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The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co. Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Ore. The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices in Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union. The Emerald is private property. Unlawful removal or use of papers is prosecutable by law.

■ In my opinion

Apathy epidemic



GABE BRADLEY
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

The concept of free public education for all citizens originated in America. It makes sense that a society that recognized the value of education for all people would be the first to experiment with democracy on a grand scale. After all, if the people are going to rule, the people need to get some learning.

And that's exactly why we developed free public education — to make better citizens. In the America of the Puritans, being a better citizen meant being a better Christian, so early public education was largely religious. However, the emphasis on education as a necessary prerequisite to a functioning democracy persisted even after the notion of separation of church and state was established.

Sadly, it seems the purpose of education in our society is no longer to make better citizens. When we're growing up, we're told we need to go to college so we can get a job. When we tell people what we're studying in school, the next question is almost always concerned with how we'll use that degree to make a living.

Whether you go to a liberal arts university or technical school, on some level you're always training in our education system for a job. I don't believe this is necessarily a bad thing. We all need jobs and we all need to learn how to do our jobs. So why not learn that at school? My concern, though, is that job training has gone from being one of the things we do in school to being basically the only thing.

Being able to hold down a good job and maintain a productive career is only one part of being a good citizen, yet it is the part on which our education system places almost all emphasis. We lack the knowledge and guidance to make many important decisions in our public and private lives.

For instance, a while back, I was helping my sister plan her schedule

for high school. I was shocked to learn that her high school required no government or civics class. They offered two government courses, but they were not requirements. I shudder to think there are countless individuals walking around Eugene with a diploma from a 4J high school who have no clue how their national, state or local governments work.

No wonder the epidemic of apathy has reached a new high (or should I say a new low) in this country — our schools are letting us down. We're not even equipping our citizens with enough information to choose apathy. We're just letting students coast through school without ever telling them public life is an important force in their daily lives or teaching them how they can be a part of it. This is ridiculous. At the very least could someone pop in the Schoolhouse Rock video about how a bill becomes a law?

By the time I got to high school, civics class was long gone. At least we were required to take one semester of government before we were allowed to graduate, but even this seems to be going the way of the dodo.

Graduating high school is the basic educational benchmark for adults in our society. High school curriculum ought to represent the cannon of knowledge and experience that we expect of adults in our society. Yet this unimpressive set of standards is increasingly becoming a joke every year.

K-12 is basically ground school for

the rest of your life. For some reason, though, it is becoming less important to teach people how to be active in the communities in which they find themselves, and more important to teach them how to fill in annoying answer bubbles.

This trend especially disturbs me as I approach the point in my life in which I will be sending children to school. I always thought that school would teach my children how to be good citizens, while I would teach them how to be good people. Now I realize I will have to do both.

Unless there is a significant change, newspapers as we know them will be all but extinct in the next 20 years or so. This is only one symptom of a loss of community consciousness. We all want to be involved, but we don't have the first clue how to be. I love the Daily Show as much as next guy. It makes me laugh. It also makes me cry.

I cry when I think about the fact that more people in this country get their information from the Daily Show with Jon Stewart than from a daily newspaper. Even Stewart has said it's ridiculous for people to turn to a comedy show as their primary source of information. And yet here we are.

I think we need to bring civics class and the newspaper back in one fell swoop. If I had my druthers, every high school in this country would require at least two years of a civics, government and public life course in which the daily newspaper was the required reading. Teaching our children to be responsible adults in the society in which they live is just about the most important thing we can do for them. And if filling in the bubbles has to take a back seat to civic education, somehow I'll manage to live with that choice.

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INBOX

NPR and PBS are not unbiased news sources

I just read your editorial "Keep NPR free from government influence" (ODE May 16), and can hardly believe the level of naiveté and condescension you managed to roll into a single editorial. News consumers want news, not spin, and they're not so stupid as to a) not realize when they're being spun and/or b) not resent when journalists flatly deny that they report from a certain perspective. The "b" is most important and explains why FOX News is a success — the network doesn't pretend to be "values neutral." Also, if you've ever watched FOX News you know that the network more often than not offers both sides of the debate.

To pretend that NPR and PBS are somehow neutral is patently laughable. With his recent changes at the Public Broadcasting System, it appears that corporation head Kenneth Tomlinson is attempting to serve all the public.

Ned Williams
Nashville

Legalizing marijuana diminishes gateway effect

Regarding your thoughtful editorial about marijuana ("Marijuana poses lesser threat than violent theft," ODE May 12): Actually, marijuana poses less danger than a cup of coffee.

If we drink 65 cups of coffee in a single day, we have a serious chance of dying as a result. On the other hand, if we smoke the most potent marijuana available in the world, all day long, the worst effect would be a severe case of the munchies.

As for the so-called "gateway effect": Because marijuana is illegal, it is sold by criminals. These criminals often sell other, more dangerous drugs and often offer free samples of the more dangerous drugs to their marijuana customers. Thus the gateway effect.

Legalize, regulate, tax and control the sales of marijuana and we close the gateway to hard drugs.

Kirk Muse
Arizona

U.S. drug policy directly targets college students

The Daily Emerald rightly criticizes our nation's criminal justice priorities in the era of the War on Drugs ("Marijuana poses lesser threat than violent theft," ODE May 12).

Violent criminals are allowed to roam free while our prisons are filled with nonviolent drug offenders. The misguided War on Drugs also directly targets students.

Since 1998, more than 160,500 students have been denied financial aid because they have drug convictions. Rapists, murderers, burglars and arsonists are all free to receive financial aid once they've otherwise paid their debt to society; only drug offenders have the doors of education automatically slammed shut in their faces.

Students who want to help change misguided drug policies that negatively affect them should start a chapter of Students for Sensible Drug Policy. Visit www.DAREgeneration.com for more information.

Tom Angell
Students for Sensible Drug Policy

■ Editorial

University is out of touch with the aim of diversity

Several recent occurrences on this campus have prompted the Editorial Board to tackle what could — even on the best of days — be deemed a difficult subject: ethnic diversity and racism at the University. Several events have characterized what can be described best as an outbreak of unrest.

First, the recent accusations lobbed at the College of Education. Students have made claims, yet to be investigated, of racist and discriminatory comments by professors in classrooms and have said the school has created or ignored a hostile environment for minority students. The number of requests by sources within the COE to remain anonymous have made it clear that the school is permeated with fear of retribution. That a school's climate could be so negative, with students afraid to speak out, clearly indicates an egregious abuse of power.

We applaud the University's choice to bring in Dr. Carlos E. Cortés, a professor from University of California, Riverside, to conduct an external review of diversity issues in the College of Education. We must take his suggestions seriously and not forget about this mess after the report is finished. Regardless of whether the independent review finds the allegations to be true, the students at the COE have felt uncomfortable, and this problem must be corrected.

Second, the Emerald's documentation of the Office of Multicultural Academic Support's enrollment restriction in certain classes, which reserves slots for racial minorities, has raised the ugly specter of what some have called reverse discrimination. Despite OMAS' claims that the policy is strictly legal, we suspect the policy might be illegal, but not necessarily misguided, considering how minority students have felt in the COE's general classes.

We hoped this academic institution had reached the point of colorblindness, but apparently the University is far less advanced than we thought. The situation with OMAS has highlighted the underlying racism in the University's attempts to build a diverse campus on the foundation of a student population that is roughly 87 percent white.

Here in Oregon, "multicultural" is how we spin the question "what category of race do you fit into?" The options offered by the OMAS ("African-American, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, Chicano/Latino, Native American or Multiracial") are so narrow that they verge on insulting anyone truly multicultural. This willingness to simplify such a complex issue shows the true problem; the University is willing to see racial minorities as tokens it needs to obtain and retain to create diversity. It's like saying, "I need to find more Asian friends," and not understanding why such an attitude would be insulting to Asians.

Finally, Greg Vincent, vice provost for the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity, has announced his departure from the University, and we cannot help but feel at a loss for hope in the matter of diversity. It is a shame to see the man charged with solving these issues leave. With him goes another step toward real work in resolving these problems.

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