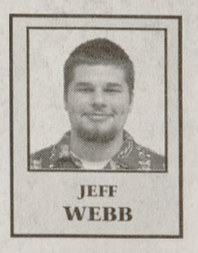
This is your loan on drugs.

(Any questions?)

Loan restrictions hold students accountable for harmful habits



JEFF WEBB

There are too many college students who think experimenting in college consists of crazy, drug-induced visions instead of the cool volcanic eruptions created in chemistry lab while the teaching assistant is looking the other way. However, illegal chemical substances are the targets of a new government initiative passed a few weeks ago.

The new measure bans federal tuition loans or other financial aid for students convicted of drug offenses. This rule, which goes into effect next summer, is a hard-line stance that some say goes too far.

But since a 1995 University of Michigan study showed 34 percent of college students used illegal drugs, this step needed to be taken to prevent drug abuse among people who should be the future core of society.

Drug problems can affect the rest of a person's life. They must be fixed early.

College is a transitional time for many teen-agers, who find themselves with more responsibility and unsupervised free time.

Some students take their newfound liberty to extremes by abusing drugs and alcohol. These bad habits can carry over to the rest of a person's life, so they must be curtailed early.

Young people are prone to make mistakes; with that in mind, this measure is not absolute.

On the first possession conviction, a student will lose aid for only one year. A second possession conviction will remove aid for two years. If students are convicted for a third possession, aid is removed permanently.

This tiered system of punishment is similar to the "three-strikes law" (if convicted of three felonies, regardless of severity, a person will receive a life sentence) because offenders are given enough chances to change themselves before an absolute punishment is meted out.

Students who stay away from harmful substances about as well as Robert Downey Jr. should be re-educated in drug rehabilitation — not in college classrooms.

And in some cases, students can restore aid earlier by entering rehabilitation programs.

Habitual offenders must learn how to stay off drugs before they can learn anything else.

Jamie Pueschel, legislative director of the U.S. Student Association in Washington, D.C., claimed in a recent Associated Press article that the measure is backward because it deals with drug offenders by denying them education.

Pueschel is right; abandoning these troubled students without means of education is like sending a hungry fisherman out to sea sans bait.

But the education here is rehab until students earn their federal-aid money back.

Once they prove they are straight and sober, they may reenter college, complete their degrees and hopefully become law-abiding, taxpaying citizens.

But letting a third of college students sleepwalk for four years, possibly entering the "real world" with nagging drug habits, is a hindrance to say the least.

Ask presidential hopeful George W. Bush how college drug use can affect future scrutiny on the job. His alleged indiscretion got him the lead spot in Jay Leno's monologue every night and may have cost him a few votes along the way.

The only problem with the law is the self-policing way in which the conviction history is obtained. Students are expected to report these drug convictions on federal financial-aid forms, including student loans and Pell grants. If a student is found to have lied on his or her application, the student would have to repay all aid received and could face federal charges for lying to the government.

These rules have a possibility of being counterproductive, but the government has to take a chance on what is best for the nation's future.

This new regulation will reduce waste in the federal student-loan system by weeding out students who are abusing a government-funded education, which will be remembered as a four-year bad trip at their next reunion.

Jeff Webb is a senior journalism major.

GUY ROGERS
THE BATTALION

JEFF SMITH
THE BATTALION

Refusing federal student aid to drug offenders bad policy

JESSICA CRUTCHER

Under a law which goes into effect next summer, college students convicted of drug offenses will be barred from receiving federal tuition aid for at least one year from the date of conviction.

A student convicted of selling drugs or of two possession convictions will lose aid for two years, while a second conviction for selling drugs or a third conviction for possession will result in a permanent loss of federal aid.

The program is meant to reduce "waste" in the student-loan system, but passing the law was a bad decision for two reasons.

First, it denies badly needed financial aid to students who have no other means of paying for college.

This drastic measure might be logical when applied to felons, but not when applied to the freshman who got caught once with half an ounce of marijuana.

Secondly, the law sets a double standard.

It sends the message that doing drugs is acceptable — as long as the drug user has lenient parents who will continue paying the bills after he or she gets caught.

One's criminal record does not determine whether one needs money to attend college. Financial aid is awarded based on need.

Scholarships, on the other hand, are awarded based on overall academic merit, grades and extracurricular activities.

That is the way it should stay.

Denying federal tuition aid to poor students convicted of minor drug charges defeats the entire purpose of government aid — to keep underprivileged young people from ending up in dead-end jobs by helping them get an education.

Denying people an education is not going to solve the country's drug problems.

As an alternative, drug-education classes should be a requirement for first- or second-time drug offenders to continue receiving financial aid.

Under the new law, some students will be able to keep their eligibility for federal financial aid by completing drug-rehabilitation programs.

But rehabilitation is not what most of these students will need.

Rehabilitation is meant for drug addicts who are extremely hooked, and the average college student caught with illegal drugs is probably not a drug addict.

Treating these students for an addiction they do not have will only worsen the problem by causing students to think doing drugs is acceptable as long as they do not become addicted.

Instead, students should be required to attend drug-education classes, in the same way speeders attend defensive driving and minors convicted of Minor In Possession charges attend Alcohol Awareness classes.

The double standard set by the new regulations also is a dangerous side effect. The rules only make provisions to punish those students receiving government aid.

Although most colleges do have penalties for students caught with illegal drugs, in the end more underprivileged students will end up being more severely punished.

Chances are a first-time drug offender will not be immediately expelled from a university, provided he or she is able to continue paying tuition.

Denying loans because of minor mistakes hurts those who need help most.

Underprivileged students relying on financial aid will obviously not be able to pay the high price of tuition. Immediately denying students financial aid for their first or second drug-related conviction is a poor decision.

Although students should be forced to attend drug-education classes and in some cases rehabilitation, the denial of financial aid is too drastic a measure to be immediately applied.

By denying students with no other means of paying their tuition an education, the very purpose of financial aid is destroyed.

Denying badly needed money to someone who has made one small mistake is denying help to those who need it most.

Jessica Crutcher is a sophomore journalism major.

MAIL CALL

Students should honor, respect Veterans Day

While public institutions across the nation closed yesterday in honor of the men and women who fought bravely and proudly for freedom and the future, Texas A&M University passed it by.

The reason is that several years ago a vote was cast to consolidate days off into a longer, more convenient Christmas break, thereby forcing the student body into an "unamerican" form of ignorance and ingratitude.

Where is the tradition we hold dear? The message I'm getting is that a few more days of self-pampering at Christmas is worth more than remembering the patriots of the past.

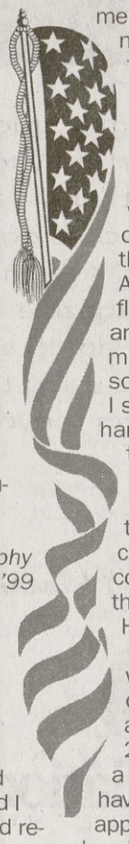
With this mindset, wouldn't it be consistent (and less hypocritical) to consolidate the name Memorial Student Center to the Student Center?

Sean Murphy
Class of '99

Tuesday evening, I left the chaos of my collegiate life to prepare for the celebration on Nov. 10.

During the 90-mile trip to Elgin, my thoughts took me back to my teen-age years. I would come home from school with petty problems and crises at the time, and my father and I would have heart-to-hearts. He would remind me of the bottom line — I had clothes on my back, food in my stomach, a roof over my head and no one was shooting at me. This is advice I've grown to appreciate.

Wednesday morning we were up at 5 a.m. Over coffee, my anticipation grew. We gently laid the colors in the bed of the pick-up and drove into town to meet the others. One by one they came. They were old and young — the current, the former and the yet-to-be. Though some had never met, they had known each other for years, for they were cut of the same cloth. They were the United States Marine Corps.



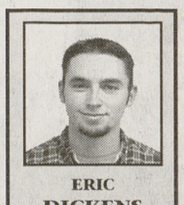
I jumped in the truck and headed up to Main Street to select my seat for the parade. As I waited, I watched the morning traffic. Then, out of the fog, they emerged. First their voices, then their images — American, Texan and Marine Corps flags billowing. My body grew chills and my eyes filled with tears. They marched together as if they'd done so for years, proudly calling cadence. I stood to my feet and placed my hand over my heart as they passed, taking a moment to pay my respect.

When the parade concluded, they retired to share tales over a traditional breakfast and birthday cake. I had been told Marines in combat are fighting for the man on their left and the man on their right. Here were those men.

This Veterans Day Weekend, I would like to remind you that our freedom has been paid for with the blood and lives of our servicemen. Happy 224th to the U.S. Marine Corps, and a special thank you to all veterans who have granted me the privilege of being appreciative that each night when my head hits the pillow, for one more day, no one was shooting at me.

Allison Reinbolt
Class of '97

Societies not meant for resumé padding



ERIC DICKENS

When going through their college years, students repeatedly hear about the importance of a full and attractive resumé.

By the time graduation nears and job hunting begins, students' resumés take on the status of the end-all, be-all representation of their time at the University. While one cannot underestimate the value of having a remarkable resumé when looking for a job, many students overlook honesty and take sneaky steps to bolster them.

At Texas A&M, it is practically a tradition for students to sign up for extracurricular activities that would look good on a resumé without ever planning to really participate. Most clubs have minimum participation requirements to maintain membership.

While this encourages many students who are using the club as a resumé-filler to show up at least a couple times, there is nothing to stop those who do not fulfill the minimum requirements from putting the club on their resumé nonetheless.

Although signing up and then dropping out of after-class programs is an easy way to add lines to that all-important resumé, the practice is dwarfed in dishonesty next to the existence of national honor societies such as Golden Key and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars.

While having the grades to get admitted to these organizations is an accomplishment, the operations themselves are little more than empty names to put on resumés. They usually require no minimum participation, (other than the entrance fee, of course) and are hardly heard of among campus organizations.

When was the last time anybody heard about the National Society of Collegiate Scholars putting on a guest-speaker forum or organizing a food drive for local shelters? The purpose of these honor societies is clear to all involved. Give them some money, and a student can officially add another meaningless accolade to his or her resumé.

However, there are several problems with students trying to fake their way through resumés.

First, when students who never participate in an organization can put that club on their resumé just as easily as those who actually do participate, it diminishes the efforts and accomplishments of the more deserving student.

The majority of students do take their memberships seriously and go to meetings, organize events and actively participate. These are the students who deserve the notation on their resumés.

Their resumés are cheapened by those who only care about paying their membership fees and putting the club's name on their own resumés.

Another drawback to this practice is its effect on a student's perception of work and rewards in the academic environment.

If a student can put a club or honor-society membership on his resumé without having to work for the group itself, what is to keep him or her from seeing this practice as "how things are done."

College is not supposed to be about finding loopholes and easy ways out. It is supposed to be a time of hard work learning to succeed.

The rewards for those efforts are an impressive resumé and a degree that actually means something.

Joining clubs and honor societies without doing any real work for the group only teaches college students laziness and how to build a trophy shelf of awards and memberships without ever really trying.

Finally, when students list memberships to clubs and honor societies they did not do anything for, they are being dishonest to themselves and to prospective employers.

Graduating students' resumés are the sums of their accomplishments, not thrown-together lists of loopholes found and empty promises made.

It is incredibly simple to pay for memberships to organizations and then to never participate. It is even easier to join meaningless honor societies that almost seem to exist only on paper.

But students have to resist the urge to take these easy steps in resumé building.

There are a huge number of on- and off-campus activities, and practically all students can find one or more that they would want to actively participate in.

This is the most honest and, in the long run, rewarding way to add achievements to a resumé.

If students do not want to put in the time and effort that goes along with these extracurricular activities, they should be honest to themselves and prospective employers by not joining them in the first place.

A resumé should be filled with hard-earned awards and justified memberships, not paid-for recognitions and empty promises.

Eric Dickens is a junior English major.