

twenty seven Ignoring a Serious Drinking Problem

Dear Fellow RA,

My name is Jason. It feels weird writing you a letter as a "fellow RA," basically because I'm not an RA anymore. I lost my job as an RA (I was fired). At the time, I thought it was a load of BS, but thinking about it now that it is a year later, I can kind of see why I was let go. As I write this letter, I'm about to graduate from Thomasville University. We have about 15,000 students and are known for our high-quality academic program. And we know how to party, too.

I became an RA my sophomore year. I drank a lot my freshman year, mostly at rush events at different fraternities and also back in the dorm. I didn't end up pledging anywhere. I thought I'd get a bid from a couple houses but it didn't work out. No big deal though. During my sophomore year, my hall was "that hall." Do you know what I mean? Things were always happening on my hall—it was the social center of the first-year residential area. Everyone would come over to pregame before they went out to parties. My residents drank a lot, but for the most part, they were pretty smart about it, at least I thought so. The Residence Life Office used to tell us all the time that we had to write kids up for drinking; I didn't really see the need unless they really had a drinking problem. Besides, I thought I knew my guys better than anyone else did. They had a couple parties that were busted by other RAs. My resident director got kind of annoyed when he found out that I was on the floor when some of the parties happened and did nothing

about it. After that happened a couple times, he put me on probation; no big deal though. My residents really appreciated me taking the heat for them.

The Situation There was this one kid on my hall, Nathan, who had the least experience drinking in high school and tried to make up for it here at TV. One night he came home a little drunk and was staggering down the hallway. It seems to me that when he staggers around, it isn't necessarily a sign that he is really, really drunk; it is just his body's reaction to alcohol. Well anyway, he went into his room and passed out. A while later, his roommate and other guys on the hall went in to mess with him and wrote stuff all over his forehead, arms, and chest. It was pretty funny, but I told them to stop and just let him sleep it off in peace. A few hours later, his roommate came to get me. I went to the room and saw a pile of vomit with blood in it next to Nathan. He wasn't moving. We took him to the bathroom, and he started moving a little and threw up some more. Then, what really ended up getting me in trouble later was that we put him back in bed to sleep it off. After a few more hours, Nathan's roommate came to get me again. He said he wasn't sure if Nathan was breathing. It turns out, he was breathing, but it was really shallow. One of the guys on the floor called 911, and Nathan went to the hospital. It turns out his blood alcohol content level was .38. He had almost died.

Getting Some Advice Honestly, the "advice" I got in this situation was that I didn't have the instincts to be an RA who could keep my residents safe. At the time, I was really annoyed. I thought I was doing everything I should; it turns out, I was really putting my residents at risk. So, that weekend was my last as an RA.

A Second Chance While I didn't get a second chance to be an RA, I did get a second chance to have a good college experience. I got involved in the campus newspaper and joined the club lacrosse team. I saw Nathan a few days ago. He had to take the semester off to go into rehab again. I couldn't help but think that if I had handled my RA role differently, he would have turned out differently. I say this so that you might live my second chance for me.

Lessons Learned It can be tempting to be cool, just let things slide, and not let administrators know when your residents are getting drunk. What I learned is that the rules are there to protect the health and safety of students, first and foremost. If I had done my job, Nathan's life might have turned out a lot differently. While I doubt I could have been the hard-ass they wanted me to be, I could have at least worked with my supervisors to figure out how to best support my residents and their health. So when you see your residents getting drunk or when you see them stumbling down the hallway, be the one to step in and make sure they are OK. If you are not sure, always, always, get

help right away. Don't take the chance that it could be too late for them, and for you. I hope you learn from my experience. Have a great year!

Peace out,
Jason

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jason was hesitant to enforce policy?
2. Does it sound like being an RA was a good choice for Jason?
3. What, specifically, would you do differently from Jason?
4. In what ways was Jason putting his residents at risk?
5. How can you tell that it is time to call 911 for a resident who has been drinking?
6. When should you document a student for drinking alcohol?
7. What are the policies of your school for when you should document an incident? Call a professional staff member at home or on call? Call 911?
8. What are the most helpful things you learned from this scenario?
9. How will you act differently as an RA, based on this new knowledge?

Developmental Questions

1. Was Jason ready to be an RA?
2. What level of challenge and support did Nathan need from an RA in order to avoid developing a drinking problem during his first year of college?
3. Would a different RA have provided that?
4. Was firing Jason a support to his development?
5. Was firing Jason a support to his residents?
6. In what ways did Jason hinder the development of his residents by looking the other way when they used a lot of alcohol?

Tips on Alcohol

1. Even if you see the same resident intoxicated with frequency, it only takes one time to die from alcohol poisoning.
2. Patterns of drunkenness are danger signals for alcoholism.
3. A resident may say he or she has only had a few drinks, but in reality, those drinks can affect each person differently, depending on who mixed them, how big the glass was, and how much the resident had to eat.
4. Never take a risk; when in doubt, get a resident to the emergency room!
5. You can't always tell from looking at someone how much he or she has had to drink. Don't risk being wrong.

Resources

Web Sites

The Bacchus Network <http://www.bacchusamma.org/>
BRAD—Be Responsible About Drinking—Information, charts, and quizzes about responsible drinking. <http://www.brad21.org/>
College Drinking: Changing the Culture—links to topics related to college drinking. www.collegedrinkingsprevention.gov/
Mayo Clinic—definition of alcoholism. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcoholism/DS00340>
Mayo Clinic—information on alcohol poisoning. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcohol-poisoning/DS00861>
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism—Section on Alcohol and Health includes research-based information on drinking and its impact. <http://www.niaaa.gov/>
Resilience.net—article titled "Substance Abuse and Traumatic Brain Injury in College Students." http://www.resilience.net/html/tools_0103b.html

Books and Journals

Slutske, W. S. (2005). Alcohol use disorders among U.S. college students and their non-college-Attending Peers. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(3), 321-327.