



# Why Banning Smart Drugs for College Students Is Impossible, Evil

**Only the handicapper general would do such a thing.**

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Should college students be allowed to take Adderall and Modafinil to improve their academic performance, or should universities treat these so-called “smart drugs” the same way Major League Baseball treats steroids? I attended a debate on the subject at George Washington University last night, and came away convinced that banning smart drugs is not only impractical—it’s profoundly evil.

The debate was hosted by [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#); Nicole Vincent and Eric Racine argued against the use of smart drugs, Dr. Anjan Chatterjee and Dr. Nita Farahany argued for them. The moderator polled the audience before the debate: more people opposed smart drugs than supported them, though quite a few people were undecided. This meant that I was in the minority—I believed (albeit weakly) that smart drugs ought to be permitted on sheer practicality grounds. Prohibition almost always drives illicit substances underground, making consumption more dangerous but no less prevalent. While I was indifferent on the question of whether the use of smart drugs is moral, I presumed banning them would be unwise (not to mention unlibertarian).

But the case for legal smart drugs is much stronger. As Farahany—a Duke University professor and director of Duke Science and Society—put it, the opportunity to improve one’s cognitive functioning is “inherently valuable”:

What if taking a smart drug gives us the capacity to study harder, longer, and better such that we cure cancer, or develop tools for staying better in touch, for solving social ills, or for improving our overall happiness? Shouldn’t we encourage rather than ban these opportunities? Improving our brain functioning can influence important outcomes for individuals, like making them more successful at work, enhancing their earning potential, alleviating their likelihood of experiencing social and economic difficulty and improving their overall well-being. Widespread improvement in cognitive function would result in widespread societal benefits like economic gains or even reducing errors... Improving our brains is inherently valuable in and of itself.

If smart drugs confer benefits on some of the people who use them, Farahany argued, it's arbitrary and cruel to prohibit people from enjoying them—just as it would be arbitrary and cruel to prohibit people from wearing shoes that let them walk faster, or coats that fix their back problems, or glasses that improve their eyesight (which, hey, actually exist).

Vincent, an associate professor of philosophy, law and neuroscience at Georgia State University, argued that the availability of smart drugs would ultimately deprive students of choice, since everyone would have to take them in order to neutralize any competitive advantage they provide. But it's impossible not to extend that logic to other advantages; on what grounds could colleges ban smart drugs but allow private tutors? Students don't spend equal amounts of time studying; should students who want to visit the library for a couple extra hours be prohibited from doing so? This argument, taken to its logical conclusion, would require deliberately sabotaging students who enjoy both natural and earned advantages—a situation not unlike the dystopic nightmare of [Kurt Vonnegut's \*Harrison Bergeron\*](#), which Farahany referenced in her rebuttal to Vincent.

One could argue, as Vincent's side did, that such advantages ought to be specifically prohibited in the campus environment, just as performance enhancing drugs are prohibited in sports. But Chatterjee, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and chair of neurology at Pennsylvania Hospital, countered that only *certain* advantages were prohibited in sports; professional golfers, for instance, are allowed to take drugs that improve their putting, he said. Farahany, for her part, was inclined to allow a wider swath of performance enhancing drugs in professional sports but rejected the comparison. Baseball, after all, is just a game. We can debate what kind of skills we want the game to test and what level of enhancement makes the viewing experience optimal. The stakes aren't the same for students—college is a means of societal advancement, not a spectator sport.

The invention of the [washing machine](#) meant that lower income people—particularly women—could spend less time washing clothes and more time engaged in intellectual pursuits. Similarly, the increased efficiency offered by smart drugs could give students the opportunity to do more of what they value. This is a good in its own right.

I wasn't the only one convinced, as it turns out. The moderator polled the audience a second time after the debate was finished. A majority now agreed that smart drugs should be permitted on college campuses.