

Alcohol at Harvard

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The main thing we don't want is for someone to die.

Though more than a quarter of our students don't drink at all, drinking and drunkenness are facts of life here. Harvard is fortunate in not having residential fraternities or sororities, which are notorious for binge drinking, but we do have Final Clubs, unrecognized fraternities and sororities, and other offcampus clubs and commercial establishments where the drinking can be heavy and unsupervised. Students sometimes get drunk in quiet isolation in the Houses and dorms, but the big danger spots are the places where the drinking is organized, not where it's covert.

Every weekend this fall we've had near-misses. A couple of recent graduates ingested a large quantity of a dangerous illegal drug while under the influence of alcohol, and nearly died. An athletic team had an initiation party involving rapidly emptying an everflowing keg. A drunken student engaged in vandalism ran from the police and was hospitalized for a week, narrowly escaping permanent injury after falling down an embankment. Parties at the same club on successive weekends sent students to emergency rooms. Students involved in such incidents often report that they were in a group event and had no idea the amount they were consuming could have the effect on them that it did.

The basics of our alcohol policies are on pages 312-313 of the Handbook for Students. They are clear but not draconian, and they haven't changed at all in more than five years. The College's responses to violations are graduated with the seriousness of the offense. The Handbook includes mention of medical and counseling resources along with statements of what is prohibited.

What are the practical consequences of an alcohol violation at Harvard? A "disciplinary action" in Harvard parlance means putting someone on probation, requiring someone to withdraw, or worse; these things go on a student's permanent record and are reported by the College in response to certain inquiries. Below that level are "warnings" and "admonitions" which we expect students to take seriously, but are internal. The standard response to simple underage drinking is a warning. Repeated violations could result in a formal disciplinary action, but as a matter of fact, there has not been a disciplinary response to a simple incident of underage drinking in the past five years. The Administrative Board does sanction students for alcohol-related offenses, such as physical assaults and irresponsible hosting; indeed a high percentage of disciplinary cases involve alcohol violations. If people tell you that the Ad Board placed them on probation for drinking, ask what else they were doing at the same time.

In fact, the College's usual response to repeated drinking is to try to get students to seek counsel from professionals at the Bureau of Study Counsel or UHS, since their behavior potentially poses real risks, physical and emotional, to themselves and to others. Where drinking persists in spite of warnings, we want students to understand their own behavior before it escalates into a serious health or disciplinary issue.

Nothing in the scientific literature suggests that binge drinking is reduced on campuses with more lenient alcohol policies. In fact the correlation goes the opposite way: there is less binge drinking at colleges where alcohol is banned. But no causal connection is known

in either direction; it may be that students who drink tend to enroll in places that make it easier to do so.

At Harvard we don't make the alcohol laws, but we have to live by them. As a citizen of a democracy, I don't get to choose which laws I obey and which I don't. I remember the sherry hours in the Harvard of the late 1960s, and I've served wine to my underage children in my own home, but those are not the standards of the law as it affects Harvard and its students today. Those who feel that the 21-year-old drinking age is wrong should not ignore it or urge Harvard to do so, but work as citizens to change it, just as young voters have fought effectively for other causes in which they strongly believe. They will find that other citizens have arguments in support of the current laws.

Alcohol-related deaths are a daily fact of life in America and admission to Harvard College does not immunize anyone against them. Particularly dangerous is drinking a lot of alcohol in a short period of time. Games designed to increase the alcohol volume per hour can and do kill students regularly. High blood alcohol levels can cause coma and death from suppression of the drive to breathe, but death can also occur when someone falls asleep in a drunken stupor, vomits while unconscious, aspirates the vomit, and suffocates. Serious injuries and death also frequently result from head injuries incurred from falling while drunk. Never leave a person alone who is too drunk to be roused. Dial 911, call 5-1212 for a police transport, or walk the person to UHS.

It is the Ad Board's policy not to sanction a student who seeks medical attention or on whose behalf medical attention is sought, as long as the only infraction is the drinking. But a drunken student who punches a physician helping him at UHS is likely to have to answer to the Ad Board for assault. Harvard is part of the real world: if someone punched a doctor in a hospital emergency room, he'd probably be handcuffed, arrested, and thrown in jail. People who buy alcohol and serve it to an underage student who passes out don't get blanket immunity because they dial 911 rather than risking a death in their room. We're not out to snare every incidental participant in an affair like this; when there is a serious incident we hold accountable the people who bear the most responsibility, using common sense about whom to sanction for what.

Why doesn't Harvard try to bribe its students into saving each other's lives by guaranteeing that no one involved in an incident will be punished if a medical visit results? Honorable and altruistic as Harvard students are, we expect that they will share the College's primary concern with human life and will not make morally dubious judgments in life-threatening situations in the hope of avoiding all risk of discipline. The College will respond proportionally to the varying degrees of responsibility of those involved in an incident. Minor infractions of incidental participants can be overlooked, but someone who causes a serious injury or death could not be immunized by the Ad Board merely because medical attention was sought.

I am confident that Harvard students have the good judgment to handle emergencies with compassion. To respond to human distress does not require a special Harvard policy; it is part of the rules of life by which we all live.

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