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Hilltopics Staff

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HILLTOPICS

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volume three, issue twenty-four
week of april 30, 2007

INSIDE this issue

Are you a winner? In this week's issue see the winning submissions to this year's Hilltopics essay contest.

Like *Hilltopics*? Hate *Hilltopics*?

This is your chance to stop talking and start acting to make it better. We're currently accepting applications for next year's staff. See the back page for more info.

A letter from the editor

Dear Reader—

Hilltopics is all about furthering intellectual dialogue at SMU, so we were thrilled at the response to our first annual essay contest. The essays we received made it clear that the SMU community has a lot to say about how to make the Hilltop more academically-focused. Our prompt was this: SMU is well-known for its vibrant Greek life and party culture and less well-known for its academic excellence and "life of the mind." What, if anything, should SMU do to change this perception? Essentially, how can SMU not only appear, but actually be more scholarly and/or studious? The suggestions in the essays were interesting and varied, from better academic advising to more greek involvement to one interesting idea that involved Chuck Norris and plastic explosives.

Three essays in particular, however, stood out to our judges as particularly insightful and well-written. Caitlin Sharp won our contest, and Makaira Casey and Charanya Krishnaswami received honorable mention prizes. Their essays are reproduced for you in this issue, exactly as they were submitted to us.

Additionally, I would like to encourage you to consider applying for a position on next year's Hilltopics staff. As someone who has been involved in Hilltopics for three years, I can honestly say that it's been a great personal experience, but more importantly, this is a great way for you to give something back to the community in which you live and study. SMU won't become a better place if we don't talk about what's going on, and Hilltopics is a great way to facilitate that discussion. You'll find our application on our back page.

Thanks for reading,
Douglas Hill
Editor-in-Chief

Grand Prize: "Getting involved: putting the student before the leader"

by Caitlin Sharp

Think back to AARO. From every staff member or orientation leader you met you were sure to hear two words: "get involved". It's the catch-all advice for enthusiasm and homesickness alike. SMU, you were probably told, has a club for your interests and an outlet for your talents. And once you join, there is an opportunity to develop real leadership skills through empowered student positions.

College experiences shape our adult identities, and at SMU, we pride ourselves on leadership. Over four years the orientation catchphrase "get involved" evolves into supported encouragement to develop that intangible "social capital" into a marketable skill. The time we spend in our leadership positions, internships, and organizations no doubt lends weight to the SMU reputation for competent leaders in its alums. Our weekends on the Boulevard and late nights in the SAC really translate into a recognizable quality of interpersonal skills, not to mention an impressive resume.

But what if—and bear with me here, Hughes-Trigg aficionados—*that's not why we're here?* The *Hilltopics* editors framed their essay question with a concern for "party culture", but what concerns me more is our worship of a "leadership culture". It's not the duty of a University to serve as a beautiful backdrop to resume-building. The "life of the

mind" is indeed struggling here, but I'm going to go out on a limb and stop blaming the Greeks, or fake ID's, or Homebar. SMU has gifted, motivated, engaged students—and we are all *too damn busy to study*.

What has happened here is a gradual reversal of priorities, although I certainly don't mean to indict Student Life as intentionally squelching the stirrings of higher intellect with the Activities Fair. Students and advisors alike have come to see clubs and leadership positions as the appropriate outlet for their passions and a chance for recognition and accomplishment. And in doing so, we have all missed the point. We have precluded academics out of the character-building equation. A university education is about, ultimately, challenging the way we think. It is to provide students with the necessary analytical tools to pursue curiosities and develop ideas independently. An academic degree may be a quieter pursuit than a student senate seat, but should employ the same devotion to detail. A student should be as prepared for a class as he would a campaign speech. Follow the leads of outside resources like she would when fundraising. Take as much pride in developing new ideas (before the professor hands it to you in a lecture) as she would in starting a new
see Grand Prize Winner on page 4

Honorable Mention: "The Nation's Most Scholarly Beach Party"

by Charanya Krishnaswami

In January, at the ungodly hour of eight a.m. on the first day of Rush Week, nearly every seat in the Hughes-Trigg auditorium was filled as hundreds of girls awaited the chance to gain access to the ostensible pinnacle of SMU social life by going Greek. Contrasting that scene with an average day in my History of Jazz class—taught by a Pulitzer Prize-nominated jazz musician, no less—in which a paltry thirty students may turn up in a class of over 150, you begin to realize where the average SMU student's priorities lie. The most recent *Princeton Review* "361 Best Colleges" list (which relies on student feedback to determine rankings) perpetuates SMU's stratified, socially-driven, light-on-academics stereotype: it ranks fourth under "Little Race/Class Interaction," ninth under "Major Frat/Sorority Scene," and nowhere on the numerous academic lists. While Greek life (and the full social calendar it provides) is certainly a valuable addition to any campus, SMU has so much more than that to offer. This university should be, and can make itself, just as well known for its amazing, accessible professors, its incredible scholarship and study abroad opportunities, and its small classes that allow every student an opportunity to grow intellectually—not just for being the collegiate equivalent of a beach party.

A relatively easy way for SMU to bolster its reputation as an academically-minded institution is through an increase, not just in scholarship money, but in scholarship publicity as well. The President's scholarship, for example, touted as SMU's "highest academic merit award," provides a stunning array of opportunities and benefits for students, including full tuition and up to a year and a summer of study abroad scholarships. Yet this scholarship appears to be SMU's best-kept secret, as countless gifted students, who would have been enticed by the chance of a free education, probably passed on the SMU application because they knew little about its scholarship opportunities. According to our admissions website, more than seventy percent of undergraduates receive some form of aid while they are here. By pouring money into this particular venture, SMU brings to its campus students who help break the negative perception of an undergraduate population that has collectively attended twice as many parties as classes. Information about SMU's incredible scholarship opportunities should not just be bullet points in bland financial aid brochures, but targeted at fantastic students all over the nation. Perhaps this is an area where SMU can take a leaf out of the books of Greek houses—all of which spend the better part of each year recruiting the "right" people—and publicize scholarship opportunities specifically to students

who are involved, academically conscious, and will help bolster SMU's perception as an academic institution.

Along with an increased focus on scholarship opportunities, SMU needs to place itself on the national map by emphasizing its many academic strengths. This university has the potential to become as recognized and respected as Vanderbilt or Rice, while maintaining its uniqueness. The Cox School has just been recognized as one of the top twenty-five business schools in the nation by *BusinessWeek*, not to mention that, with its prime location in Dallas, internships are a snap to find. Another terrific asset SMU possesses is the student-professor ratio of twelve to one, meaning that every professor is not only accessible, but willing and able to get to know every student. If there was ever a time to increase publicity, this is it: with our acquisition of the George Bush library a certainty, SMU is about to receive a great deal of both negative and positive mentions in the national news. But when the news breaks, there is no question that students all over the nation will begin paying closer attention to that SMU brochure in their pile of college mail-outs. SMU would do well to ride this wave of publicity, so to speak, by making itself known not only as the home of a controversial library but of a terrific business school, accessible professors, and a truly lovely campus which perfectly combines quaint Ivy League charm with an urban edge. By increasing its national recognition, SMU will begin to attract diverse students who come to this campus not just for its Greek life and party scene but also for its scholastic merits, and who will, in turn, decrease this university's stereotypical homogeneity and augment its academic reputation.

SMU is, as I often explain to friends who have either never heard of it or only know of it as a mecca for designer handbags and fraternity parties, something of a hidden gem. On the surface, the stereotypes certainly seem true, but beyond this glossy exterior, SMU possesses a unique and notable academic excellence, which has proven to be the most valuable part of my college experience. With its many strengths, SMU can easily begin to attract a more diverse population of students by increasing its national recognition, while demonstrating its commitment to scholastic achievement through an increase in both the publicity of and money awarded through scholarships. Someday, SMU may indeed rank on a *Princeton Review* list not just as a four-year-long beach party, but perhaps as the nation's most scholarly and academically rigorous beach party.



Honorable Mention: "Conquer Complacency: The Might of the Honor Council"

by Makaira Casey

As SMU becomes a more widely recognized name, our university has the opportunity to assert an identity as a nationally competitive school and development of the SMU Honor Code could help realize this goal. At its most basic level the Honor Council enforces the Honor Code's injunctions against academic sabotage, cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, plagiarism, and impeding Honor Council investigation defined in the student handbook. However, the Honor Council's mission is not merely punitive; it also aims to prevent honor offenses by cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility. Currently the Honor Council's limited presence on campus minimizes this influence. A prevalent Honor Council could raise the standards of education to create a more engaging academic environment and ultimately improve SMU's reputation.

While Honor Code prohibits academic dishonesty, it also promotes academic integrity, which means accepting responsibility for the maintenance of high educational standards. Accountability for academic integrity applies to students, faculty members, and administrators. If students and faculty were to fully recognize this principle, it would prevent the system of declining expectations that I have experienced in some classes; as students slack, professors lower their standards. This process cultivates complacency instead of challenging students to excel. Students who do not embrace responsibility for their education create a negative reputation that reflects on the entire student body, and the lowering of expectations reduces our opportunities to explore our potential. In a community united by scholarship every participant engages and is rewarded by the development of confidence in his/her ability to think critically.

In order for the honor council to successfully cultivate honor, it must be regarded as fundamental in the academic community. Most importantly, the Honor Council must establish respect in the eyes of the faculty, because the Council simply cannot successfully inculcate honor without professors' support. Honor council members need to speak with professors individually and in faculty meetings to inform them about the council's mission. Professors will not only need to always print the Honor Code on their syllabi, but talk about honor and academic honesty in class. The professors' expectation of academic honesty should be reinforced by requiring students to write and sign the honor pledge on all assignments. Professors could further discourage dishonest acts by establishing clear and reasonable late policies to alleviate deadline pressure that may lead students to commit Honor Code violations under duress. When cases of academic dishonesty do arise, professors must consistently report them to the Honor Council to preserve its legitimacy. Additionally, President Turner and the deans must demonstrate their support the Honor Council by recognizing it as an integral part of the SMU infrastructure. The Honor Council has been consistently awarded only subsistence funding by the SMU Senate in response to petitions for funding as

a club; the expenses associated with creating a successful Honor Council should be subsidized by the administration. This indication of the importance of honor by the administration will reinforce the Honor Code's mission.

With the backing of the faculty and administration, the Council must promote awareness among students by speaking to incoming freshmen in *person* at Mustang Corral and orientation to tell them that cheating would mean letting down that Honor Council member personally as well as their classmates. At orientation students could sign their names among those of their peers in an honor book to symbolize their entrance into the SMU community and its foundation in honor. Synopses of Honor Council cases ought to be published in *The Daily Campus* so that students are privy to the activities of the council, conscious of the possible consequences of academic dishonesty, and simply aware that the council exists. Open Honor Council meetings could provide a forum for students and faculty to voice concerns regarding academic integrity.

This is a feasible plan of action with the potential to dramatically increase the level of scholarship at SMU. However, it is not possible to enact these radical changes without the support of the entire SMU community. Students, faculty, and administration in partnership with highly motivated Honor Council leadership can initiate the renunciation of complacency on campus. The realization of this plan will directly effect SMU's national reputation, because students who feel indebted to the SMU community for a proud part of their identity, especially their sense of honor, would be inclined to give back, thus helping to raise SMU's national ranking. These students will also enter the world as responsible individuals whose accomplishments will reflect positively on SMU.

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club. Buzz words like “initiative” and “investment” have a rightful if not imperative place in the classroom.

This is not to say that all SMU students are models of exuberance simply (and saintly) too engaged in their civic volunteering. We certainly have a pervasive cloud of academic apathy here, even within the ranks of student leaders. This is where professors come in. They should demand the same level of commitment and involvement in their classrooms as activity advisors do outside of it. It is their task to make academics absolutely impossible to ignore. To engage in ways that leave students concerned not just about their grade but about the issues they face in class. And when students are forced to rise to the occasions set by demanding professors, they will find within themselves a passion for scholarship. SMU has those professors now, but they are all too easy to avoid. It is a sad truth that some faculty have come to mirror

the complacency they see in their students, but a renewed emphasis on academic performance by demanding teachers ignites and permeates faster than one might think.

While it’s never too late to spark dormant intellect, first year perspective is crucial. “Get Involved” should come to refer to an investment in one’s education, not a planner full of acronyms. We are *students*, you see—there is a reason we’re allowed to check that box for “occupation” on surveys and forms. While there is definitely merit in the extensions of that (student-leader, student-athlete), SMU needs renewed emphasis in that role as an *identity*. A “student-culture” should be all-encompassing, focused not on resumes or even grades but rather those intangible qualities (much like leadership) that start defining that in terms of academics, not chairperson titles. We are scientists, historians, philosophers, and mathematicians, and we should take on all the responsibilities of those positions.

Hilltopics 2007-2008 Editor Application

Please return by 1 May to hilltopics@hotmail.com or any Hilltopics distributor.

Name: _____ Email: _____

Phone Number: _____ Year: _____

Major(s) and Minor(s): _____

Preference of Position: (please rank 1-6, 1 being your first choice; note that actual positions filled may vary from those on application)

____ Editor-in-Chief (conducts weekly meetings of editorial staff, directs overall management of publication)

____ Business Manager (spokesperson for Hilltopics to the SMU community, facilitates the logistics of keeping Hilltopics in good standing with the University)

____ Copy Editor (responsible for editing articles for length, grammar, and content)

____ Distribution Manager (designs and implements the Hilltopics distributions strategy)

____ Graphics Editor (designs each edition of Hilltopics and advertisements, as needed; responsible for generating and submitting PDF to printer each week; requires experience with Adobe Photoshop and Adobe InDesign)

____ Managing Editor (directs the content of each issue and, in the case of controversy, has the final say as to what articles are or are not included)

Please note that every editor, regardless of their particular position, will be responsible for distributing Hilltopics each week, and will also write articles as needed.

Application Questions:

Please briefly answer each of the following questions on a separate sheet and submit your responses with your application.

1. Why are you applying to be a Hilltopics editor?

2. What do you think are the biggest strengths and biggest weaknesses of Hilltopics?

3. What is a political, social, or cultural issue about which you care deeply? That is, what kinds of topics would you be most interested in writing about for Hilltopics? Why is this issue important to you?