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The Daily Tar Heel

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Double Jeopardy

Financial aid applicants shouldn't have to answer whether they have ever been convicted of a drug offense on their FAFSA forms.

Thanks to Congress, students now have an even smaller shot at getting federal aid for college.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid now contains a question asking applicants if they have ever been convicted of a drug offense. The federal government has decided that if you answer yes, you don't deserve its help in going to college.

This policy is absurd. Federal aid is awarded strictly on the basis of the student's financial need - merit never factors into the equation. Refusing aid to students with drug convictions will have the more serious consequence of having a permanent impact on these individuals for a single mistake.

It is up to the colleges to which students are applying whether their prior drug conviction will affect their chances of being accepted. Each individual institution decides for itself what factors it considers relevant and irrelevant in the acceptance or denial of applicants. Many colleges probably don't care if you've been convicted of a drug-related crime, but many others will.

The federal government's allocation of financial resources, however, should have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not the federal government thinks you deserve to go to college.

In addition to the irrelevancy of the student's character in the decision to grant need-

based aid, the policy also discriminates between different types of crime.

Why no question about convictions for drunken driving? Armed robbery? Murder?

Singling out drug convictions over these other crimes that are surely more heinous is testament to the absurdity of the policy and American lawmakers' illogical fascination with the war on drugs.

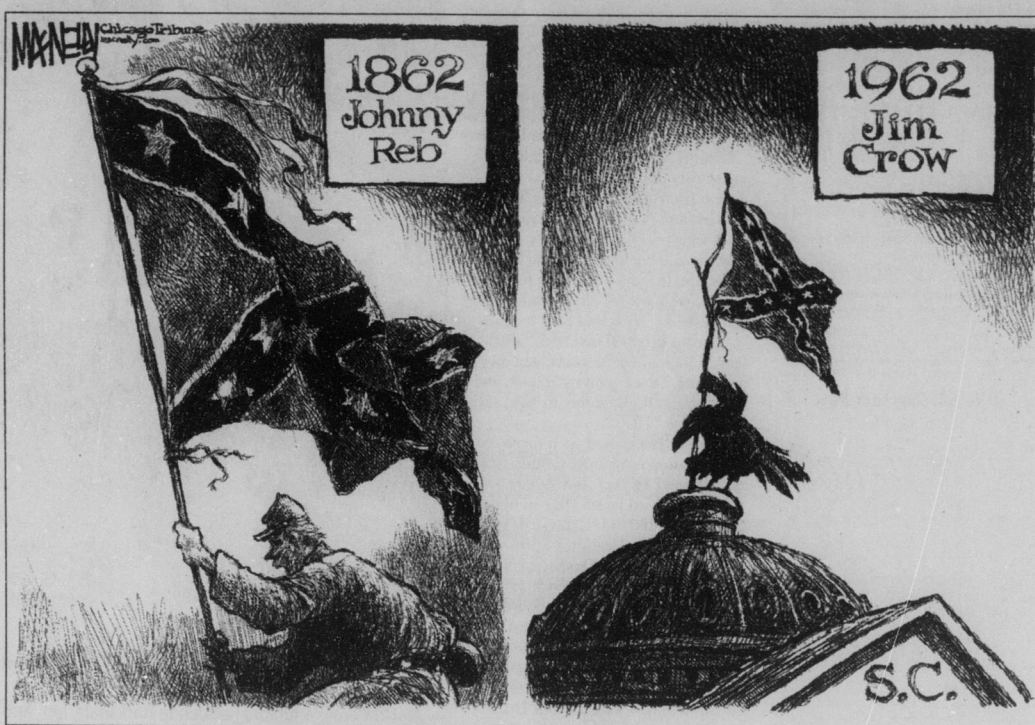
If you have already been convicted of a drug-related crime, you have been to jail or served your community service hours. It is unfair to punish people twice for the same crime, especially when that punishment involves something as serious as the affordability of a college education.

If lawmakers truly believe drug convictions are such a serious blemish on the character of those convicted, they should be more proactive in helping these misguided individuals get their lives back on track. Going to college seems like the perfect opportunity to do so.

But the bottom line is that federal aid is a critical resource for families who otherwise cannot afford to send their kids to college.

Pulling that money because certain Congressmen do not feel students with drug convictions deserve it is just plain wrong.

And it's perhaps the applicants with a troubled past who need federal money more than anyone else.



Want Beads? Dress Like a Dinosaur

I heard Mardi Gras falls on a Tuesday this year, an innocent classmate informed me last week.

"Yeah, I hate those years when 'Fat Tuesday' falls on a Thursday," I jokingly thought in reply, allowing my exceptionally good manners to hold my tongue.

Indeed, folks outside Louisiana have probably seen nothing like the celebration going on in The Big Easy this week.

So please allow me to wish you a happy "Lundi Gras," which translates quite loosely into "Mardi Gras Eve."

Actually, if you were in New Orleans now, you probably wouldn't know what day it is. After Friday, it's all a blur until Wednesday, with only passing parades marking the day.

And I say that as a reveler who doesn't even bother with the alcohol-related side of the festivities. You could ask a 5-year-old waving for beads from passing floats on St. Charles Avenue, and even he wouldn't know the day. Ask a guy in the French Quarter and you'll probably hear some drunken babble like "It's day-oh, man."

Indeed, Mardi Gras is a continuous party, and you'll never know what I'm talking about until you see it for yourself.

That said, you can't "go to Mardi Gras" any more than you can "go to Christmas." It's a season; it's a mentality. Parades have been rolling daily somewhere in the metropolitan New Orleans area for about three weeks, and schools have been enjoying King Cake parties every Friday since January.

When they say "laissez les bons temps rouler" - let the good times roll - they mean it.

But this year N'Awlins officials are trying to slow down the good times a bit. With the fun falling somewhat later than usual this year, officials fear warmer weather will lead to more lasciviousness than normal. Clearly they're worried about the city's fine reputation as a stronghold of family values and



BRANDON BRISCOE
VOICE OF REASON

modesty.

The stories are true - more takes place on Bourbon Street these days than most folks can imagine or care to imagine. It's amazing what people will do for plastic beads if given enough encouragement from a crowd ... and alcohol.

Thankfully, most of the folks who "show their wares" stick to the French Quarter, sparing the eyesight of the rest of the city. As New Orleans columnist James Gill noted, "The 14th Amendment rules out any attempt to craft a city ordinance allowing only good-looking women to display their attributes."

Nonetheless, the police want to clean up the seedier side of the celebration this year, so they'll be out looking for nudity, so to speak. The cops tend to get as crazy as the crowds this time of year, producing about as much silliness as they put up with.

One year, they told me to remove my family's stepladders, which were reserving our place along a parade route. The ladders allowed kids to watch the parades and catch throws without the obstruction of greedy adults on the ground.

"You'll have to get your ladders off the parade route before we come through and confiscate them," the officers announced very officially. I just laughed, looking up and down the street to see thousands of ladders lined up in an unbroken chain for miles in each direction. "Go ahead," I thought.

While they only threatened to take me to jail for laughing, they actually hauled 300 people to the slammer last year for public indecency. Still, that's pocket change compared to the thousands who bared their body parts for beads.

But even if the cops' initiative is futile, at least someone's making an effort this year to promote the family-oriented side of Mardi Gras. No joke, the pre-Lenten party has more than loose women, drunker men and unabashed celebration.

There might not be any G-rated activity in the city, but it's not difficult to find places on parade routes to bring the family without worrying about someone spilling a beer on you.

And yes, folks who remain fully clothed can still catch plenty of "stuff" from parades in the greatest free show on earth.

Last year, I wore beads around campus on Mardi Gras day, only to be asked what I did to get them. I replied, "Well, I know this great belly-dance routine ..."

Actually, my best year was when I was 6 years old. The matching dinosaur costumes my brother and I sported hauled in the beads. Apparently we were "cute." We actually had to leave some of our treasure behind at some parades as it was too much to carry back to our car.

In fact, anyone who can yell, "Throw me sumptin', mister!" will walk away with, well, something.

So Tuesday, I'll be sporting my beads and listening for those words with a handful of beads to toss. First come, first serve.

And while Chapel Hill needs a little more spice, I won't require any degrading acts of people to get beads. You can leave the dinosaur costumes in your closet.

Brandon Briscoe is a journalism and mass communication major from New Orleans, La. Send him your tips and comments at brandon_briscoe@unc.edu.

Common Sense Ruling

A Raleigh judge ruled in favor of immigrants by offering them the chance to take English classes instead of serving jail time.

Creative sentencing is currently the hippest trend for judges. And one Raleigh judge is doing something good with that trend - offering Latino immigrants charged with minor offenses the option of taking free English classes instead of performing community service.

Wake County District Judge Ann Marie Calabria told The News & Observer last week that many non-English speaking people are arrested because police officers cannot communicate well with them.

And as the Latino population of the Triangle continues to grow, these miscommunications are only going to become more frequent. Sending people arrested on minor charges because of communication problems to English classes would eliminate similar problems in the future. It would also help to integrate immigrants into the English-speaking community.

If other judges decide to follow Calabria's lead, they should also follow some other guidelines she has set for herself. She told the N&O that only people charged with minor offenses would be eligible and that no one with a serious criminal record would be.

Calabria is also willing to offer anyone who does not have a firm grasp of English

the same options as Latino immigrants. That way, other immigrant groups and native English-speakers who never learned to read or write would also be eligible.

Although Calabria's sentencing will reach out and help some of Raleigh's Latino population, the city should start taking steps that would help the entire Latino population.

Raleigh needs to hire more bilingual officers and train current ones in basic Spanish.

Since mid-1999, the Durham Police Department has worked to increase the number of Spanish-speaking officers. In January, the department traveled to Puerto Rico to recruit officers. And current officers - including Police Chief Teresa Chambers - are taking Spanish courses, including one at UNC that includes a 10-day trip to Mexico.

That way there would be no confusion as to what an officer wanted a suspect to do.

One could argue that it is an immigrant's responsibility to learn English, not a police officer's responsibility to learn Spanish. But the police serve everybody - English-speaking or not.

Calabria's sentencing is not only hip, it plays an integral role in giving the Triangle the ability to treat its growing Latino population fairly.

READERS' FORUM

DTH Wrong to Slam UNC For Suspending Suspect in Arson

TO THE EDITOR:

The "Prior Conviction" editorial was a bit poorly thought out and ill-reasoned. Yes, our justice system operates under an "innocent until proven guilty" rationale.

But that doesn't mean we give suspects, especially possible felons, the opportunity to commit more crimes. Justice in the United States also includes the notion that a potentially dangerous person should be kept in jail until his or her trial so as to prevent additional societal harm.

While this may confine some people unjustly for a short time until they get a fair trial, it also prevents the real criminals from committing more crimes. I find it quite ironic that you are criticizing the University's actions when it is precisely you it is protecting. You speak of a possible lucrative lawsuit to come from Daniel Sarrell against the University.

Well if you really want to talk in terms of "lucrative," imagine what might have happened if Sarrell was the perpetrator of the arson and had acted a second time (after the University had reason to believe he

was involved in the first arson attempt), this time successfully completing the flame-induced demise of Morrison. I think the families of hundreds of decedents might be the ones with the lucrative lawsuits against the University. Have you spent a moment to consider what might have been had the University not acted?

The University stands in a legally imposed custodial relationship to the students living in Morrison. And it is their duty to exercise reasonable care in fulfilling this legally imposed duty. Once aware of a foreseeable risk to students after the first arson attempt, the University would have been acting irresponsibly not to protect Morrison students from the potential of great future harm.

Scotty McNab
Graduate Student
School of Law

Affordable Housing Would Reap Benefits Of Townwide Tax

TO THE EDITOR:

Affordable housing ... a subject that has been around for a long time. Is it rhetoric or is it reality? For as long as I have been here, I've main-

tained that the only way to ensure that we have accessible affordable housing is with government subsidy.

When the proposal of a 1-cent property tax was mentioned, I supported the concept. I still do. The idea of a "penny for housing" is a logical step for underwriting this much-needed level of housing.

Often citizens have commented to me of their concern that our service people cannot afford to live in Chapel Hill. What better way is there than for the community to attempt to ensure that those who work here can afford to live here too? A penny a year would generate approximately \$700,000 a year, which could leverage almost \$3 million in private financing to promote affordable homeownership and rental opportunities.

It is a modest contribution: On a \$150,000 house it would mean about \$15 a year. Who would benefit? We all would because our teachers, public workers, police and fire personnel and nurses, to list some, would be able to be part of and contribute fully to the total community.

We should all urge our county commissioners to embrace the idea.

Lee M. Pavao
Member
Chapel Hill Town Council



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ISSN #01079436