

AN ALCOHOL EDUCATION SAFETY V. LIABILITY ON CAMPUS

02/16/2011

Parting Thots by Geoffrey Challen

Since my undergraduate years a decade ago Harvard has struggled to balance the pleasures and dangers of alcohol on campus. Many of the changes I've witnessed are definite improvements. For me, AlcoholEdu was the evening I spent kneeling in front of the toilet, and my DAPA was my freshman girlfriend cradling my head above it. I arrived at college clueless about alcohol and armed with little more than trial and error to figure it out. A trip to the Ad Board (trial) and many mixed drinks (error) later, I started to get the hang of things. Today we have an Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Services which supports many good things: AlcoholEdu, the DAPA program, Ryan M. Travia and something called e-TOKE which I have not experimented with but have been assured is not a joke.

Yet, despite these new programs, alcohol on campus remains dangerous, as evidenced by the sobering statistics recently released about alcohol-related hospital admissions last semester. DAPA claims to avoid scare tactics, but Provost Hyman and Dean Hammonds did their best to scare the assembled Resident Tutors with these numbers at the unusual mid-year tutor meeting. Perhaps they frightened themselves: Provost and Dean both left before the event concluded with a panel discussion of the issue they had raised. After an Adams House tutor delivered a moving declaration of his love for the party form, the panel came to a general agreement that alcohol remains worrisome.

Before the meeting concluded, however, Quincy House tutor Seth W. Moulton '01 raised an uncomfortable question highlighting the tensions inherent to Harvard's approach to campus drinking. He pointed out that underage students from our era had opportunities to drink at supervised, house-sponsored events like Stein Club where our imbibing was tolerated in the hopes that we might learn how to drink responsibly.

In my case, the approach worked: I did learn to drink. I remember encountering a blockmate in the basement of Lowell House. "There's alcohol in the Grille," he said. "It's very strange." We were both underage, and there was alcohol available in the grille. But it wasn't strange. It was the comfortable public alcohol that brings friends together, not the furtive drug taken to shot-pounding extremes behind closed doors. Hoisting a pint in responsible company formed the cornerstone of my alcohol education.

Today Harvard doesn't tolerate those grey areas, and BAT teams patrol Stein Club. We focus on student safety as long as it doesn't incur any liability. When it does, we turn away from those we are trying to educate, pursuing confrontational and ineffective strategies. Two examples illustrate my point: the legal drinking age and the Harvard-Yale Tailgate.

Why won't Harvard support lowering the legal drinking age? We hear repeatedly that 21 is Massachusetts state law, and that is true. But "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was Federal law and Harvard made it's disagreement with that misguided policy extremely clear and extremely public. The mixture of legal and underage drinkers on campus is the source of many of our difficulties with alcohol. Students hide their parties because inevitably some of the attendees are underage. Tutors stay away because confronting underage drinking strands us between the reality of campus drinking and our own liabilities.

Trying to defend the current drinking age is hopeless, but Harvard won't officially decriminalize underage alcohol use on campus. It won't publicly eliminate underage drinking as a disciplinary priority. It won't indemnify residential life staff against alcohol-related lawsuits, freeing us to focus on student safety. Harvard won't even join the 135 other institutions as a signatory to the Amethyst Initiative, which merely calls for "debate on the 21 year-old drinking age." In the face of this silence, it's easy to reach the uncomfortable conclusion that Harvard won't act because it cares about liability more than safety. Because Harvard worries that a lowered drinking age will mean more drinking, more accidents, and more lawsuits.

If Harvard cared about student safety it would increase the length of the Harvard-Yale tailgate. Every year the tailgate gets shorter, more restrictive, and less safe. It's just not hard to posit a connection between the tailgate length and student safety. The shorter the tailgate, the faster the drinking; the faster the drinking, the less safe the event. Why won't Harvard sponsor a more relaxed, more normal tailgate, like the one they have at Yale? Perhaps because a shorter tailgate also limits the amount of time that Harvard is sponsoring an alcohol-driven event, reducing their liability.

What's needed is something else Seth's question mentioned: institutional courage. This means courage to reconcile safety v. liability concerns in favor of safety and students, and to take a few unpopular countercultural stances along the way. Courage the College had ten years ago, but seems to have lost.

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