

Students dropped for non-payment

Financial services enforces existing fee policy

By SOMMER BUNCE & ELIZABETH RAINES

The Battalion

When Student Financial Services (SFS) payment offices in the Pavilion opened at 8 a.m. Tuesday, more than 1,600 students were waiting to find out why they had been dropped from their classes.

The students, many of whom added classes or fee options after SFS sent out billing statements in December, were dropped for non-payment according to a University policy that mandates that any student who has not paid 100 percent of tuition and fees before the first day of classes will be canceled from classes and assessed a \$100 late fee.

The policy, which has always been in the books, was loosely en-

forced in previous semesters, said SFS director Bob Piwonka. Because of some anticipated changes in state auditing services, SFS chose to enforce the policy beginning this semester, he said.

"We used to allow the wiggle room, until students took too much advantage of it."

— Bob Piwonka
SFS director

"The language has always been there, and students have always been expected to pay before the first day," Piwonka said. "We

used to allow the wiggle room, until students took too much advantage of it. A lot of people assumed they could just pay some of the fees and have their classes still held for them. But now we want to get the point across that if you don't pay your fees, count on standing in a long line."

When statements were sent out, the due date was erroneously listed as Jan. 12. However, the due date was actually Jan. 5. The error in the statements gave students a week longer to pay, Piwonka said. But because of the later due date, students had less time to be notified of any problems with their payments before the SFS policy was enforced.

The last day payments were accepted without a late fee was Friday. Piwonka's staff posted

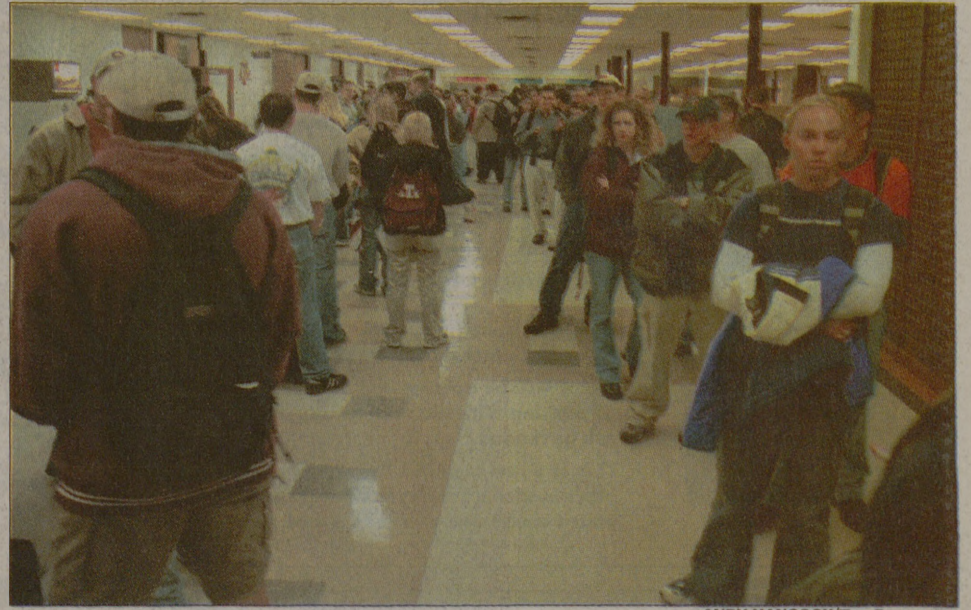
payments received on or before Friday. The due date is also a postmark date; any payments in the mail by Jan. 12 will be accepted, Piwonka said.

No business or mail was processed Monday in observance of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, a University and government holiday.

Students who discovered that SFS failed to receive their payment or that they owed SFS more had no recourse until 8 a.m. the first day of classes. In addition, mail postmarked Friday may still be in the postal system, Piwonka said, and will be accepted as payment when received.

Regardless, any student for whom SFS had not received a full

See FINANCIAL on Page 4.



Students crammed into the Pavilion to make payments and add meal plans. The

lines filled the downstairs lobby, lined the stairways and went outside.

ANDY HANCOCK/THE BATTALION

A year in the making ...



Top: Aggies filled the new and improved Sbis Dining Center on the north side of campus. Sbis, which has been closed since late 1999, reopened on Tuesday. Right: Members of the Fish Camp 2001 staff sit with friends during lunch at the newly refurbished Sbis Dining Center.



RUTHANN HALPRIN/THE BATTALION

Sbis reopens after a year of renovations to mixed reviews

By BRANDIE LIFFICK
The Battalion

After Sbis Dining Center had been closed for more than a year, the words "pick it up" once again echoed off its walls when the renovated hall reopened Tuesday.

Students eating in Sbis for the first time in more than a year had mixed responses to the facility's facelift.

"At first glance, it [Sbis] looks nice," said Monica Ramirez, a junior zoology major. "But the amount of seating has really been reduced; I don't like the setup. While it looks better cosmetically now, it was better for actual use before."

Rebecca Flannery, a junior computer science major, complimented the building, but said there was not a significant change in the menu.

"A lot of the food choices are the same, but the building itself is really nice. Everything is so nice and new," she said.

Karen Carter, manager of Sbis, said the first day was an overall success, but meal "counts are really high" — unusually high. Carter did not have final numbers, but estimated almost 5,000 meals were served Tuesday.

Students found long lines Tuesday when they dined in Sbis, but

Carter said she expects everything to level out within the week when students become acclimated to the layout of the building.

Sbis closed on Dec. 15, 1999, with a projected reopening date in August 2000 — just in time for Fall 2000. Because of unexpected plumbing and electrical concerns, the completion date was pushed back.

Ron Beard, director of Food Services, said the renovations covered everything from the wooden floors to refinishing the furniture to repairing the roof.

"All of the furniture was sent to the TDC (Texas Department of Corrections), where it was stripped and then refinished," Beard said. "The roof was completely redone, and the hardwood floors were expanded to bring back a little nostalgia — to the way it was from the last renovation in the 1970s."

The building was not the only thing updated. The menu and food selection were revamped also. A new section of Sbis offers world cuisine.

Food choices include Italian stromboli and hamburgers. The world cuisine section changes food each week.

See SBISA on Page 4.

now activating...
NEO

To activate Neo accounts, students should follow the instructions online at www.neo.tamu.edu, or visit the Student Computing Center (SCC) on campus.

For technical help using the phonebook, contact Help Desk Central at 845-8300, or helpdesk@tamu.edu, or go to the Website at <http://cis.tamu.edu/help/hdc>.

SELSO GARCIA/THE BATTALION

Online phonebook gets update

By EMILY HENDRICKSON
The Battalion

To allow for a faster, more responsive directory system, Texas A&M's electronic phonebook, which lists the phone numbers and email addresses of students, faculty and staff, was integrated with the Neo system on Jan. 2.

The original phonebook listed a student's phone number, physical address, email address, Website and classification, and required students to update their personal information. In the past, many students rarely updated their information, making phonebook entries inaccurate. It was not unusual for a senior to have his or her freshman phone number listed.

"The old, unsupported directory was designed by the University of Illinois and only allowed for about 10,000 entries," said Thomas Putnam, director of Computing and Information Services (CIS).

The Neo system is an email system developed by CIS and is configured like an ordinary email service, with 10 megabytes of storage. Neo forwards email to any account and is accessible through any browser. Official email from the University is sent to the Neo account, but students may choose to have their email forwarded to other email services such as Hotmail. To ensure delivery of official email from the University, the email is sent to the Neo account, and a notification of the sent email is then delivered to the student's chosen email service.

Since the phonebook has been integrated with Neo, the only information available is the student's forwarding email address, phone number, major and classification. Most of a student's information is automatically updated and can be changed at the Office of Admissions and Records, leaving students little to update.

Students who have forgotten their passwords may reset them at an open access lab or desk central. Students should access their accounts to update their information for the phonebook. Students who wish to publicize information no longer available through the

See NEO on Page 2.

Tech fire caused by experiment

LUBBOCK (AP) — When a Texas Tech graduate student's experiment with solvents went bad, it caused thousands of dollars in damage to the university's chemistry building.

No one was injured in the blaze Monday afternoon.

The student was sitting across the room from his experiment when he heard a popping sound, said Tech spokesman Michael Sommermeyer. Liquids from the student's test tubes be-

gan to flow out and then caught fire, Sommermeyer said.

After a fire extinguisher he grabbed proved too small for the blaze, the student left and returned with a larger one, Sommermeyer said.

But by that time, the fire had grown too large to handle and the student yelled for help, Sommermeyer said.

David Birney, an assistant professor, heard the yells and came to try to help, Sommermeyer said. When Birney saw

that the fire was out of his control, he closed the door and called the fire department, Sommermeyer said.

Few people were in the building because of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday but all were evacuated safely.

The floor and a hood vent used in experiments were damaged.

There is no sprinkler system in the chemistry building because some chemicals used in experiments could spread if water is used on them, Birney said.

Meningitis cases confirmed in area

Disease takes life of Montgomery County teen; two others infected

HOUSTON (AP) — Spinal meningitis has claimed the life of one Montgomery County student and at least two others are suffering from the illness, officials in two county school districts said Tuesday.

A seventh-grade boy from Magnolia, about 35 miles northwest of Houston, died Monday. John Paul Watson, assistant superintendent of the Magnolia Independent School District, said.

At the same time, two students in New Caney, 30 miles northeast of Houston, have

contracted the disease and two more may have it, said Rick Cowan, superintendent of the New Caney Independent School District.

One of the confirmed cases is a female high school student and the other a male elementary school student, he said.

"The bottom line is it's scary because not as much is known about the infectious bacteria and the less you know, the more it creates panic," Cowan said.

Cowan was awaiting

word from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on whether the other two students with bacterial infections also have meningitis.

If enough cases are confirmed in the county, a mass vaccination program will be started, he said.

Both districts were preparing letters to parents.

"Some parents aren't taking it seriously enough and some are getting squirrely and pulling their children out of school," Watson said. "It

is like everything else in public education: People go to extremes."

Meningitis is a severe bacterial infection of tissue covering the brain and spinal cord and can result in blindness, deafness, amputations and permanent brain damage.

Meningococcal meningitis, the cause of the Magnolia student's death, is particularly severe, according to the Texas Department of Health, with 10 to 20 percent of those infected dying, often within hours of onset.

Two inmates possibly seen

Report unconfirmed by FBI

IRVING, Texas (AP) — With the seven escaped convicts from a South Texas prison having eluded authorities for more than a month, the reward for information leading to their arrests and convictions has risen to \$440,000.

Two of the fugitives were reportedly spotted north of Houston on Monday. The sightings could not immediately be confirmed by state officials, although initial FBI review of the store's surveillance video showed promise.

Navasota Police Chief Bill Lucas said his investigators are reviewing surveillance photos with state corrections and Texas Department of Public Safety officers.

The chief said employees of an Exxon station near Texas 6 reported seeing two men in a red and white flatbed pickup truck who fit the descriptions of Donald Keith Newbury, 38, and Randy Ethan Halprin, 23.

The two men purchased beverages and tried on sunglasses at the store, then requested directions to Conroe.

The men were last seen heading east on Texas 105, leaving Navasota in the direction of Montgomery County. Lucas said police in Navasota, about 60 miles north of Houston, notified law officers in that area.

Montgomery County sheriff's officers began searching Conroe streets for the fugitives.

Halprin and Newbury escaped with five others from the Connally Unit near Kenedy, Texas, on Dec. 13. The fugitives face capital murder charges in the shooting death of police officer Aubrey Hawkins during a Christmas eve robbery of an Oshman's Super Sports USA in Irving, a Dallas suburb.