

EDITORIAL

THE BATTALION

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TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR BONFIRE

Future bonfire plans should wait for Aggies, Aggie culture to mature

Aggie Bonfire should not burn again until Aggie culture, as described in the Special Commission on the 1999 Aggie Bonfire Final Report, evolves into a mind-set capable of responsibly and professionally overseeing the construction of a safe structure.

According to the report, one of the major factors that led to the collapse of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire were norms in Texas A&M culture that allowed structural flaws and irresponsible behavior to go unquestioned. A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen and bonfire student leaders were content with the report's thoroughness and will analyze the findings before a decision on the fate of bonfire is made in June.

While structural problems can be fixed with a new design, Aggie culture cannot be changed overnight. It will take time and reflection for Aggies to overcome the barrier of "tunnel vision."

Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence to show the cultural bias at A&M remains unchanged. During the release of the report in Reed Arena, students displayed immaturity by whooping and hissing at certain comments and questions.

When chairman Leo Linbeck Jr. announced that alcohol and excessive horseplay were not causal factors of the collapse, the crowd's childish collective whoop of approval was transmitted on national news. Instead of listening to criticisms that led to the collapse, the crowd rudely hissed.

Should Bowen decide to continue bonfire, the student body should not be supportive if the cultural bias that indirectly led to the collapse does not change.

At a forum with Vice President of Student Affairs J. Malon Southerland, students promised to cooperate in any way for bonfire to burn in 2000, includ-

ing doing away with hazing and alcohol that were cited as problems in the report.

"We would be willing to do whatever it takes ... as long as we can build it and as long as we can burn it in November," a student pleaded to Southerland.

Yet, reports of crew chiefs passing their pots down despite instructions from bonfire adviser Rusty Thompson leave little hope that the hazing rituals and alcohol associated with bonfire will disappear immediately.

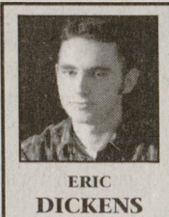
Right now, current and former students are making very emotional remarks and have high expectations of future bonfires.

However, it would further perpetuate tunnel vision if bonfire is not placed on hiatus until the Aggie culture has changed to create an environment where a safe bonfire can be built.

A lesson learned

Missed deadlines present chance for redemption

Ahh, the smell of panic in the air. As another dead week rolls into Aggieland, a morbid series of circumstances can come together in a lethal combination.



ERIC DICKENS

First, college students, a demographic not known for normal sleeping patterns, feel the effects of a semester spent frequently forsaking sleep for fun, games and occasional studying. Next, give these red-eyed students comprehensive final exams or massive end-of-semester projects. Lastly, the last week of the semester means deadlines and due dates are even more final — Q-drops are long-forgotten get-out-of-jail-free cards.

All these elements put together create a stressful situation that many students experience first-hand. Many students have found themselves in the predicament of meeting with professors in their offices and calling them at home after missing finals or failing to turn in final projects.

These student slip-ups put everybody in a difficult position. Students are ashamed or burdened with guilt for missing their deadlines, and teachers are faced with punishing students who are usually truly repentant.

As awful as this scenario is, certain benefits can be reaped by both parties. Students are in college to learn and professors to teach — in these desperate situations, lessons that are not taught in any college textbook can be learned and taught.

Students begging professors to let them make up missed finals or to accept

late term papers might want to take a moment to reflect before getting off their knees. Besides learning about humility and fallibility, they get another dose of one of the oldest lessons in college. Every undergraduate has heard of the dangers of procrastination, but most seem to forget those dangers and continue to put off assignments.

Missed final assignments are slaps to the face which tell students that procrastination is one bad habit they cannot afford to let die hard.

As for professors, they can simply choose to hold class in the school of hard knocks by refusing to let students make up missed assignment and giving them an 'F.' However, if they do not immediately turn their backs to desperate undergraduates, professors get the opportunity to show that teaching is not just about grades and papers.

Being an outstanding professor at an institution of higher education means doing more than just doling out letter grades — it means mentoring and helping students with their troubles, even when they screw up. Professors are not students' mommies, but for those willing to accept a higher calling, end-of-the-year mistakes are excellent opportunities to fulfill that role.



RUBEN DELUNA/THE BATTALION

Of course, all this worry and trouble can be avoided if students take the responsibility to stay on top of their assignments. Nonetheless, term papers are handed in late and finals get slept through.

Students missing deadlines should be prepared to fail the class and approach their professors with honesty — most likely it is way too late for butt-kissing, and time to simply tell them exactly what happened.

On the other side of the lectern, professors should think back to their own days as undergraduates and have a modicum of sympathy for students. Failing a student for his or her mistake is the easy lesson —

one that teaches a student to respect deadlines out of fear of punishment. But no lecture stands out as strong in students' minds as the time they see a professor work with them to correct a hopeless situation.

Dead week can kill a student's pride. Missing a final or due date can give a student a blow while giving the professor the chance to demonstrate what it really means to be a teacher.

There are many lessons to be learned in college — how to be a mentor is one that professors can still learn.

Eric Dickens is a junior English major.

VIEW POINTS

Student evaluations should have say in professor pay

One of the worst things college students have to deal with is tenured professors. While many professors with tenure are also blessed with genuine personality and the ability to relate to students, far too many professors are not. Frankly, many of them suck as teachers. However, they have tenure, so they cannot easily be fired, and student evaluations, while they may contain strong words, do not give some professors adequate incentive to do better.

This problem can be fixed quite easily by tying professors' salaries to student evaluations. Professors could be guaranteed half of their salaries. The other half would be adjusted based on how well or how poorly students evaluated the professor — a good evaluation would bring in the base salary, a bad evaluation would bring in a small pay cut and a very good evaluation would mean a bonus.

Many administrators would certainly worry about this system. They feel professors would be intimidated at the prospect of losing money and would cater to students by making classes easier. They feel students who dislike the professor would use this opportunity to hurt him or her in the pocketbook. This is exactly the point.

Those who feel this program would degrade the quality of education at Texas A&M are forgetting two vital facts. The first is that college students are responsible adults and are generally fair. The second is that the only professors who would be feeling the bite of a bad evaluation are the ones who are such bad teachers that they re-

ceive bad evaluations. The good professors will be unaffected or will receive bonuses.

Admittedly, some classes are simply difficult and will need to be hard. To that end, a review board would have to be established, but it should be a student review board. Appeals concerning pay cuts could go to the board, where an impartial panel of students would determine if the professor's poor evaluations were a result of bad teaching or bad students.

Yes, this plan will scare away some potential faculty. It will also appeal to potential faculty who would love to make extra money from their excellent teaching. In the end, the University comes out on top.

The curse of many college students is the professor who is brilliant in his or her field, but so socially inept or so wrapped up in his or her research that teaching is actually a burden. Texas A&M is an institution of higher learning. It must fulfill its primary mission — teaching — before it even begins to worry about reputation or research. Giving professors incentive to teach well is the ideal method for improving teaching.

—Chris Huffines

Napster's end initiated with decision of Metallica lawsuit

Metallica's lawsuit against Napster is the beginning of the end for the MP3-swapping software company. On Wednesday, Napster Inc. announced that it may block over 300,000 users who share

Metallica songs. By getting a list of individual users, the band is leading the way to render Napster useless.

Napster has no choice but to ban these users, but it will set a precedent that will likely end up with other artists suing for copyright infringement. The software thrives by helping people steal from artists and deserves to be disabled.

From a legal standpoint, Napster would make the right decision by pulling those members, but at the same time would invite other irate artists to follow Metallica's lead. Until the suit, Napster was relatively safe from getting in trouble since it only facilitates the song trading and is not responsible for what its users trade. However, the fact that Metallica is naming specific users leaves Napster little choice but to boot them.

Metallica is doing the music world a favor by making the common crime of pirating songs over the Internet difficult to get away with. Before Metallica got the specific names, users felt no guilt for downloading and sharing copyrighted songs. Now, cyber-pirates risk being monitored.

It may seem like an invasion of privacy to some, but it was only a matter of time before a band would take the initiative to catch people illegally trading its music.

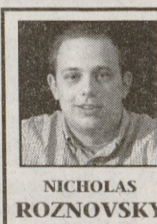
Anyone who has used Napster knows that it primarily serves as an MP3 cartel more than a place to share indie music. Users have no right to complain that their ring was finally broken.

Napster's decision will have an effect on other lawsuits that are in the works. Rumors are circulating that Dr. Dre may also get lists with users names. Artists who have been ripped off since Napster went online are getting the payoff they deserve.

—Mariano Castillo

NRA shooting blanks with bad public relations

Recently, it has been nearly impossible to read a newspaper or turn on the evening news without seeing some mention of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and its continued efforts to support its interpretation of the Second Amendment.



NICHOLAS ROZNOVSKY

Whether a story covering the war of words being waged between President Clinton and NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre or an advertisement featuring Karl Malone holding a gun and letting everyone know that he "is the NRA" is presented, the NRA has obviously made a concerted effort to bring its message back to the forefront of American political debate.

NRA membership is still strong, but members are going about fighting the gun control debate the wrong way.

Instead of approaching the debate in a logical manner, the NRA is convinced that its cause must be fueled by the fear and anger of the public. In truth, it is ignoring the most crucial component of the battle — the minds of the American people.

To expand its media presence, the NRA has entered the realm of Dionne Warwick, George Foreman and Ron Popeil — the world of half-hour infomercials. Now, at three o'clock in the morning, the NRA preaches its doctrine on a variety of cable channels.

But to the average viewer, the NRA's 30-minute infomercial looks more like a news program than an advertisement.

Accompanied by a quickly scrolling message bar spouting alarmist blurbs, a professionally dressed woman "reports" on the travesty which has turned Australia and Canada into hellish cesspools of crime and violence — gun control.

Although no one else seems to think so, apparently the Land Down Under and the Great White North have been overrun by thieves, rapists and murderers now that citizens are not allowed to walk the streets packing heat. The NRA tells its viewers that crime scenes with murder victims being carted into ambulances are common occurrences on the nightly news in these countries. Some Australians, they reveal, have become so afraid for their personal safety they have even installed security systems in their very own homes!

And all of these problems are headed towards the United States, the NRA warns. The infomercial does not acknowledge that these conditions already exist in America, but spends its time fostering fears of anarchy and lawlessness in its late-night audience.

For those who are not swayed by purely reactionary fear, the NRA pulls out its big gun at the end of the infomercial: For just a small yearly fee, viewers can join the NRA, defend their right to own firearms, and most importantly, get a really neat silver bullet

Sensationalistic infomercials and cheesy celebrity endorsements are not the best way for the nation's largest lobby of gun owners to approach the gun control issue.

keychain and framed picture of NRA President Charlton Heston.

Yes, if sensationalism and panic are not enough to reel in new members, the NRA figures that the appeal of "Moses" himself will seal the deal. Like Ron Popeil extolling the virtues of his newest kitchen appliance, Heston launches into a cheesy appeal to the viewers for their dollars. Full of hokey cliches and shameless attempts to associate NRA membership with patriotism and righteousness, Heston's speech is so blatantly commercialized that it cannot be taken seriously as an appeal to rational minds.

Sensationalistic infomercials and cheesy celebrity endorsements are not the best way for the nation's largest lobby of gun owners to approach the gun control issue. It would seem that such an important issue would merit a more serious and intelligent method of debate.

Unfortunately, the NRA cannot seem to break away from its history of using melodramatic tactics to reach out to the American public.

Just seven years ago, NRA magazine ads depicting federal agents as jackbooted Nazi thugs were enough to cause former President George Bush to cancel his NRA membership. Earlier this year, NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre faced public backlash after he accused President Clinton of perpetuating violence in America. It seems that the NRA cannot get enough of the free publicity its sensational methods produce.

Regardless of one's position on the issue of gun control, it is obvious that the NRA is no longer interested in discussing the issue itself. Instead, the organization has turned the debate into a crusade. Armed with inflammatory statements and conspiracy theories, the NRA has set its sights on stopping any form of gun control.

Both gun control advocates and opponents would benefit if the NRA would abandon its alarmist strategy and actually discuss the implications of limited gun control. That does not mean its viewpoint should be abandoned, but rather the NRA should examine the way it expresses itself and consider appearing to listen to the other side of the debate.

Gun control and personal safety are serious issues. They deserve grown-up debate, not childish name-calling and mindless accusations. While the NRA may feel that any publicity is good publicity, its sensationalistic methods stifle debate on gun control and alienate a large section of the public.

If the NRA wants to win the gun control debate, it needs to stop pandering to the cameras and give Americans something they can think about. The NRA may feel as if it is hitting the opposition where it hurts, but it is really just shooting itself in the foot.

Nicholas Roznovsky is a junior political science major.