

A step too far

Student unions frivolous, prone to exploit academic world



CAYLA CARR

In the 1870s, unions were established in the United States to ensure job security and fair treatment for workers. Usually, employees who were armed unions were used to pay workers at low-level jobs who relied on the union group for limited financial security. Unions have taken on a more complicated meaning today. Now they are not reserved to only the base-level workers — unions have been formed in all realms of employment. Unions are organized for educators, professional athletes, air traffic controllers and anything in between.

On Nov. 1, a precedent was set when the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that unions cannot exclude graduate students who teach or conduct research at private universities. Graduate students are recognized as workers, and therefore have the same opportunity to organize and bargain as a union.

Private universities across the nation fear this new ruling will weaken educational standards, but educational standards should not be their only concern. Graduate students now have unlimited opportunities to "bargain" with their "employers," professors.

While unions once were a means of survival, they have now become a luxury that students can abuse. Student unions will exploit the academic world. Learning should be the prime concern, but bargaining will become the key to graduation.

According to ABC News, the decision made by the NLRB cannot be appealed. Sheldon Seiback, general counsel of the American Council of Education, said in a CNN interview, "It erodes a relationship between faculty and students, from grading, to who should graduate, to the curriculum that might be taught — they could all become objects of collective bargaining." A union's purpose is to prevent a substandard work environment.

Substandard work environments for graduate students could result in low entrance scores, insufficient pay and excessive graduate requirements. Graduate students have not only been awarded the opportunity to dispute their "less than satisfactory conditions," they are now expected to insist that

their extensive labor be compensated. This will not only weaken educational standards, it will also threaten relations between teachers and students.

Professors, as employers, will be less likely to act as superiors when they obviously are. These professors were once graduate students with less-than-satisfactory working conditions and overwhelming expectations. These professors had no legitimate say as students, and therefore succumbed to those in authority. A graduate student's purpose is not to take the place of the professor by teaching class and grading papers. To achieve a respectable degree, a certain amount of work is required.

Most people accept that blue-collar laborers and their supervisors can have difficulty

reaching an agreement and therefore resort to unions, but one would expect a professor and a student seeking his master's degree to reach a compromise without threats. This is the world of academia, where intellects should prevail. Scholars should not have to resort to unions when controversy arises. They should be able to evaluate the situation reasonably and decide what would best suit both sides.

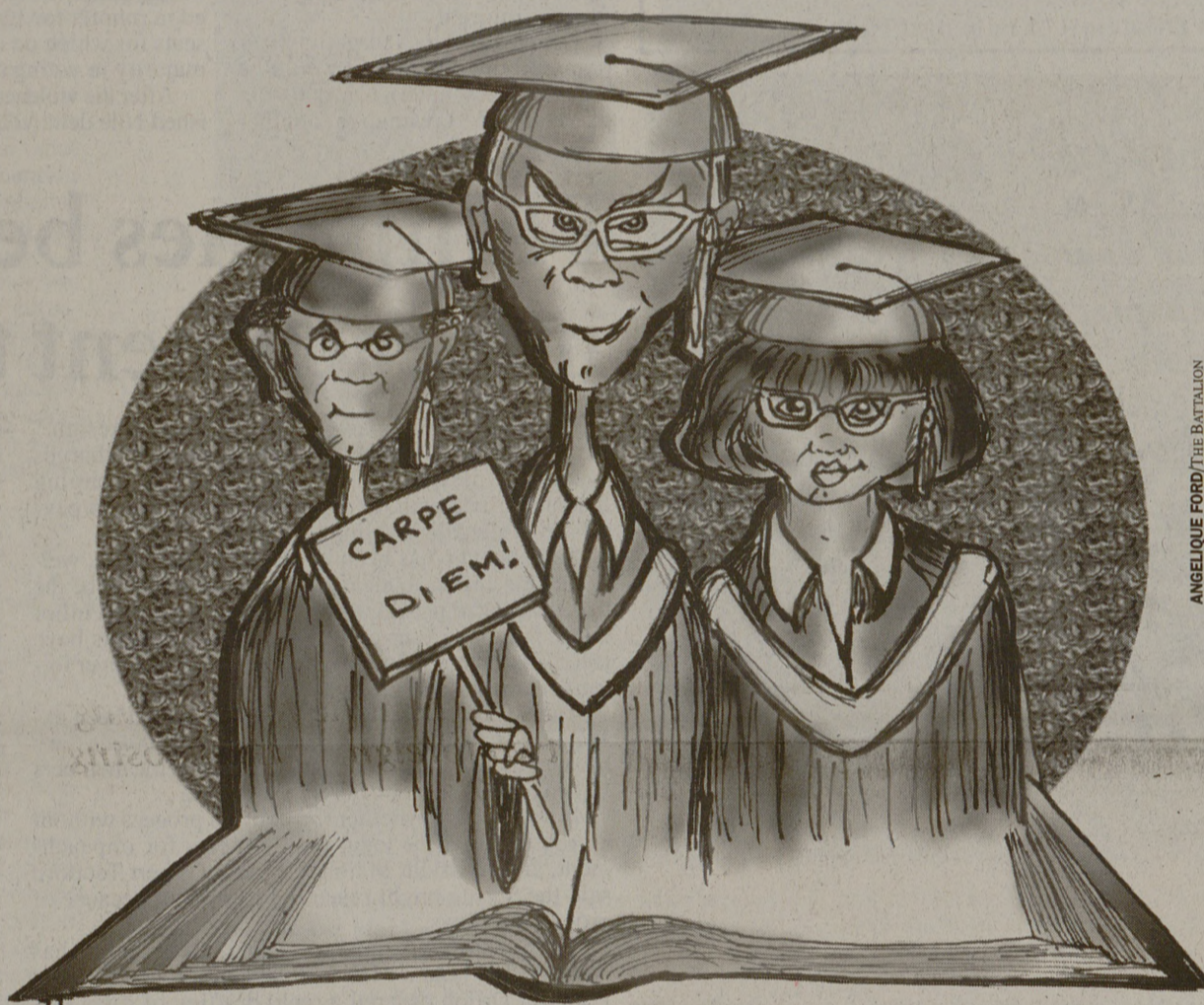
As John Beckman, New York University's spokesman, has said, "These graduate students are first and foremost students. They are admitted as students — not recruited as employees."

There is no justification in assuming graduate students are employees of the school. These are temporary positions where students

serve as teachers to aid the professors and work to compensate for the financial burden of graduate school.

Graduate student unions are unnecessary. There should be no collective bargaining in education, especially at the graduate level. Private universities should protest this ruling and take it to the Supreme Court. In the world of academics, standards are set and curriculums are followed. Graduate school is a higher form of education that cannot withstand the effects of statutory rights. Unions will threaten the educational system and prevent advanced learning from taking place.

Cayla Carr is a junior speech communication major.



ANGELIQUE FORD/THE BATTALION

Joined at Birth

Operation separating conjoined twins necessary, best medical decision



ANDREW STEPHENSON

On Aug. 18, conjoined twin girls Mary and Jodie were born in Manchester, England. Their parents, who are devout Roman Catholics, came to England from Malta to seek medical assistance for their daughters' birth. The girls were joined at the abdomen. They had a fused spine, and shared the heart and one pair of lungs. Doctors said both Mary and Jodie would certainly die unless they were surgically separated, but the surgery would almost certainly kill Mary, who was being kept alive by Jodie's heart and lungs.

The twins became the focus of media attention in England, especially since their parents refused to consider such an operation. The parents' argument was their interpretation of the Catholic belief that any wrongdoing is evil, even if the operation would result in good. They said they did not believe in "murdering" one child to save another. Opponents turned this argument back on them, saying that it is also evil to "kill" two babies in the name of a religious doctrine.

Every person is entitled to hold deep personal religious convictions, but when it comes to legal debates, basing an argument on religion can cause problems. Society as a whole tends to demand that laws should not adapt to the morals of individuals. The parents faced a terrible moral dilemma and chose to base their decision on their faith.

But doctors launched legal action to win the right to proceed with the operation, and judges decided the most socially and legally

responsible path. While many may object to taking the parents' rights from them, in this situation, the doctors did the right thing.

When the first round of court proceedings ended with a ruling that the twins should be separated, that case was appealed and additional medical opinions were sought. Both specialists appointed by the court endorsed surgery.

"The sad fact is that Mary lives on borrowed time, all of it borrowed from her sister," stated Lord Justice Alan Ward in the ruling. "She is incapable of independent existence. She is designated for death."

With the surgery pending, a last-minute appeal was filed by the Pro-Life Alliance, a group that sought to have the weaker twin Mary's legal representative replaced when he did not appeal. The group wished to have the case heard in the House of Lords. The Pro-Life Alliance even tried to compare the doctors to Nazis, and the surgery to eugenics.

"Mary's life is being extinguished not because she is a conjoined twin, not because her heart beats inadequately, not because Jodie's life is under threat, but because she is mentally impaired and her life is deemed of no intrinsic value," said the group in a statement, as reported by CNN. "These are very sad times for English law and English medicine."

Comparing an intense and complex operation to save a life to the terrible horrors of Nazi Germany is a stretch. Conjoined twins have existed for centuries, and the first successful separation surgery occurred as early as 1689. The survival rate for conjoined twins is between 5 percent and 25 percent, but about 75 percent of the surgical operations that have taken place

since 1950 have resulted in the survival of one or both of the twins.

This appeal was rejected, upholding the Sept. 22 ruling by three appeal court judges who said the case came down to an issue of self-defense — the right of Jodie, the stronger twin, to be released from a sister who would eventually kill them both.

The marathon 20-hour surgery began Nov. 6, and ended at 5 a.m. the next day. The statement the hospital released that morning was not detailed, in order to protect the anonymity of the family, but it stated, "Jodie is currently in a critical but stable condition. Unfortunately, despite all the efforts of the medical team, Mary, sadly, died."

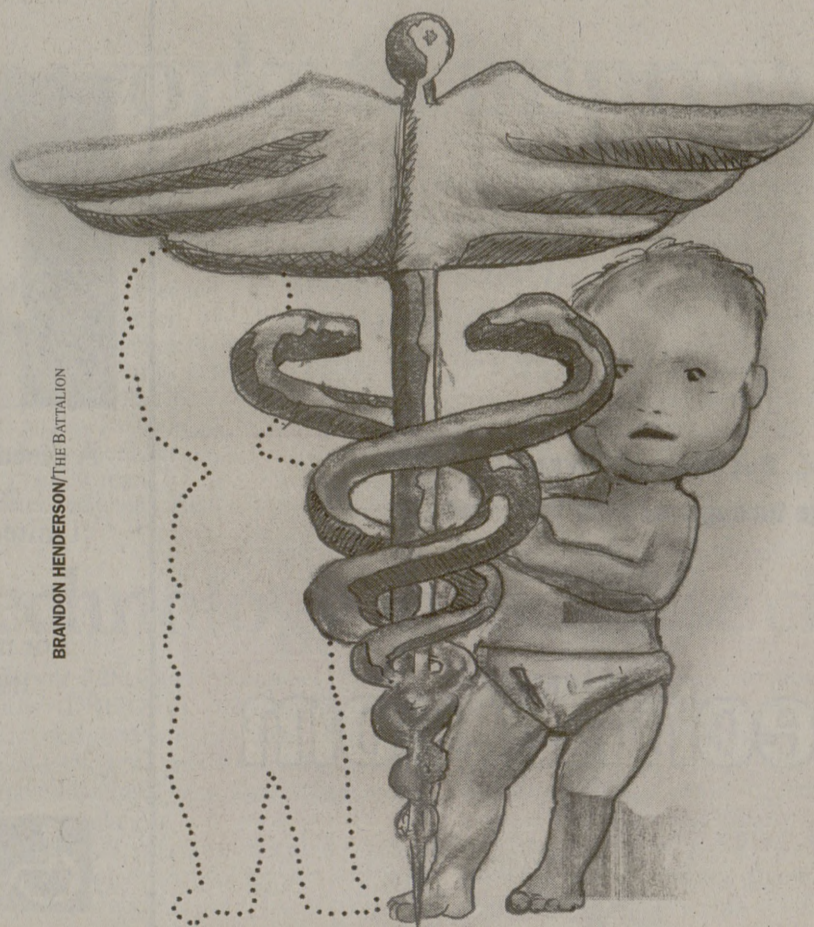
Neither solution was good. The death of a child is never less than tragic. In this case, surgery was the lesser of two evils. Instead of losing two lives, doctors were able to save one. Throughout human history the willingness to give one's life to save another has been a mark of true humanity. Mary made this sacrifice for her sister.

The doctors had no real choice in the matter because they had sworn an oath to try to save human life. Surgery was the only way to save a life.

As of Nov. 9, Jodie was in critical condition, but was making a "rapid recovery" and breathing without a ventilator. Experts believe that Jodie's progress will continue and she will have a good chance at a normal life, although she will face years of corrective surgery and skin grafts. The doctors say if Jodie makes it through, she will have normal intelligence,

walking ability and average life expectancy and could even have children. These good results help to justify the tough decision the courts in England had to make. Their actions have given a young girl a chance for life.

Andrew Stephenson is a sophomore environmental design major.



BRANDON HENDERSON/THE BATTALION

Technology is too dangerous

Can technology destroy humanity? The question brings to mind Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator on a murderous rampage — it is silly. This idea of technology destroying humanity has become so cliché in science fiction that it is hard to take the idea seriously.



SHANNON GREENWOOD

Bill Joy, cofounder of Sun Microsystems, takes the question seriously. Joy first expressed his concerns in an essay "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," published in Wired magazine earlier this year. Joy makes the argument that more scientists should acknowledge that technological advancement in the current fashion could lead to disaster.

In his essay, Joy discusses three potentially devastating technologies: genetics, nanotechnology and robotics. Genetics could allow a devastating plague to be created by terrorists or by accident. Nanotechnology, the control of matter at the molecular level, could create self-replicating molecules capable of destroying the atmosphere. Robotics technology could result in humans being slavishly dependent on computers or oppressed by superior intelligent machines à la Terminator.

These technologies could become self-replicating and spiral out of control.

Conventional weapons of mass destruction — like nuclear weapons — require large facilities or rare resources. These new technologies are knowledge-enabled mass destructors that require knowledge but require far fewer resources.

Skeptics believe technological advancement will plateau and that many of these supposed threats are not possible. However, it does not appear that advancement will slow anytime soon.

Moore's law says computers will double in speed every 18 months. This trend has held true since the 1970s. Current silicon computer technology is projected to reach its limit by 2005.

However, many scientists believe that computer advancement will not be hindered by the limits of silicon components. Research has shown that many building blocks of computers can be built at the molecular level. If Moore's law holds, in the year 2030, computers will be more than a million times faster than they are today.

Many argue that computers cannot make intelligent decisions, so they will not be able to take over. But, no one can really say what they will be capable of if computers were a million times faster.

Many of Joy's critics have pointed out that many dire predictions about technology have been shown to be false; there were scientists who believed detonating a nuclear bomb would ignite the atmosphere. However, it is easy to point out that many of the problems caused by technology were not predicted, either.

There are even scientists who believe that the public need not worry about robots taking over because people are superior. Hans Moravec, a robotics expert at Carnegie Mellon University, believes that humans should encourage research to create robots that will replace humans as Earth's dominant species.

It is optimistic to say that technology could not destroy humanity. Government bans on research would stifle innovation but not prevent the creation of technology. During World War II, halting nuclear research and never creating nuclear bombs may have benefited the United States, but if the Germans had developed the nuclear bomb first, who is to say how history would have turned out?

No one is more able to evaluate the possibilities of a new technology than Bill Joy, the scientist who discovered it. Joy advocates a code of ethics for scientists to follow, similar to the Hippocratic Oath of the medical profession. However, the code would not be effective unless all scientists followed the rules.

At present, no one can destroy the entire world on a whim. That capability is present only in science fiction, but the scientific community should make sure it stays fiction.

Shannon Greenwood is a senior

"In life, the real stuff is the rough stuff. And the rough stuff makes us stronger."

Bonfire ... a year later.

The Battalion invites the Texas A&M student body to submit letters to the editor reflecting on the anniversary of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse.

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