

Alcohol

There has been interest from students this fall in the subject of drinking at Harvard. We inform students at the very beginning of their time here of Massachusetts law regarding alcohol. It is simple and straightforward: purchase, possession, and consumption of alcohol by persons under the age of 21 are all illegal. Likewise, it is illegal to provide alcohol to a person under the age of 21. And it is illegal for any individual to possess false identification or to use false identification to purchase alcohol. Like any other illegal act, violation of any of these provisions is a matter of concern to the College, and yet we are aware that they occur regularly. I want to share with parents some thoughts, adapted from a longer piece I wrote for the November 11 issue of the Harvard Independent (the full text is posted on the College Web page).

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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 off-campus 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 ever-flowing 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.

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.

In fact, the College's usual response to repeated drinking is to try to get students to seek professional counsel, 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.

It has been suggested that Harvard's clear expectation that its students obey the alcohol laws is actually responsible for some of the dangerous drinking that occurs here. But 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 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. 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.

Students (and parents) sometimes suggest that students will avoid getting medical help for themselves or for a seriously intoxicated friend because doing so will get them in "trouble," or because the College will "find out" about an

incident. In fact, 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 people who serve alcohol to an underage student don't get automatic 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.

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Many parents will have heard or read of recent legislation which permits (but does not require) colleges to inform parents or guardians of alcohol or other drug use which results in disciplinary action. In fact, Harvard has long informed parents or guardians of all College disciplinary actions. And resident deans urge frank conversations between students and parents when any issue, including alcohol or other drug use, affects an undergraduate's life or work in the College in a significant way. But many students are reluctant to discuss such issues with their families, and so parents' initiative in raising the topic can be both important and helpful. Parents play an important role in helping to shape students' attitudes about drinking, and conversations about alcohol between students and parents are never a bad idea. Students who come to our attention because of incidents involving alcohol almost never think, at first, that they are not in control of their behavior, which sometimes turns out to be a matter never discussed with those who know them best.

Often, we hear from students that parents or other family members "don't mind" if students drink -- even, students imply, in violation of the alcohol laws and of College policies. Occasionally, students report that parents have supplied the alcohol for underage parties at Harvard. I, like many parents, have served wine to my own underage children in my own home, but those are not the standards that apply to other people's children and to life in Harvard residences. There are penalties for providing alcohol to underage drinkers, and the "host liability" laws that apply to the provider, should an underage drinker suffer an injury or cause an accident, are severe.

Harvard, like other colleges and universities, continues to be concerned about underage drinking and alcohol abuse. While a great deal of thought has gone into developing our policies and providing needed resources for students, we also recognize that we do not have all the answers to problems that we know are of as much concern to parents as to us.