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OPINION

editorials, letters, commentary and perspective

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SEX, abstinence & government

OUR OPINION: Abstinence-only programs are unproven and fail to deal with the reality of today's teenage sexual activity

There's no getting around the fact that people are having sex. And a lot of that sex is taking place between teenagers outside the confines of marriage. It's been going on for years, and the federal government wants it to stop.

Just how much is stopping young people from having sex worth to the U.S. government? Apparently at least \$250 million.

That's how much President Clinton announced he would spend on an abstinence program aimed at teenagers in an attempt to discourage premarital sex. The program was created in response to high teenage pregnancy rates that are perceived to be a major cause for young people receiving welfare.

The program will exclusively promote waiting until marriage before engaging in sexual activity. Because it seeks to show sex outside of marriage as "unacceptable," there won't be any discussions on how to use a condom, birth control or any other form of sexual protection. It's abstinence or nothing.

It's not hard to understand why the government would want to promote abstinence in the first place. In today's world of STDs and teenage pregnancies, there is no doubt that the safest sex is no sex. Unfortunately, in today's world, expecting all teenagers to wait for marriage is unrealistic to say the least.

The government estimates that 56 percent of females and 73 percent of males have sex before they reach the age of 18. That's the reality, and any sex education program must deal with that. People who



have chosen to become sexually active won't be able to relate to a lecture on the importance of waiting for marriage. Not only will an abstinence-only program be ineffective for teenagers who are already sexually active, it may actually be detrimental.

Programs that preach only abstinence and ignore the fact that teenagers are having sex do not give sexually active young people the information they need on sexual protection. If teenagers choose to have sex, we have a responsibility to give them information on how to have safe sex. An abstinence-only program would not provide these facts. Instead, teenagers who still decide to have sex will run an even higher risk of teenage pregnancy and STDs — the opposite effect the program is

aiming for.

The biggest problem with implementing a large-scale abstinence program is that there is no evidence that such a program will have any effect at all. Just because the government is spending millions of dollars promoting abstinence doesn't mean anyone will listen.

There have been no conclusive studies that indicate teaching abstinence changes young people's sexual behavior. The government seems to be under the impression that if they spend enough money on a program, teens will listen. With all the factors that influence people to have sex in the first place, this kind of thinking isn't realistic.

If promoting abstinence is a national priority, why not find out if these kind of pro-

grams work before dumping \$250 million into them? Before implementing a nationwide program, it would help to have some evidence that the program will work.

Start small. See what effect an abstinence program has at local levels first. If it can be shown to have a positive effect on the choices young people make, then consider implementing a larger program.

But to rush forward with an abstinence program without taking into consideration the reality of young people's sexuality is a mistake. Implementing an unproven program will lead to more harm than good. Even if abstinence is the goal, the abstinence-only program isn't the solution.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.

LETTERS

Hold corporation's responsible

Given President Frohnmayer's role in and recent comments regarding the University's housing officials' refusal to pull GardenBurgers from the menu, it appears that he needs a lesson in the structural nature in a participatory democracy.

President Frohnmayer was quoted in the Feb. 18 *Emerald* as stating, "if the University makes a choice for all students, it removes the student's own ethical responsibility to define the situation and make choices." The individual students, as well as the community at large, have defined the situation and made a choice. No to exploitation! Yes to worker rights! Yes to the GardenBurger boycott!

In a participatory democracy, individual citizens, engaged in collective action, define and shape the values and norms upon which society is based. It is the role of organizations in civil society, like MEChA and its supporters, to relay the collectively defined values and norms to the institutions and the state that serves them.

It is then the institution's responsibility to

reshape its policy so that it is in agreement with the values and norms that civil society has democratically constructed, not as Frohnmayer suggests to "be politically neutral."

Frohnmayer's arguments are a continuation of the dominant economic and political trends that have placed corporate profitability and the market outside of community notions of social responsibility.

Frohnmayer may believe in a technocratic neoliberal democracy grounded on atomizing individual property rights, in effect, surrendering the ordering of community norms and values to the invisible hands of the market.

But we argue that citizens must be allowed to organize and hold their institutions and corporations accountable to a higher level of standards. A level of standards that guarantees the workers' rights to organize, protects the environment and promotes economic and social justice for all.

Eloina Gonzales
Daniel Zettler
CISCAP Mexico Interest Group

Support human rights

Beggars can't be choosers. You've heard this expression before. Why someone with so little should question what is being given to them is incomprehensible to many of us. It is as though the "beggar" should be grateful for the charitable offering and thankful for being noticed in the first place.

However, the expression mentioned above is about who has power and who doesn't. It's about who makes decisions and for whom. It's about why some people are not poor and why many are (36 million as of 1995).

The remarks by University President Dave Frohnmayer in the Feb. 18 *Emerald* regarding the push to get GardenBurger off our campus parallels the nature of power relations implied in the above saying.

That the University abstains from making decisions which students can (allegedly) make is a short-sighted remark. In fact, decisions made by student organizations regarding curricula, faculty hiring, admissions, housing and so forth are either

overlooked by the University's administration or given lip-service.

What students are asking the University regarding GardenBurger boycott is nothing new. There is an entire history on this and other campuses across this country. Similarly, what farmworkers in the state of Oregon are asking is nothing new. Yet this University, as of now, wishes not to make a social pact that supports dignity and self-respect, better known as human rights.

The commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday brought to bear the country's track record on civil rights. But how can we continue to talk about, much less struggle for, civil rights when human rights are violated right in our backyard?

It is unfortunate that University's Housing officials are unwilling to pull GardenBurger from its menu when veal was removed after a compelling campaign. Human rights versus animal rights? That's a sad commentary on our education when these two are pitted against each other.

Sergio Romero
GTF, Sociology