Marijuana college gives students a higher education

By Jason Motlagh, Time

On the second floor of the downtown campus, a motley group of students listens to a lecture titled “Palliative and Curative Relief Through a Safe and Effective Herbal Medicine.” Not the sexiest of topics on the face of it, but there’s a catch: this is Oaksterdam University, and the medicine being discussed is marijuana. At “America’s first cannabis college,” in Oakland, Calif., the sallow-faced hippy-skater types that one expects to find sit beside middle-aged professionals in business attire, united in their zeal for the pungent green leaf. No one dares speak out of turn, until instructor Paul Armentano, a marijuana-policy expert, cites a news report that U.S. antidrug authorities plan to legalize pot’s active ingredient exclusively for drug companies’ use. “More stinking profits for Big Business,” mumbles a young man wearing a baseball cap. His classmates groan in agreement.

More than 17,000 students have enrolled since Oaksterdam opened in late 2007. The original student body numbered fewer than two dozen people. Most are from the U.S., but others have arrived from as far as Iran and Colombia to get training for the lucrative medical-marijuana industry. The concept itself originated in Amsterdam, where school founder Richard Lee visited a community-focused cannabis college and figured he could do the same in the Bay Area. A professional and transparent approach, he reasoned, could help erode the drug’s stigmas and eventually move the state closer to full legalization. Some alums have taken up his activist mantle, campaigning aggressively last year in favor of a statewide proposition to legalize and tax recreational cannabis. (It failed by an 8-point margin.) (See pictures of the marijuana-growing industry.)

Still, faculty members concede the vast majority of new students are aspiring entrepreneurs with money on their mind. Oakland has some of the country's laxest drug laws, making it ground zero for the medical-marijuana boom. Small pot clubs abound. In 2009, four legal commercial-scale dispensaries approved by the city council sold some $28 million worth of the drug. The question most frequently asked of instructors? "How much will this plant yield," says "Big" Mike Parker, a technician in the horticulture lab with a long white beard and fading skull tattoos on his wrists. "This is hard work – you see me sweating," he adds, tending to his plants under the bluish glow of a metal-halide light. "And if you think you're gonna get rich, you're here for the wrong reason."

True to one of its sundry nicknames, cannabis is a weed that grows like one in the right climate. But given the gray area that now exists between state law – which allows regulated production for medical purposes – and federal laws that still prohibit the drug, discretion dictates that plants must be grown indoors. That's no easy task. During a recent class, instructor Chris McCatheran broke down the risks of overfertilization, offering tips on what combination of nutrients is best and how to maintain the right parts-per-million ratio. Growing cannabis plants indoors is clearly a delicate affair, even if the feds don't storm in and shut you down. (See photos of the hazy world of cannabis culture.)

Illegal pot farming has run rampant across Oakland. And although busts are still pretty rare, advocates fear that could change if public health and safety concerns mount as cultivation-related crime continues to rise. According to the Oakland police, in 2008 and 2009 there were eight reported robberies, seven burglaries and two homicides connected to the business. (Last year's statistics are likely to be worse but are not yet available.) Meanwhile, the amount of fires doubled in 2010, largely the result of shoddy electrical wiring in illicit grow houses. On March 2, a warehouse believed to

contain between 300 and 500 pot plants – many times the legal limit, if it had a permit – went ablaze in the western part of the city. It required 18 firefighters to put it out.

This is just the kind of Wild West behavior that Oaksterdam faculty and students insist they are trying to eliminate. “There’s still a chance that the police might kick down your door, but you’re taught to be responsible here and you get the best instruction,” says Lisa, 40, a food caterer by day who grows for a cooperative on the side. She drove three and a half hours from Lake Tahoe on a Saturday morning to attend an advanced class and says she can make up to $3,000 extra a month from her plants, a substantial sum but hardly windfall profits.

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