



Smart Drugs for College Kids

Should students be able to take drugs to enhance their school performance?

by Alexa Lardieri

Pop a pill, ace a test. If you could take a pill that would instantly make you work harder, improve your brain function and make you “smarter,” would you?

A panel of experts argued this question in a debate this week presented by [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., entitled, “College Students Should be Allowed to Take Smart Drugs.”

So-called smart drugs, including the prescription drugs Ritalin and Adderall, allow students to stay alert longer and focus more on studying. The panel discussed whether taking these drugs is cheating.

A recent study from the University of South Carolina found that 17 percent of college kids, or 1 in 6, misuses ADHD drugs. Most of these students get the drugs from their friends who have prescriptions. In the past 10 years, smart-drug prescriptions have tripled.

“I have serious doubts about this drug. But I can easily see why students think it is a harmless performance enhancer,” said Jeffrey Tucker, the director of digital development at the Foundation for Economic Education and chief liberty officer at [Liberty.me](#).

Dr. Anjan Chatterjee, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the chair of neurology at Pennsylvania Hospital, argued for the motion. His partner, Nita Farahany, is a professor at Duke University and director of Duke Science and Society. Both argued universities should educate students to make their own informed decisions.

Arguing against the motion was Eric Racine and Nicole Vincent. Racine is the director of the Neuroethics Research Unit; Vincent is an associate professor of philosophy, law, and neuroscience at Georgia State University. They believe taking smart drugs will produce a hypercompetitive society with detrimental effects.

Throughout the debate, and in front of about 200 people, Farahany stressed society should stop coddling college students so they can prepare for the “real world.”

“Colleges should empower students ... College students are moral agents (who can) decide for themselves,” Farahany said. “The gradual improvement of our brains is a social good that we should pursue in society.”

Anjan also argued for autonomy: “People have the right to choose for themselves. The problems and perils (of smart drugs) are overblown.”

Should we give students the option to choose to take these drugs? Do we want students taking them without supervision — or will they turn into overworked machines?

Vincent and Racine expressed their fears of creating an overly competitive society. Vincent argued that once one person takes a smart drug, others are forced, then, to take them just to keep up. They are “coerced” and no longer have the freedom of choice.

“Our lives can go wrong in other ways. The drugs are not the problem. The problem is what the drugs enable us to do,” Vincent said.

Vincent has taken smart drugs; Farahany currently does. She attributes her ability to achieve much to the assistance of the drugs, whereas Vincent blames smart drugs for overworking and not prioritizing well.

“The problem was that I hadn’t reassessed what I actually valued. I created a fantastic opportunity for myself (the ability to work more), which would then lead me to sacrifice the very things that I claimed were valuable,” said Vincent.

Before the debate the audience voted — for, against, or undecided on the motion: 27 percent were for it; 44 percent against; and 29 percent undecided. When the debate was over, the audience voted again: 59 percent for the motion; 33 percent against and 8 undecided. The panel arguing for the motion was declared the winner.

“Whether it is available or not, nothing is going to stop it. In some ways, this drug is perfect for students who don’t have regular jobs, can sleep irregular hours, have crush deadlines due to procrastinations, and so on,” Tucker said. “These students will find out quickly. Instead of steady good work habits, it yields episodic bursts of energy followed by flake outs and collapse.”