is selectively enforced in this way.

Furthermore, curfew laws can never scare kids into staying home. Even the threat of violent death doesn't deter young gang members from loitering on city streets. Receiving a curfew warning from El Paso police never kept me from staying out until midnight.

Because of all these problems, the El Paso curfew ordinance has faded into disuse.

Fortunately, Clinton's endorsement is by no means a mandate. The president's proposal only promises that the Department of Justice will instruct local lawmakers in addressing legal challenges if curfews are established. It does not actually require towns to impose curfews.

As Republicans take easy potshots at everything from midnight basketball to Clinton's appointees (one of whom, U.S. Attorney Kendall Coffey, resigned after allegedly biting a dancer in a strip club), the president is forced to find some toothless bit of campaign fluff that can be considered anti-crime. Curfews offer an extra family values bonus by encouraging parental responsibility.

Election years always make Washington a little crazy. A stalwart Republican is listening to a drag queen and at least one federal prosecutor is taking a bite out of more than just crime. But the recent dueling endorsements for teen curfews once again show that the campaign bunch is a culture club of silliness.

Jeremy Valdez is a Class of '96 chemical engineering major

