

# Students for Sensible Drug Policy Working to End the War on Psychedelics

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IT APPEARS WE ARE FINALLY at the beginning of the end of the War on Drugs. This is especially clear to those of us whose social media feeds are filled with news about the momentum to legalize marijuana and medical marijuana, changes in laws offering compassionate alternatives to incarceration for drug addicts, and new government-approved psychedelic research. What in the current zeitgeist has finally brought the majority of people to believe that marijuana should be legal and that the War on Drugs is a failure? The rise of an organized youth movement, led by Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP), has been a substantial contributing factor in this vital change.

Founded in 1998 by students at Rochester Institute of Technology, George Washington University, and American University, SSDP initially set out to fight back against a provision in the Higher Education Act (HEA) that barred students with drug convictions from receiving federal financial aid. Today, SSDP boasts approximately 30,000 alumni, and 3,000 current students in chapters on more than 200 campuses in 43 U.S. states and 13 other countries across the globe. While we weren't able to entirely repeal the HEA's aid elimination provision, we did roll it back significantly. The upside of this policy that has blocked over 200,000 students from federal financial aid is that it also spawned an army of young people determined to end the War on Drugs. Many of those college students have gone on to become leaders in the drug policy reform movement.

SSDP is dedicated to ending the entire War on Drugs—we are not just a “pot club” and we work on much more than cannabis reform. While legalizing marijuana is a high priority, readers of the *MAPS Bulletin* may be surprised to learn that many of our members “turn on” to reform via their interest in psychedelics. As a grassroots organization, dozens of new students contact our staff each month, and one of the first questions we ask is what sparked their interest in reform. What we find is that reforming laws regarding psychedelics is drawing even more new students into the drug policy reform movement than legalizing marijuana or lowering the drinking age. In fact, MAPS is cited more than any other allied organization as the reason new students come to SSDP to start a new chapter. As marijuana reform eases into the mainstream, more opportunities will open up for SSDP and MAPS to work together to end the War on Psychedelics.

Young people hear about SSDP when we attend or table at events such as the Psychedelic Science conferences. Often, enthusiastic students contact MAPS directly hoping to get involved, and MAPS staff connect them with SSDP since we are better equipped to manage a large network of students. Thanks to this strong relationship, numerous chapters bring MAPS speakers to campus to teach students about the science and politics of psychedelics, and MAPS Founder Rick Doblin has spoken at many of our regional and national conferences. Many SSDP students go on to become passionate reformers, changing campus policies or helping reform municipal, state, and federal laws.



*Student attendees gather for a group picture at the 2012 International Students for Sensible Drug Policy Conference in Denver, Colorado.*

A few all-star SSDPers have even gone on to work at MAPS after graduation, using the skills they learned as campus activists for psychedelic research and reform. Randolph Hencken, one of the authors of this article and MAPS Director of Communications from 2008–2011, first became aware of SSDP while attending a talk by renowned artist and MAPS supporter Alex Grey. There, a nurse conducting a psychedelic research study at UCLA encouraged Randolph to get involved with SSDP while he attended San Diego State University. For him, SSDP was a platform from which he could openly express his views about the harms of prohibition and the benefits of psychedelic therapy. Perhaps even more importantly, SSDP plugged him into the national network of reformers where he was able to make the connections that supported his growth in the reform movement.

Randolph was preceded at MAPS by Jag Davies, also an SSDP alumnus. “SSDP isn’t just your run-of-the-mill student group,” Jag told us when we spoke to him about this article. “It exposed me to the depth and breadth of drug policy reform issues. SSDP has played a crucial role in all my subsequent work over the past decade with MAPS, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], and now the Drug Policy Alliance.”

“I learned of MAPS and their great work through my participation in SSDP,” says Troy Dayton, co-founder of SSDP and current CEO of The Arcview Group, an investment firm with strong roots in the legal marijuana industry. “I learned via SSDP that one could have a career in drug policy and research. The skills and connections I built at SSDP helped land me my job as Director of Development at MAPS [2007–2008].”

“SSDP was where the rubber met the road for me as a young activist,” recalls former MAPS Development Associate Brian Wallace. “I found the praxis of academia and personal beliefs in organizing numerous events on campus, honing my fundraising skills, and figuring out how to keep myself and my fellow chapter members involved and inspired.”

Many other SSDP alumni are continuing their psychedelic activism in other ways. University of Northern Colorado chapter alumnus Chris Pezza re-started Palenque Norte, an organization devoted to creating spaces for visionary thinkers to share their ideas, which was originally inspired by a 1999

lecture series with Terence McKenna, Jonathan Ott, and Sasha Shulgin near the Mayan ruins outside of Palenque, Mexico. The Palenque Norte series put psychedelics in the spotlight, starting at the 2003 Burning Man festival. In 2012, after a five-year hiatus, Chris restarted the series and is now bringing the talks beyond Burning Man to provide more public opportunities to discuss entheogens and related topics.

In 2012, late SSDP alumnus Daniel Jabbour, from the Stevens Institute of Technology chapter, founded the Psychedelic Society of San Francisco, which works to create safe spaces to foster education, discussion, and community between consciousness-seekers [article on page 35]. “Stumbling upon SSDP in college was one of the single largest influences of my young adult life,” Daniel said. “Through SSDP, not only did I learn about drug policy, but also about human rights, immigration policy, criminal justice reform, health care policy...there aren’t many areas of public policy that drug policy doesn’t touch. I also credit SSDP with helping to develop my leadership and communication skills and tactics to be able to engage intelligently in a dialogue on the issue with anyone.”

Through SSDP’s AMPLIFY Project, we connect student activists with musicians who support ending the War on Drugs. While students advertise for local shows and tour stops, the band allows SSDPers to table at the venue and often give a short speech on stage. Students involved in AMPLIFY focus on spreading the word about our organization and cause, and often even engage in direct service to the musical community. For example, at the 2013 Tomorrowworld music festival in Georgia, AMPLIFY volunteers worked with DanceSafe and others to provide harm reduction services for people using psychedelics or other drugs. In February 2014, MAPS Harm Reduction Coordinator Linnae Ponté led a remote training for several of our AMPLIFY volunteers to help them be better equipped at future events.

Sam Tracy, one of the authors of this article and current Chairman of SSDP, joined the drug policy reform movement due to his interest in harm reduction, and became passionate about psychedelics reform after watching videos of MAPS speakers at a chapter meeting. He is particularly interested in easing the restrictions on research and use of MDMA, and



*Northeastern University SSDP hosts a panel with MAPS Executive Director, Rick Doblin, about ongoing psychedelic research and therapy.*



*University of Maryland SSDP chapter leader, Nico Orduz, performs outreach to prospective students at the 2014 International Students for Liberty Conference in Washington, DC last February.*

works to educate the public about the realities of the drug. His freshman year, he wrote an op-ed for the University of Connecticut student newspaper advocating for research into the medical uses of psychedelics. In November 2013, he appeared on NPR's *The Colin McEnroe Show* for an episode about the risks and rewards of MDMA, advocating for a regulated market as a safer alternative to our current prohibitionist approach.

SSDP views ending the War on Drugs as our generation's most important civil rights movement. During the 1960s, youth organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were leaders in ending systematic government-sanctioned racial discrimination. Today, SSDPers are continuing that fight for justice and equality, working to end the systematic government-sanctioned criminalization of certain people who use certain drugs.

For more than 15 years, SSDP has fostered students to stand up against the War on Drugs, to educate their peers and parents, and to continue their fight against drug prohibition after graduation. Like MAPS, SSDP is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization only able to operate on the generosity of those

who contribute to our organization. We invite you to support SSDP today, and to give whatever amount you are comfortable donating. If you are a student, please join our movement, and if you are an SSDP alumnus, please stay involved through our alumni network. 🌐

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