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ON EDUCATION

Calling the Folks About Campus Drinking

By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

MADISON, Wis.

Officer Brent Plisch drove off to start his shift with the campus police, as all around this college town the planets were aligned for undergraduate excess. It was Friday night of the Labor Day long weekend, the eve of the first football game for the highly ranked [Wisconsin Badgers](#). Classes for the fall semester had yet to begin, so there was no homework to tug at the student conscience for moderation, much less temperance.

Sure enough, half past midnight, Officer Plisch got a call in his cruiser from three other policemen. They had spotted a young woman woozily negotiating a pedestrian bridge between two dorms. When they questioned her, she couldn't spell her name or remember her address. Her breath test showed a blood alcohol level nearly three times the legal limit.

Staring with both scrutiny and compassion into the woman's glazed eyes, Officer Plisch and the others considered taking her to a detox center. They elicited her name and address from a dorm friend, so that the next day, when, presumably, the woman would be sober and aware, they could serve her with a summons for under-age drinking.

And there, under the university's guidelines, the matter would most certainly not end.

A few days later, a dean would be required to review the night's police log and call in the woman for a discussion. Then, in all likelihood, that dean would telephone the woman's parents to inform them.

Over the past two years, Wisconsin has sought to control *la vida loca* with *in loco parentis*. The parents of any student taken to detox must hear directly from a dean. For students who receive a summons but do not need detox — or are ultimately released to the care of abstinent friends, as was the woman on this Friday night — the dean retains the option of telling Mom and Dad.

The Wisconsin policy in some ways is a throwback to the paternalistic past of colleges, when they enforced curfews and housed the sexes in separate dorms.

In another respect, though, the regulations speak to the present day, to a generation of students and parents who stay in contact by cellphone and e-mail on a practically hourly basis.

While binge drinking is a nationwide concern at colleges, the parent-notification policy faces an almost unique set of obstacles here at the University of Wisconsin. Both culture and counterculture have long conspired to tolerate, if not endorse, hearty drinking. The state's German heritage is inextricably bound up with the brewing industry. And Madison's history of student radicalism has often been lubricated by copious infusions of alcohol and drugs.

Back in the 1970s, before the state raised its drinking age to 21 from 18, university snack bars served beer, which could be bought with a meal card.

Campus buses equipped with kegs transported revelers between the two student-union buildings during Fasching, the German pre-Lent celebration. So ubiquitous were putatively illegal pints of liquor among Badger football fans that they hailed Coke vendors with the cry, "Hey, gimme some mixer!"

At enough points over the passing years, though, social drinking turned antisocial. The results went beyond vomiting in the dorm bathroom, passing out in the bushes or stumbling barefoot down University Avenue. Drunken students regularly became the victims of crimes, ranging from theft to rape.

By the beginning of classes in September 2005, Chancellor John D. Wiley had resolved to take action with the parent-notification program. Last month, the family of every incoming freshman received a letter from him outlining the policy.

UNAMBIGUOUSLY, alcohol abuse is the No. 1 health and safety problem on every college campus,” Chancellor Wiley said in a recent interview. “I don’t even know what would be No. 2. Just about every unpleasant incident, every crime, involves alcohol abuse by the victim or the perpetrator. The question is, what do you do that’s effective to prevent it? And there’s no magic bullet.”

Indeed, the parent-notification policy has shown mixed results. The number of students taken to detox by university police was 112 in the 2006-7 academic year, up from 44 in 2004-5, before the rule took effect. On the other hand, Wisconsin administrators say that the number of repeat offenders has fallen markedly during the same period, and that virtually none of the sanctioned students wound up dropping out.

“We’re not calling home to tattle,” said Tonya Schmidt, an interim assistant dean of students. “We’re calling to ask parents to be partners with us. We are saying that we’re concerned, and want to work on your child making better choices for the future. We do want the students to know there are consequences, but our goal isn’t to be harsh and punitive. It’s to make sure this behavior doesn’t happen again.”

By meeting with the binge drinkers and by alerting parents, Wisconsin’s deans often discover related emotional or academic problems that can be addressed. A student who went into detox in his first month of school, for instance, confided to a dean that in the preceding summer he had been the sole survivor of a car accident that killed several friends.

While the university would not identify students by name because of federal privacy laws, it did make available, with the names redacted, several of the personal essays written by students as part of the program. These statements suggest the power of exposure, especially to parents, to stimulate remorse.

“When I received my acceptance letter over a year ago,” one student wrote, “the dream I have had since I was a young child had come true: I was going to be a Wisconsin Badger. With the opportunity of a lifetime in front of me, I was determined not to mess this one up. Instead, I have made poor choices which put this great opportunity in jeopardy.”

The parental responses, as recorded in writing by the deans, include gratitude, shame, concern and even, at times, huffiness. After all, campus police officers have found the occasional father stocking his child’s dorm room with a case of beer.

The Wisconsin approach to problem drinking has been studied by several other universities, including Minnesota and [Penn State](#), Chancellor Wiley said. In a case of parallel evolution, St. Lawrence University in upstate New York and Ohio Northern University have developed similar parent-notification policies.

Wisconsin continues augmenting its own. On football weekends, one parking lot is reserved for teetotaling tailgaters. Chancellor Wiley has met with tavern owners to persuade them, for instance, not to promote drink specials like free shots with beers.

A nocturnal drive with Officer Plisch provides ample evidence that plenty of liquor continues to flow. Still, as Mr. Wiley knows, things could be much worse. His official residence was donated by a law professor, John Olin, who was fired (though later reinstated) by the Board of Regents in 1887 for advocating prohibition.

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