

# OPINION

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## Financial Aid Law Seriously Flawed

Marijuana convictions shouldn't prohibit college help

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Current federal laws prevent anyone with a drug conviction—even a nonviolent one—from receiving financial aid for college. With America's rising drug problem, the logic behind the law is obvious—deter young people from engaging in drug activities by threatening their chance to go to college. However, the law is seriously flawed. Individuals with con-



victions involving marijuana should not be lumped into the same category as those convicted of selling crack or crystal meth. These are very different drugs, with very different effects on society. As usual, America's one-size fits all drug policies treat all crimes as equal, even when they clearly are not.

A recently released study shows that nearly 190,000 students have been turned down for financial aid

since the federal government added a question that asks students if they have a drug conviction to federal financial aid forms. The study, released by Students for Sensible Drug Policy, shows that one in every 400 students is refused financial aid when they answer 'yes' to this question. Not answering the question won't make a difference—a student will only be automatically disqualified from receiving aid. Those with convictions can regain their aid eligibility by completing a drug rehab program that includes random drug tests.

Although illegal, marijuana does not wreak havoc on individuals,

*Marijuana does not wreak havoc on individuals, families and entire communities the way other drugs are known to. Why then, is it grouped in with other more dangerous drugs?*

families and entire communities the way other drugs are known to. Why then, is it grouped in with other more dangerous drugs? Under age drinking is a huge problem in America, particularly on college campuses; there aren't any policies that keep minors caught drinking from receiving financial

aid. This is not to advocate for marijuana use, this is to simply point out how unfair it is to subject someone convicted of smoking a joint to the same fate as someone convicted of smoking and selling crack.

During the 2003-2004 school year, more than 40,000 applicants

were refused financial aid because they had drug convictions. That's 40,000 students that could have gone on to become teachers, doctors, lawyers or even President of the United States—in short, productive members of society. There's no guarantee that these students won't live out their dreams of finishing college, but one thing is certain: this current barrier will only make achieving that goal that much more difficult.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

## Talk About the Risk to Kids Underage drinking is serious business

BY KAREN WHEELER

A dozen parents sat down recently to talk about underage drinking. "Up until they are 12 or 13," one of the moms said without intended humor, "they do what you say. Then they stop."

In fact, research shows that most young children view drinking alcohol as wrong. That does change as they grow older, when a third of Oregon eighth-grade girls say they have consumed alcohol in the past month and 1 in 10 of both girls and boys say they have engaged in binge drinking during the prior 30 days. Is your teen one of them?

"None of us think so," said another mom, "but we're all worried." Perhaps they should be: A national survey found that 1 in 5 teens said they had had 5 or more drinks in the prior 2 weeks, a rate 20 times higher than what a group of parents estimated in another survey.

The son of one of the Oregon parents surprised his folks: "We were gone on a weekend and he

threw a party at our house." That not only exposed the parents to potential civil or criminal liability if someone had been injured, but most parents also are unaware that state law permits police to seize not only the liquor from an underage party but also related property such as furniture, stereos and glassware



*Teens who drink at age 15 are four times more likely to become alcohol-dependent than those who wait until they're 21.*

if the party was held with the parents' knowledge.

One parent said she regularly shows her daughter news stories about teens hurt or killed in alcohol-related auto crashes. "This could be you, it could be your friends, it does happen," she tells her 13-year-old. She's right: The national rate of alcohol-related fatalities among 16- to 20-year-olds is almost double that for drivers 21

and older. And that is only one of the risks.

"The earlier you start," one mom tells her kids, "the more likely you'll have a problem. So I'd really like you to wait." She could add that teens who drink at age 15 are four times more likely to become alcohol-dependent

than those who wait until they're 21. The odds of alcohol dependence are also higher among children of alcoholics.

Teens should know that binge drinking, defined as consuming five or more drinks in one sitting, can lead to alcohol poisoning that kills. Or that alcohol's influence can lead to date rape, sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted teen pregnancies. The teen years are a time of

brain development. Sophisticated imaging techniques have detected structural brain differences in 17-year-olds who displayed alcohol-induced intellectual and behavioral impairments. Studies of laboratory animals, meanwhile, show that alcohol consumption during puberty affects maturation of the reproductive system. The parents who sat down together all agreed: Parenting is a tough job. The job requires not only careful listening, setting clear expectations, enforcing consequences and identifying attractive alternatives to alcohol, but also modeling responsible behavior. What kind of example do your drinking habits set for your child or teen? As one mom put it near the end of their conversation, "I feel like I really don't know what I think I know." If you're also unsure where your child or teen is with drinking, it's in your best interests—and those of your teen—to find out.

Karen Wheeler is addictions policy manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services.

## Deadline Too Severe But too important to ignore

BY U.S. REP. CORRINE BROWN

Understanding Medicare Part D, the prescription drug benefit plan is extremely important for everyone, especially for seniors and their loved ones who can help to choose the best plan that suits their needs.

Indeed, the new prescription drug benefit is the biggest change to Medicare since the program was created back in 1965. This added benefit will change the way about 30 million Americans pay for their medication. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most confusing government plans ever launched.

Too many people have still not signed up, while others are having a lot of trouble understanding this complicated plan. Not only is picking a plan difficult, but the drop dead deadline of May 15 makes no sense.

I've been an elected official for 25 years and I have never seen a program that penalizes somebody for the rest of their life if they don't



sign up right away.

I know this process is very confusing. If you have questions about signing up for a plan, you can

call a Medicare counselor at 1-800-MEDICARE.

There are severe penalties if you miss the May 15 deadline. What will happen is that you will have to wait until the next open enrollment period for coverage starting in January, plus pay a one percent per-month penalty for missing the deadline.

That means at a minimum the premium will be six percent higher—not just next year, but always.

For all of the seniors out there, I plead with you, if this Congress fails to act, make sure that you sign up for a plan before May 15.

Congresswoman Brown is a Democrat from Florida and member of the Congressional Black Congress.



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