

COMMENTARY

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Editorial

Consider reality of financial aid drug provision

Anyone with a prior drug conviction will discover it's nearly impossible to obtain financial aid from the federal government, even if the conviction occurred long ago and the person has since turned his or her life around. But withholding aid from students who have had prior drug convictions is pointless and unfair — no one should be denied access to higher education.

Groups in Oregon and California are now rallying for the repeal of the Higher Education Act's drug provision, and the protest — one of the most important concerns on campus — affects many students.

The provision potentially bars students who answer "yes" to question 35 on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which asks if the applicant has been convicted of a drug offense — students can lose aid even if they just leave the question blank. In 1998, a new provision to the Higher Education Act implemented the clause requiring the drug conviction question be placed on the FAFSA form.

Why withhold financial aid from students who may need it the most? Whether one has sympathy for past drug offenders or not, it is counterproductive to punish them twice — by convicting them of the original crime, and then by taking away what could be their only means of attending college. Higher education is an excellent way for these students to improve their lives and make better choices. Barring past drug offenders from school will only hinder this process, decreasing the likelihood that they will continue their education.

Many protesters contend the provision targets minority students, since studies show more than half of those convicted of drug violations are minorities. Recent American Civil Liberties Union statistics show that black people make up 12 percent of the population and 13 percent of drug offenders, but represent more than 70 percent of incarcerations for drug possession.

The Higher Education Act drug provision should be repealed. The judicial system punishes drug violators once. Punishing them a second time won't benefit anyone. Furthermore, FAFSA only denies aid to those convicted of drug offenses and not other crimes. If it's acceptable for the government to deny people access to education based on their pasts, why just bar people with drug convictions? Why not shoplifting arrests or speeding tickets or violent crimes? How do they make any more sense than prior drug convictions?

It's estimated that up to 60,000 students were denied financial aid this year because of prior drug convictions. For these people, obtaining financial aid might make the difference between a future of possibilities or a future of crime and poverty. The government should consider this reality when deciding whom they will exclude from access to higher education.

Editorial Policy

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Please include contact information. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.

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Evaluating class evaluations

A few weeks ago I was hustling to my public relations writing class when I was called out into the hallway by a faculty member who asked me if I remembered what I wrote on my teacher evaluation for a fall term class. After a little deliberation, I remembered exactly what I wrote.

I had written a glowing review of the professor, but I included an inside joke in the "other comments" section. The phrase asked for a clown to be sneezed upon, but it also included some profane words.

My words were not written to be negative — they were an inside joke that

only the members in the class would understand. Since professors can eventually read evaluations, I thought the professor would have a good laugh remembering the story and the class that produced the words. I soon learned that a few amusing words could cause me great trouble.

The faculty member reminded me that not only does the professor see the evaluations, so do other faculty members and the dean. The faculty member closed our discussion by telling me to be careful of what I write on my evaluations because it could potentially hurt me down the road. I didn't think much of what was said at the moment since I was already late for class, but since then the advice has brought my mind to a boil.

If students could potentially be hurt by what they write on an evaluation, then why would they be honest or even fill it out at all? For a student who is up for a scholarship that is decided by a group of faculty members, a truthful, yet negative, evaluation of one of

his colleagues could be just enough to push the decision to give the award to someone else.

Another scenario is students who take a class at the beginning of their college career and then as upperclass people take a class from a professor who sits on a tenure review board. If your name keeps popping up as the student who gives the bad evaluations, then your treatment in that upper division class could be tainted.

Often, students take more than one class from a single professor during their time in school. An evaluation

completed for the first class will be available to the professor by the time they take another class from them. An evaluation with a few harsh criticisms could put you behind the ball the second time around.

The simple way to solve this problem is to make sure they are read blind, without a name attached. Instead of signing the form, a student could give his student identification number. This way, if the name of the student needs to be tracked for any reason, it could be done. The evaluations could also be done anonymously.

The major criticism of this would be that students wouldn't take the evaluations seriously. This could occur, but the students who are already filling out the evaluations are doing so only because they want to. The students who couldn't care less just leave.

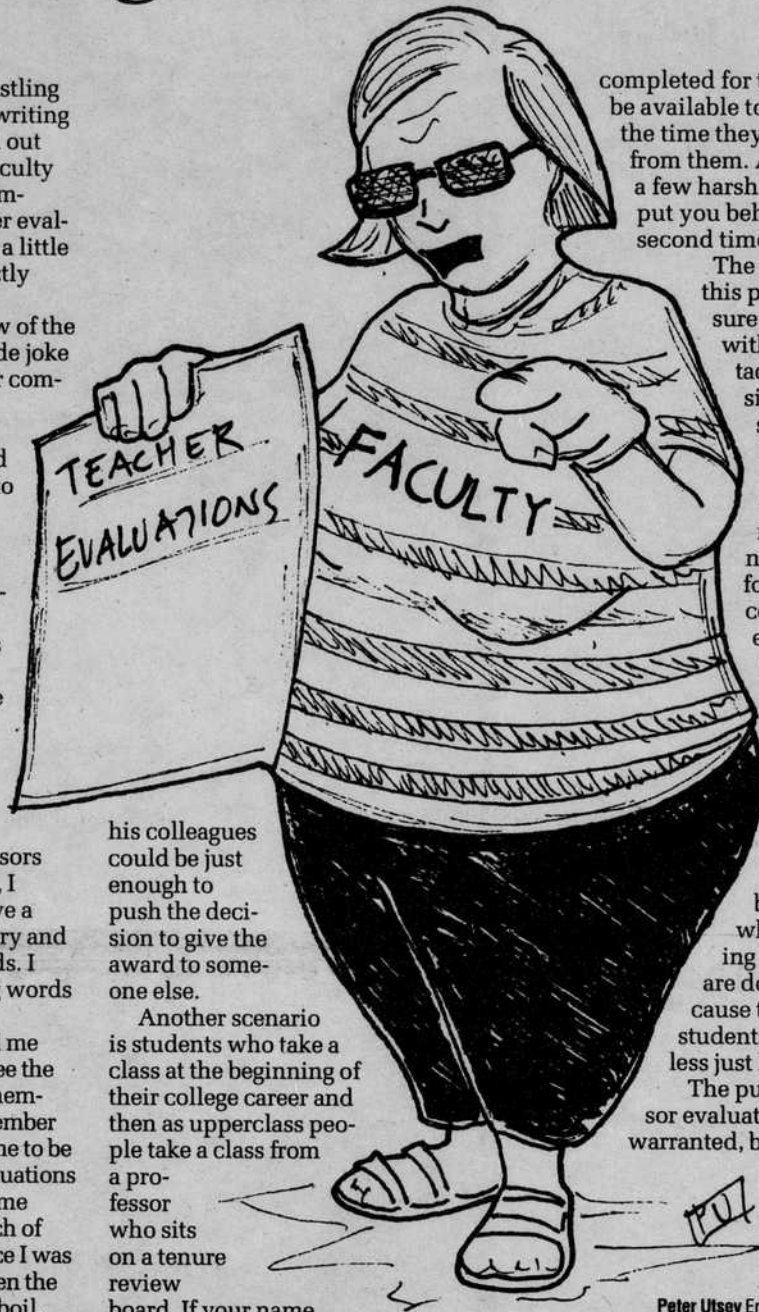
The purpose of the professor evaluations is valid and warranted, but they are only good if they are truthful. The positive evaluations are just as important as the negative ones, but half of this

equation will cease to exist if students are afraid to be honest.

E-mail columnist Jeff Oliver at jeffoliver@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.



Jeff
Oliver
Columnist



Peter Utsey Emerald

Poll Results:

Every week, the Emerald prints the results of our online poll and the poll question for next week. The poll can be accessed from the main page of our Web site, www.dailyemerald.com. We encourage you to send us feedback about the poll questions and results.

Last week's poll question: Should University computing officials be allowed to monitor heavy bandwidth users?

Results: 130 total votes

- Yes, heavy bandwidth users decrease access for all users — 15 percent, or 20 votes
- Yes, students who use the system illegally should lose their Internet privileges — 12 percent, or 16 votes
- No, the University should have a policy to protect students from communication surveillance — 63.2 percent, or 84 votes
- Don't know — 9.8 percent, or 13 votes

This week's poll question: Should the Oregon Commentator be forced to change its mission statement?

The choices:

- Yes, if the Oregon Commentator uses student fees, it should follow ASUO rules
- No, the Oregon Commentator does not promote any political affiliations
- Don't know
- Don't care

Letter to the editor

Take action to protect students in financial need

The \$720 million shortfall in the Oregon state budget has put students, and especially student parents, in a possibly devastating situation. Due to the state shortfall, the Student Childcare Block Grant and Oregon Opportunity Grant are facing possible cuts and elimination. A proposed \$2 million cut would eliminate the SCBG and harm the 433 parents who receive it, while 1,500 to 3,000 students will also lose their OOG grants.

These state-funded grants allow students across the state to attend college. Education has to be a focus for our state legislature. Students and Oregonians need to force the state legislature to recognize the importance of fully funding these programs.

ASUO is heading up a letter-writing and postcard campaign to send to our local and state representatives. People can stop by the ASUO office to make a phone call, sign a postcard or volunteer to go to Salem and lobby to our representatives.

Megan Hughes
pre-journalism

CLARIFICATION

The column "Fake plants reek!" (ODE, 1/31) should have stated that Student Recreation Center silk plants were purchased with student money from a construction fee, which is separate from the incidental fee. The Emerald regrets the error.