



Let the wheels of the bus keep turning

CHAD MALLAM • THE BATTALION

Two weeks ago, students riding off-campus bus routes to Texas A&M found they were not the only ones. The buzz among the usually aloof passengers arose out of confusion, as the bus drivers asked their riders what school they were bound for. Hand-written signs at the front of the busses instructed passengers to have identification ready before leaving the bus. The Aggie students soon discovered Blinn college students were using the busses to get to their school.

These so-called system-abusers did this by riding the bus from their home to the A&M campus. From there, they rode the Reveille bus route, that stops near Blinn. This semester, there has been some grumbling about space on the bus and increased time to get to a destination. There are, however, more factors of the occasional busing inconvenience than just Blinn student. An easy scapegoat for problems, they are not causing overcrowding or longer wait periods. In this case, A&M students just do not have much to complain about.

A&M officials do not believe there is even an issue. Gary Jackson, manager of Bus Operations, said in the Nov. 21 *Battalion*, "Thus far, the numbers of riders from categories other than A&M registered students is very low — so low in fact the percentages carried out to two decimal places show up as zero. I don't think we have a problem."

The routes for Blinn passengers sound convenient until the time spent walking, waiting and riding is accounted for. These Blinn students probably require an extra hour for transportation to school. They must be desperate to resort to these measures, especially since parking at Blinn is extremely inexpensive compared to A&M.

Aggies should not mind these students using the system that Aggies pay for in their student fees. At least for the time

being, the numbers are not high enough to make any difference.

When A&M stopped requiring bus passes they made the system public domain. The routes will run regardless, and most students are able to get to campus without any problems whatsoever.

When the decision was made to add the transportation fee to general student fees, there were concerns about Blinn students taking advantage of the system. Thus far, that has not been the case. For Blinn students, it is inconvenient to use the A&M buses compared to driving.

The one thing that Bus Operations may be overlooking is how cunning the "system-abusers" are. They have found a way to get to Blinn without a car, without the help of friends and for free. It is doubtful they will be held off by checking I.D. cards anyway. Most people know of a Blinn student who has borrowed an A&M I.D. to get into the Student Recreation Center for free or to use a student ticket at a football game.

People who really want to break the rules will find a way. With the amount of trouble some Blinn students already go through to ride the bus to school, another small hurdle is unlikely to stop them.

Still, some A&M students are not happy about Blinn students not buying parking passes. Yet there are Blinn students who are co-enrolled at A&M, who have paid their transportation fees.

Perhaps there are some people who are having their unethical way with Bus Operations. If there are ever enough of them to fill up an entire A&M bus, the fee-paying students of Aggieland might just have to wait a whole 10 minutes for another bus.

Christy Ruth is a sophomore journalism major.

Something missing from UT yell practice

As Texas A&M football head coach R.C. Slocum stood in his burnt-orange jacket and preached to the Twelfth Man at Kyle Field Thursday night, there was a mysterious uncertainty in the air.

The uncertainty was not about victory or defeat in Friday's contest, but about the meaning and significance of the pageantry. Why were we there, anyway? What was missing? As the yell leaders stumbled through the end of yell practice,

Aggies seemed to be looking for something else — something deeper than five renditions of "beat the hell."

Ah, yes ... that's because Bonfire was supposed to burn Thursday night.

Yell practice was completely void of the rite — no mention was made of Bonfire or the 12 Aggies who died constructing the monument in 1999. Open microphone in hand, A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen, Head Yell

Leader Sam Seidel and Slocum ignored Bonfire as they addressed the crowd.

Shame on them. Granted, it would be unhealthy to again experience last year's painful, melodramatic production of a memorial service, but that does not mean students should forget or ignore what has become a fact of life in Aggieland. Aggies may have moved on, but as long as "Bonfire" is part of their collective vocabulary, it shall be synonymous with University of Texas football game and the memory of the 1999 collapse and its victims. It's just that simple, and to pretend otherwise is futile on a campus full of students with a passion for tradition.

Obviously, some would retort, Aggies were at yell practice Thursday night to show support for the football team, but Friday's was no normal yell practice. Only one other time in recent memory has there been such an awkward situation for yell practice: Two years earlier — to the moment — Aggies stood in Kyle Field with lighted candles in hand. That night, the Ags were not looking for random mugs, but, rather, solace in a time of tragedy.

Now, though, the University is a bureaucracy entranced with a taboo of the word "Bonfire."

That mental fixation, coupled with broadening legal entanglements and complications for future Bonfires, has bred a sense of

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cynicism and avoidance of Bonfire. Sadly, a facade remains, suggesting that nothing has changed. The awkwardness of Thursday's yell practice and Seidel's recitation of "The Last Corps Trip" — a tradition reserved for Bonfire — proved otherwise.

Aggies are holding onto the past while looking to the future. But this game is all or none. Aggies cannot celebrate a Bonfire yell practice without Bonfire.

Until administrators and student leaders reconcile student needs with the student body, Bonfire will be the great divide in Aggieland. Students and administrators must not be afraid to openly talk about Bonfire, but students are afraid of upsetting the nest by pursuing the issue. This must end: the University must make a concerted effort to reach out to students. If A&M administrators and leaders want to show they are worthy of their titles, they must stop shirking students' need for assurance and leadership.

These are tough times, and Bowen is caught between a rock and a hard place. Regardless of his forthcoming decision about Bonfire, Bowen deserves sympathy from his Aggie family. Likely, he did not seek these dire circumstances when he accepted the presidency, and, probably, seldom does a day pass in his life without thought of those who died working on Bonfire.

But that does not mean he is off the hook. Having closed Bonfire 2002 meetings and design planning sessions is unacceptable. Getting information about Bonfire 2002 this semester has been like pulling chicken teeth (and chickens do not have teeth). This project is not the steering committee's bonfire. It is Aggie Bonfire, and students must know what is happening.

Some say incessant debate about Bonfire is to continue beating a dead horse. If that is true, Bonfire is already dead. But students must realize one thing: today is a delicate time, one that dictates the future of Bonfire. Those who want to see the Bonfire tradition end need only rest quietly, and it will pass without challenge. But those who want Bonfire to burn in the future must speak now or forever hold their peace. If Bonfire is to continue, it must be preserved today. Time is running out, and as long as the squabbling continues, we are only beating the hell out of ourselves.

Brady Creel is a junior journalism and management major.

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WRONG ACTION

Bonfire lawsuits are irresponsible, unnecessary

Charity and sympathy have prevented many in the Aggie community from scrutinizing the lawsuits filed by the families of some of the Bonfire victims. But the time of mourning is over, and painful truths must be told. These lawsuits will needlessly sow conflict and bitterness when Aggies need to move forward together.

A close examination of the lawsuit petitions indicates that some of the families are after money. Lots of money. In at least two of the lawsuits, Zachry Construction Corp. is named as a defendant, although the Zachry-owned crane at the stack site had nothing to do with the collapse. The attorney for Chad Powell's parents said administrators, not the University, were named as defendants in order to sidestep the \$500,000 liability cap. And then there is the avalanche of damages for which the families demand financial compensation. These include not only actual damages such as medical and funeral expenses incurred by the victims, but also emotional or psychological and punitive damages — claims intended to maximize monetary compensation.

Public universities are already strapped for funds, and for these families to assuage their private grief with taxpayers' dollars is

inappropriate. The families say they want somebody to accept responsibility for the accident, and the lawsuits are rather liberal in assessing blame — the University, administrators, students and crane operators are all accused of negligence.

According to the commission tasked with investigating the causes of the collapse, there is plenty of blame to go around. Administrators allowed untrained students to build a complex structure without supervi-

To accuse these students of gross and deliberate negligence is almost obscene.

tion; student Bonfire leaders authorized the construction gaffes that contributed to the accident, and all those involved with Bonfire operated with a "tunnel vision" that produced a closed culture resistant to change.

In this blame game, we cannot ignore the fact that those students who died were, in fact, willing and enthusiastic participants. The causes are many and there are countless people who, in hindsight, could have done more to prevent the collapse.

Legal definitions of negligence aside, it is

difficult to conclude that those held responsible by the lawsuits knew the Bonfire stack was unsafe, but did nothing to correct it.

Student leaders lacked the technical knowledge to recognize problems with the stack, and administrators' safety concerns focused on hazing and alcohol.

Nobody could have foreseen what happened, and any attempt to formally assign blame in a legal proceeding is grossly unfair. To stubbornly insist that administrators should have known of a forthcoming disaster amounts to cursing the wind. Sometimes accidents happen, and it is nobody's fault.

Perhaps the most deplorable aspect of this situation is the choice by some families to name student Bonfire leaders as defendants. To accuse these students of gross and deliberate negligence is almost obscene. They, too, could have been killed, and they share no more responsibility for what happened than the victims themselves.

Two years have passed, and the time has come for the Aggie community to move forward. The families of the victims will always hold a special place in the hearts of all Aggies, but there is no excuse for bitter accusations and cynical ploys to extract money from the institution their children loved.

CARTOON OF THE DAY

