

POLICY REACTION: ALCOHOL AT THE UNIVERSITY

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Fourty-four percent of college students, both locally and nationally, have engaged in "binge drinking," defined as consuming five drinks at one sitting in the last two weeks. This is according to both a national study and the university's findings about its own student body. This finding has led to some major reconstruction work on the alcohol policies. It has also led to confusion and circulation of rumors among students. In any circumstance which affects this many people, open communication is crucial to alleviating tension.

However, communication between students and the administration has perhaps not been as effective as it could have been.

The nationwide figure of 44 percent was published after a 1993 survey of students at 140 college campuses. The director of the School Health Project at Harvard University and designer of the survey, Henry Wechsler, defined binge drinking as having five drinks at one sitting. A student classified as a "binge drinker" engaged in this activity once within the two weeks preceding the survey.

The survey also found that 19 percent of college students nationally are "frequent binge drinkers," meaning they had three or more episodes of binge drinking within the last two weeks. This group reported the most alcohol-related misconduct. One in three reported an injury due to alcohol, two in five engaged in unplanned sexual activity and two in five male frequent binge drinkers reported having driven after having five or more drinks.

Wechsler concluded that it is the frequent binge drinkers who should be college officials' primary concern. "Programs aimed at reducing this problem, should refer them to treatment or educational programs, and should emphasize the harm they cause for students who are not binge drinkers," he said in the report.

While the report urges colleges to intervene, it does not necessarily blame colleges for drinking problems. "Most students reported the same drinking behavior in high school as in college," the report said. In fact, out of all the students surveyed, one in three was already a binge drinker in high school. And 47 percent of the respondents binged neither in high school nor in college.

The Health Advisory Board at the university found that the percentage of binge drinkers here seemed to mirror the national average.

The alcohol policy changes, according to both President Thomas K. Hearn Jr. and Ken Zick, the vice-president for student life and instructional resources, were intended to promote responsible alcohol use among students.

"I'm not a prohibitionist. I'm not even for abstaining," Zick said. He said he has found through other studies that alcohol awareness education, the Harvard study's recommended solution, has not proven effective here in the past.

Zick said that he sees implementing serious consequences as the only way to achieve serious change. For this reason, any alcohol education a student receives after committing an alcohol offense is now undertaken at the student's own expense.

Hearn also said the consequences laid out by the policy reforms will better prepare students for the real world than the previous, more lenient policy. Hearn added that he hopes the more stringent consequences that Zick established will initiate a "change in student culture."

The lack of student input in these policy changes has been a major source of complaint among the student body. Many students feel that the some of the current controversy would have been eliminated or at least lessened had their opinions been considered.

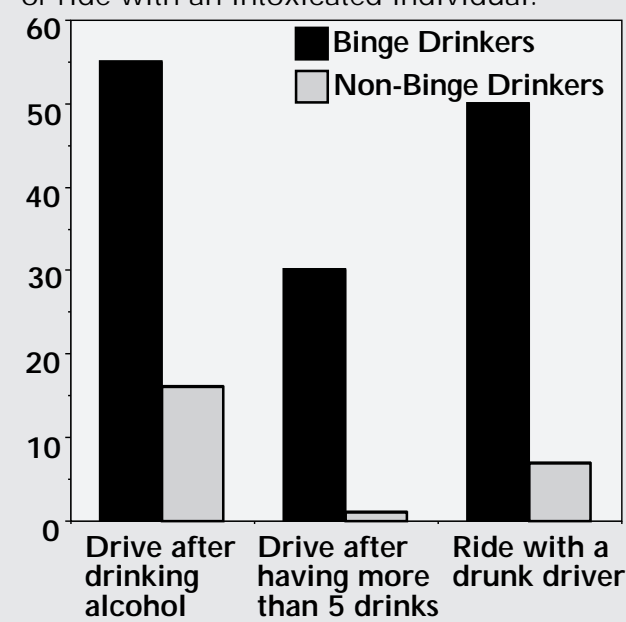
Both Zick and Hearn said they assumed that most students would propose more education as a solution. The administration, they said, saw that as ineffective.

Nonetheless, there will be an opportunity for students to voice their concerns in the future. The administration is planning a conference with student leaders in March to discuss all the recent policy changes on campus. The chance that the outcome of the conference will result in a policy change is, however, low. "A flawed process does not necessarily mean a bad policy," Hearn said.

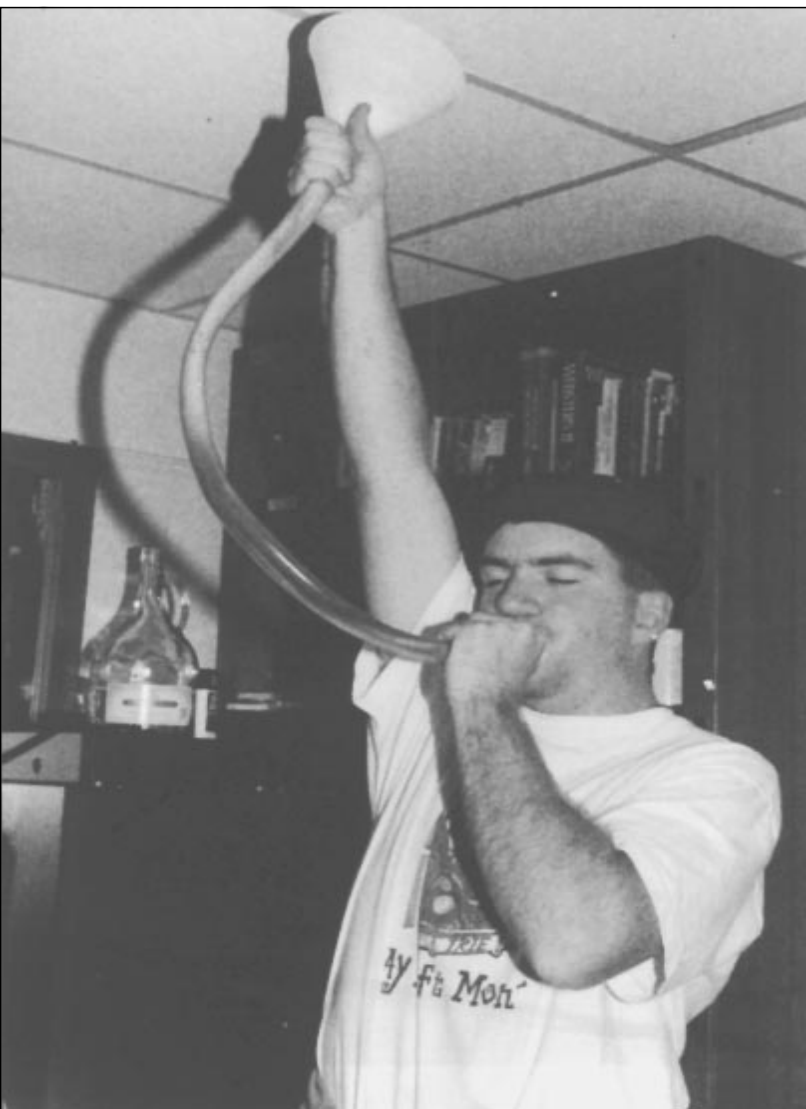
The letter sent home to the parents of students caught drunk on campus has been termed as "paternalistic" by many students. They believe that because they are legally adults, parents should not be involved.

Risky Business

Binge drinkers are much more likely than non-binge drinkers to drive after drinking or ride with an intoxicated individual.



Source: Journal of the American Medical Association



Courtesy of The Howler

A student uses a funnel to guzzle alcohol. This kind of intense alcohol intake can indicate "binge drinking." According to the university's Health Advisory Council, 44 percent of students here are binge drinkers.



Courtesy of The Howler

Two students in a residence hall room demonstrate an unusual method of mixing a Bloody Mary. According to some students, problem drinkers avoid the administration's reprisals by hiding their drinking activities.



At left, two students cheerfully consume mass quantities during a pledge night two years ago. At right, dancing while intoxicated is another popular pledge night activity.



Both photos courtesy of The Howler

"They expect us to act like adults, and they treat us like adults with the honor code, but then they send this stuff home to our parents," sophomore Tim Rogers said.

According to the *Wake Forest Student Handbook*, the administration reserves the right to contact parents if they deem this necessary. Zick said he sees the letter home as the "linchpin" of the policy because it raises the parents' awareness, thereby making this intervention much more effective.

To avoid the restrictions and punishments resulting from drinking on campus, parties may simply move off campus. Many students predict an increase in drinking and driving as a result of the policy reforms. According to one student, it may even lead to an increase in drinking.

"People will drink so much more, so much quicker when they go out," sophomore Lindsay Mitchell said.

Zick suggests that Safe Rides can alleviate the danger of drunk driving. However, beneficial though this service is, it only operates from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. on Wednesday and Thursday nights.

And Hearn said that any student here who would drive drunk was an "admissions mistake."

Wake Forest is able to implement regulations that are more restrictive than those in effect off campus. Prohibiting students over 21 to be intoxicated on campus is therefore within the power of the administration. Regardless, this policy is controversial.

Zick stated that many other colleges prohibit intoxication; however, some restrict only public intoxication, whereas Wake Forest prohibits both public and private intoxication.

Returning to campus this fall, many students may have felt bombarded with restrictions. They heard about not only the alcohol policy reforms, but also the grading memorandum issued by Paul Escott, the dean of the college, and the Lilly Report. Hearn said that they are all independent events.

"The sum is more than the parts," he said. He said that he hopes students do not feel besieged.

Change of any kind leads to uncertainty and the Zick and Hearn seemed unsurprised by this reaction. However, they said they hope that these changes will serve to improve the educational experience at the university.

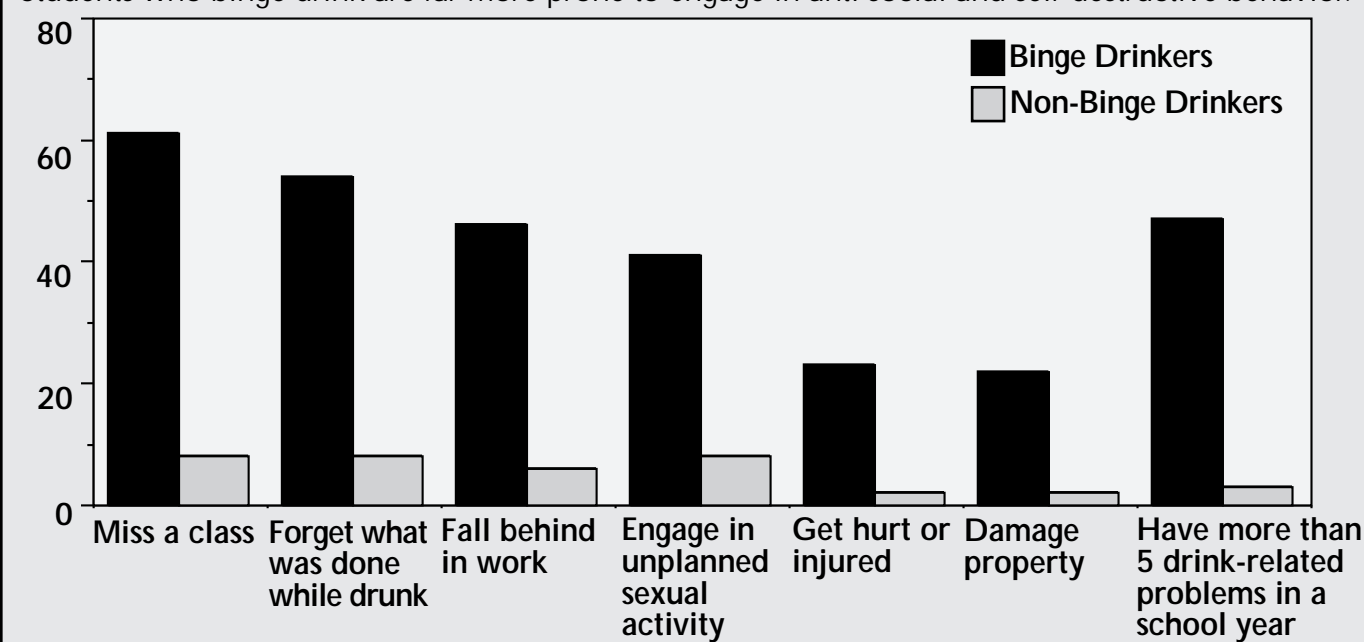


Courtesy of The Howler

Two students sprawl among empty beer cans on the floor in the aftermath of a party.

The Long Term Costs of Binge Drinking

Students who binge drink are far more prone to engage in anti social and self-destructive behavior.



Source: Journal of the American Medical Association