

Default rate on student loans hits record low

by Ellen Nakashima
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WASHINGTON - The default rate for the national student loan program, once so loosely run that its very existence was in doubt, has dipped to a record low of 6.9 percent, saving taxpayers \$18 billion over the last eight years, Clinton administration officials said Sunday.

They attribute the drop to a strong economy and increased enforcement, including removing schools whose students do not repay their loans. The rate peaked at 22 percent in 1992, when a few more than one out of every five students with loans defaulted.

Today, of the 2.2 million students holding federal loans, about 150,000 - or one out of every 14 - have failed to repay.

"That's a singular accomplishment," said Terry Hartle, a spokesman for the American Council on Education, which represents more than 1,800 colleges and universities. "It's an extraordinary story of gov-

ernment working well."

Republicans note that the rate began falling as a result of initiatives begun under the Bush administration, and say the Clinton administration is taking a bow for doing what Congress has ordered it to do.

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-unknown senior education official

"They're taking credit a lot lately for things they've been mandated by Congress to implement," said Rebecca O. Campoverde, communications director for the U.S. House

Education and Workforce Committee, noting that Congress, beginning in 1990, passed a series of laws designed to increase student loan repayment and tighten school eligibility to participate in the program.

Both sides deserve praise, said Sheldon Steinbach, American Council on Education general counsel.

"Most important has been the educational process undertaken by the individual institutions to ensure that the young men and women who take out these loans understand that they have a responsibility to repay them," he said.

He noted, however, that Education Secretary Richard W. Riley "has taken a dramatic lead in making this an initiative for the administration." Riley and President Clinton are expected to announce the new default rate Monday as Clinton continues his push for congressional support for his education initiatives.

The government has removed more than 1,300 schools from the student loan program, 850 of them because a quarter or more of their students defaulted for three straight

years. About 500 schools were removed for violating federal financial aid rules.

Officials acknowledged that stricter enforcement rules began in 1990 under the Bush administration but asserted that passing a law is but the first step.

"It's a whole other job to take the law as it is written and implement it over a period of years in a way that affects thousands of schools and millions of students and their families," a senior education official said. "The fact that the student loan default rate has dropped is a reflection of the fact that students are taking seriously their obligations to make their payments on their loans."

Students in default are barred from receiving other federal student aid. Their credit rating is lowered and tax refunds or other federal payments, and wages, can be seized to cover the debt.

In 1998, students took out 8.6 million loans worth \$35.7 billion. In 1990, administration officials said, they took out 4.1 million loans worth \$11.7 billion.

Drunk students plow steamroller into campus property

by William Lee
Campus Correspondent -
TMS Campus
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MACOMB, IL (TMS) Two Western Illinois University students and a visiting friend were recently arrested after they allegedly stole a steamroller and caused damage to area around their residence hall.

The students, Jason Dion, and Cory Lehman, both 19, along with Jesse Medel, 20, of St. Charles, Ill., were arrested and charged Sept. 17 with criminal damage to government property and illegal consumption of alcohol by minors. The three were each given a \$1,000 bail by a judge.

After a night of drinking the trio

allegedly took the steamroller from a nearby construction site and drove over a tree and damaged the concrete drive around their residence hall.

"It is very probable that alcohol and then a lack of good judgment participated in this act," Robert Fitzgerald, director of WIU's Office of Public Safety.

Though the charge of damage to government property is a felony, because WIU is a state-supported school, the charges were dropped to misdemeanors, according to the Western Courier. It is not known if the construction company that owns the steamroller will press charges. Neither Dion or Lehman would comment on the incident.

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Judy Shepard doesn't give up after son's slaying

by Andy Argyrakis
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"Matt is no longer here because two men learned that it was okay to hate," said a emotional, yet stiff lipped Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was slain in one of the America's most brutal hate crimes nearly two years ago. "They were given the impression that society condones or is indifferent to such treatment of those who are not like them."

Shepard's plea for peace was one that seemed logical to those gathered at North Central College in suburban Chicago Thursday, Sept. 28, but she quickly pointed out that such behavior is easier said than done in American society.

She also told students of the additional struggles she experienced when she learned her son was homosexual. "As a parent of a gay child, your hope is that they can go through the entire day without an incident," she said. "It would have been a great day if nothing like that happened."

On October 7, 1998, this mother's worst nightmare came true when her 21-year-old son, a student at the University of Wyoming, was pistol whipped, tied to a fence post and beaten into a coma in freezing cold temperatures. Matthew was left to lay in misery for 18 hours until he

was discovered and treated for abrasions, hypothermia, severe welts and a fractured skull at a nearby hospital.

Matthew held on for five days after the attack, but the abuse gradually turned fatal. As he was laid to rest, his killers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, were sentenced to life in prison.

"There was a bit of relief at first to know that Matthew's suffering was over, but for us the suffering was just beginning," Shepard said on behalf of her family. "There are still days when I can't go on, but the love and support of those around me have sustained me. Matt would be disappointed if I gave up and that's why I've been going around the country to show people what's its like not to give up after such a tragedy."

The Shepard family, which also consists Matthew's father, Dennis and his brother, Logan, started the Matthew Shepard Foundation to encourage acceptance and embrace diversity. "Not every one is the same in this world, and out of those that are gay, I don't know anyone who would choose to live their life in fear," she said. "Everyone has the right to live and should be treated with respect, like you would a brother and sister, because we are all from the same family."

Such is the thinking behind the foundation set up in Matthew's name, and Judy hopes that through her cru-

sade, parents will learn to be more accepting of the lifestyles their children lead. Shepard was very accepting when learning of her son's homosexuality. When he first told her of his orientation, she continued to love him the same way she had before.

"We all should make contracts with our children to let them know we love them unconditionally and that we will be there for them no matter what, just like I was with Matt," she said. "Do you think the murders' parents stopped loving them after the crime?"

Judy noted that her husband's acceptance of her son's sexual orientation has been an example to other men across the nation to first love their children before they disapprove of their lifestyle. "For those parents that can't do that, I would just look at them as a mother who had their son yanked from them and wonder how could they turn away when they had the chance to be there for that child?" she said.

Judy noted that her other son, Logan, who had hoped to room with Matthew at the University of Wyoming, has also helped spread the message of acceptance. "Instead of just saying his brother got killed or that he is now an only child, he tells people that that his brother was killed as part of a hate crime because he was gay," she said. "That shows that he is comfortable enough in his own skin to tell people what really hap-

pen and educate them that crimes of such magnitude take place but must be stopped."

Shepard made it clear that the main audience anti-hate awareness could be spread is the college demographic, particularly since that was Matthew's age when he died. "I have

one wish for college students and that is that they would stop pigeonholing everyone that is different than they are," she said. "It starts with the faculty and administration on a campus making it clear that hate behavior will not be tolerated. If it doesn't start with them, then

how will students learn from their example? Students need to get involved to, by joining support groups on campus and discussing this issue so that their schools can be free from hate crimes."



Judy Shepard, whose son Matthew was slain in one of America's most brutal hate crimes nearly two years ago, speaks to a crowd at North Central College in suburban Chicago.

PHOTO BY ANDY ARGYRAKIS (TMS)

DePaul student escapes harm during attack in dorm

by Matthew McGuire
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TMS Campus

A 20-year-old DePaul University junior fended off a knife-wielding man who entered her unlocked dorm room and attacked her as she exited the shower Tuesday, Oct. 3.

After a brief struggle and lots of screaming, the woman scared off the intruder without sustaining injuries. Police do not have anyone in custody, but were scheduled to release a sketch of the man.

The attack happened about 3 p.m., after the woman returned from a work out to her McCabe Hall dorm room. The woman believes she may have passed the man in the hallway on the way back to her room, which is located in heart of one of the Chicago's

more affluent neighborhoods, Lincoln Park.

After she took a shower, the woman exited the stall, wrapped a towel around her body and saw the intruder's reflection in the mirror.

As the student began to scream the man walked toward her with a knife and the two began a struggle. The two fumbled into the hallway - still within the apartment-style dorm room - and fell to the floor. The man placed one hand over the woman's mouth and threatened her life.

By this time, the woman's screams had garnered the attention of neighboring students who came to her aid as the man fled, said DePaul spokeswoman Denise Mattson. A Chicago Police Department search of the coed residence hall and surrounding neighborhood came up empty handed.

The student shares the dorm room with two other women who were not home at the time.

DePaul officials were examining how the attacker could have gotten into the building, which is equipped with a card pass system and attendant at the front desk. Following the attack, officials met with students to discuss the incident and review safety procedures. Counselors were also made available to any student who had additional concerns.

Despite DePaul's location in an upscale neighborhood, the incident served as a reminder that the students live in the middle of a major metropolitan city, Mattson said.

"Generally this is a very safe area but we reminded all of our students that crime happens every where in urban environments," Mattson said.

Charges against suspect in murder of Gallaudet student dropped

by Billy O'Keefe
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TMS Campus

One day after charging Thomas Minch with the murder of a fellow student at Gallaudet University, authorities have dropped charges against the 18-year-old deaf college freshman, claiming they don't have enough evidence.

Minch had been arrested for the beating death of a gay student group leader at the country's only liberal arts university for deaf students. He was charged with second-degree murder in the death of fellow student Eric Franklin Plunkett.

Plunkett, 19, was found dead in his dorm room after friends reported him missing for more than a day. Au-

thorities said that Plunkett likely died from repeated blows to the head and neck.

Plunkett, a freshman who was deaf and had cerebral palsy, served as secretary for the Lambda Society of Gallaudet University, a gay and lesbian group some 20 students strong.

Despite Plunkett's status in the LSGU, however, police have yet to classify the attack as a hate crime.

News of Minch's arrest had left an already fearful Gallaudet student body in shock. Several students told the Washington Post that Minch was a warm, polite person, and that it seemed impossible that he was Plunkett's killer.

Minch and Plunkett enrolled at Gallaudet this fall. Minch posted a

tribute to Plunkett on his personal Web page.

"In loving memory of Eric Franklin Plunkett," read Minch's last words on the site, in which he also describes his love of camping, his strong family ties and the fact that he has read more books than he could possibly list. "May his soul be in heaven!"

Established by Congress while the Civil War was in full swing, Gallaudet boasts a campus of approximately 2,000 deaf and hearing-impaired students. Plunkett's is the third violent death in the university's history, with the first two coming in 1990 and 1980, respectively.