

A Case Study in Policy Development

Violet Decisions: Response to Binge Drinking Policy and Enforcement



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Introduction

The night of September 15, 2001 began as any other Saturday night at the Kappa Iota Lambda fraternity house on the campus of Altered State University. Prior to the annual Fall Festival, many of the brothers congregated to engage in what would become a tragic chain of events. Brian Bleekers, 19, and five underage companions began the evening at approximately 7:00pm by indulging in numerous shots of hard alcohol quickly chased by bottles of imported beer. By 9:00pm, the brothers of Kappa Iota Lambda had cumulatively finished one half gallon (1.75 Liters) of whiskey and a case of lager beer.

With the festival about to begin, the brothers of Kappa Iota Lambda decided to freshen up before attending the event and mingling with sorority girls. At 10:00pm a junior in the house, Timothy Fleck, 21, noticed Bleekers half dressed and sleeping in a chair in his room. When he attempted to wake Bleekers, Fleck received a minimal physical response and noticed that Bleekers' speech was slurred and incomprehensible. Seeing that his friend was incapacitated, Fleck assisted Bleekers into his cold-dorm bed on the third floor and departed for the festival.

At approximately 2:30am on Sunday, September 16th, the brothers of the Kappa Iota Lambda returned home to find Bleekers on his back, lifeless in his bed, with vomit on his face and pillow. The brothers cleared his airway and checked for a pulse. When no pulse was found, they decided to begin CPR. While CPR was being performed on Bleekers, a Sophomore in the house, Teddy Aims, quickly sought out the President of the house, John Upright, who contacted EMS and the proper authorities. Later that day, a somber phone call was placed to the parents of Brian Bleekers. With sincerity and directness, Dr. Henry Cummings of Community Hospital informed the Bleekers that their son had aspirated on his own vomit and had died. He conveyed that alcohol was involved and recommended that they come to the hospital.

With great horror and a multitude of questions, the parents of Brian Bleekers headed for the Community Hospital on the campus of Altered State University. Once the news of this tragedy was made public, Altered State University President, Dr. Sandra Stone, met with members of the media to offer a public statement. Following her statement, the University was flooded with hundreds of letters, phone calls, and electronic mail messages expressing community concern and demanding administrative action.

Policy Development at Altered State

Excerpt from the Altered State Student Newspaper – September 23, 2001 “Drinking Leads to Tragedy”

While most ASU students were preparing for a weekend of fun, relaxation, and studying, the parents of Brian Bleekers, 19, were making funeral arrangements for their son. A small fraternity pre-party ended in tragedy when Bleekers apparently drank too much, went to sleep, and aspirated in his own vomit. By the time he was discovered by friends, it was too late to save him. He died at Community Hospital.

Although most college students consider Bleekers' death a "fluke," the pain it has caused has raised awareness about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption. This notion of Bleekers' death being a "fluke" incident may be the root cause of college students ignoring warnings regarding the dangers of alcohol abuse and binge drinking. The lesson this tragedy should send is this: Overindulgence in alcohol carries severe, and sometimes lethal, risks. Brian Bleekers' death was an accident, but an accident that could have been easily prevented.

Currently, the newly formed Alcohol Prevention Task Force is convening to review this instance and offer suggestions to revamp the existing policies surrounding alcohol consumption on the ASU campus. Although these steps may not eliminate the problem, they may have a considerable impact. Moreover, the administration must use every tool at its disposal to spare any more parents from having to hear the devastating news that Brian Bleekers' parents heard last week.

Altered State University Demographics and Statistics:

- Population: 42,000 students (undergraduate and graduate)
- 25% Greek on-campus housing students
- 53% on-campus housing students
- 22% off-campus housing students

Prior to the death of Brian Bleekers, Altered State University had a Personal Misconduct Policy similar to many other universities' policies that prohibit drinking on campus. Any student who violated the policy was subject to a variety of penalties, ranging from a reprimand to expulsion, depending on the severity of the violation. After the tragic death of Brian Bleekers, Altered State University's administration and alcohol policy came under great scrutiny from the media and public. ASU President, Dr. Sandra Stone, formed a committee to review ASU's alcohol policy and make recommendations for modification and implementation. Representatives from the following groups were invited to participate on the task force:

- Altered State University Administration (President, Dean of Students, Chancellor, etc.)
- Interfraternity Council and Pan-Hellenic Association representatives
- Dormitory Presidents and Vice Presidents
- Student representatives
- Parents

On September 27th 2001, the night of the first Alcohol Committee meeting, Dr. Stone suggested an agenda to examine the current policy, discuss the current rules and consequences, and tentatively come to a consensus on which current regulations are ineffective. Attendance at the meeting was high, displaying a strong interest in curbing

the alcohol problem on campus and indicating a strong desire for community involvement.

Under the existing ASU alcohol policy, a student accused of personal misconduct went through a series of disciplinary proceedings until an outcome was reached that satisfied the policy. When a report of violation was filed with the University, the Dean of Students would send a notice to the student that included the violated policy, the reported circumstances, and a summons to the Dean's office. Based on the results of the meeting, the Dean of Students could then take any of the following actions: reprimand and warning, disciplinary probation, restitution, participation in a specific program (i.e. alcohol awareness classes), provision of a specific service, expulsion from university housing, transfer to a different residence hall or housing unit, suspension, and/or expulsion. A student could request a formal hearing before a commission that consisted of one student and two faculty members. The student could present his/her case before the commission, who would then make a decision based on majority vote. If the commission determined the student had committed a violation, it would review the student's disciplinary record and establish the disciplinary sanctions on the student as it saw fit.

Members of the Alcohol Prevention Task Force approved of the current rules and consequences, but felt that innovative ideas were needed in order to strengthen the policy. More specifically, they felt that these punishments were not enough to deter students from drinking on campus, underage drinking, or violating the ASU alcohol policy. A sub-committee was formed to research policies on other campuses that could potentially be revised and included in ASU's current policy. This subcommittee was charged with searching for policies that support individual and community efforts to curb binge drinking and to present a summary of suggestions at the next Alcohol Prevention Task Force meeting.

At the next meeting on October 17th 2001, the sub-committee reported that another major university had had considerable success with the policy of sending a letter to parents of the student who committed the violation. Members of the Alcohol Prevention Task Force strongly approved of adding this component to the Altered State University alcohol policy. Dr. Stone proposed to have the new regulation in place by January, in time for the beginning of the new semester. Altered State University administration subsequently approved amendment of the existing policy to include this new regulation.

The policy amendment took effect as planned. Although not an issue addressed by the task force, campus police also appeared to be taking a more aggressive stance against campus drinking. Students perceived that officers were following them home from bars and conducting undercover surveillance at campus parties. Six fraternities were expelled from the university in the few months following Bleekers' death.

Evaluation of the Revised Alcohol Policy

In October of 2002, Dr. Stone called a meeting of the Alcohol Prevention Task Force to conduct a post-assessment of the effects of the policy that allowed Altered State University administration to send notification letters to the parents of underage students who had violated the alcohol policy. The Task Force gathered statistics from years 2001

and 2002 that compared the incident rates for Operating While Intoxicated, Public Intoxication, Illegal Possession/Consumption, Noise Violations, Damage to Private Property, and Alcohol-Related Hospital Admissions. The Alcohol Prevention Task Force also considered Altered State University student violations and the response that ASU administration received from parents who were contacted via the parental notification policy.

The statistics revealed higher alcohol-related incident rates across the board in 2002, the year after the new policy and regulations were enacted. However, there were no alcohol-related deaths in 2002 at ASU. The University did not expel any fraternities from campus in 2002, compared to the six fraternities that were expelled in 2001 for alcohol-related violations. The University received no responses from parents who were notified by letter of their student's alcohol violation.

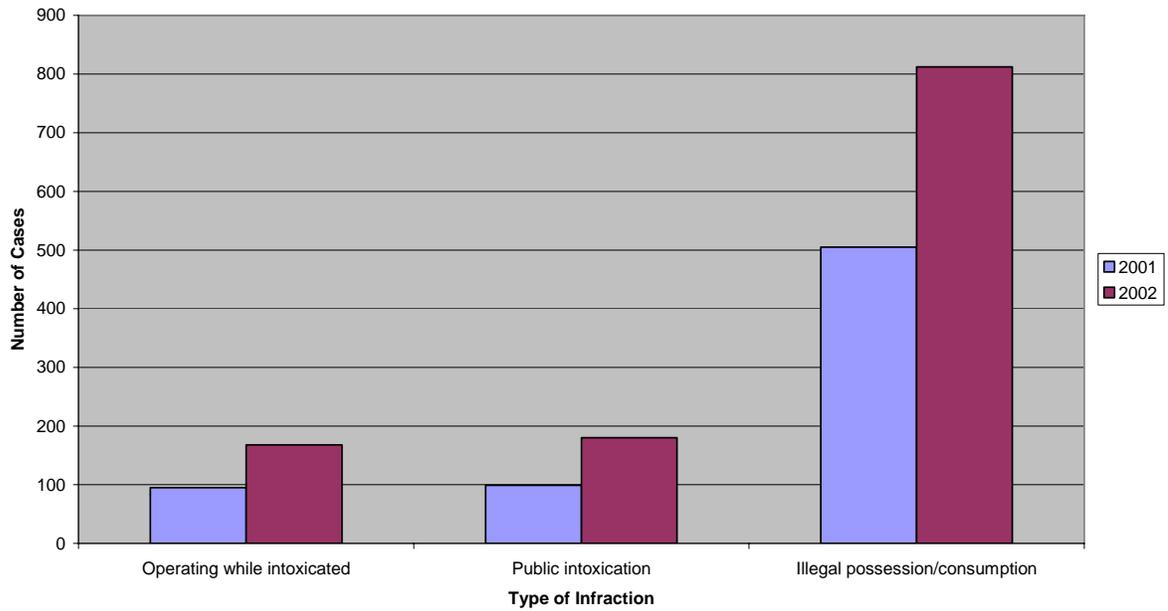
The Altered State Student newspaper published an interview with ASU dorm president Holly Derrier that discussed the student view of the new Altered State University alcohol policies and regulations. When asked if she had noticed any changes after the fraternity death and resulting change in policies, she replied, "I think there have been changes in policy, especially after ASU was ranked the #2 party school in the nation. And I think ASU wants to prove that they have a dry campus." She went on to say, "the only real repercussion I see as a result is the ASU police department arresting people who are walking, rather than driving home after becoming intoxicated. And I have never had a circumstance arise in which I had to deal with a student whose parents were notified via the new policy."

Conclusion

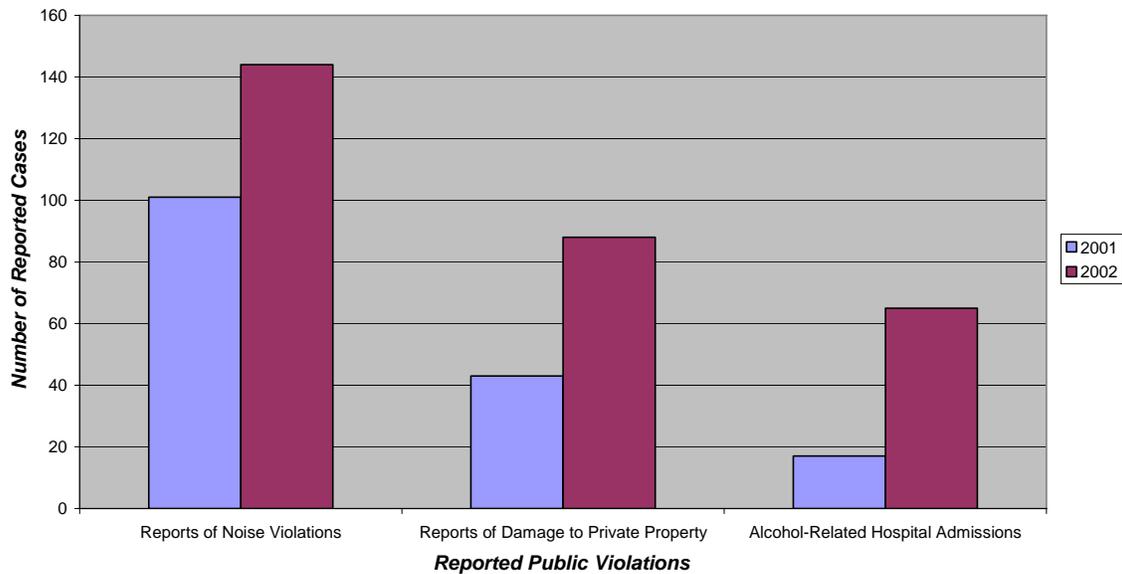
This case study is based on real life events. Health issues surrounding alcohol consumption on University campuses deserve considerable attention from University administration, parents, students, and the general public. Alcohol abuse, binge drinking, and underage drinking have health ramifications that affect a multitude of personal, community, and political realms. Policies that protect students and deter destructive behaviors must be implemented prior to the occurrence of a tragedy. In this case, alcohol-related policies that existed before the death of the University student were modified after his untimely death in an attempt to make them stronger. Despite the actions of the Altered State University administration, alcohol-related arrests, and reported violations continued to rise among University students.

Appendix A:

Alcohol Arrests & Citations by Altered State Police Department



Alcohol-Related Violations and Hospital Admissions on ASU Campus



Appendix B:

November 16, 2001

Name of Parent
Address
City, State Zip

Dear (Mr. or Ms.) _____:

Altered State University's campus judicial system allows parents or guardians to be notified when the student under 21 years of age have been found responsible for violating campus policies involving alcohol and other drugs. This parent/guardian notification policy, permitted under federal law, reflects the commitment that ASU has to educate its students and is designed to both inform parents or guardians that such a violation has occurred and to encourage a discussion with their students regarding the behaviors that led to the violation.

You are receiving this letter because your (son or daughter), _____, was found responsible, in a judicial conference held according to the campus judicial system procedures of Altered State University, for a violation of the alcohol or drug policies of the University. The criteria used by Altered State University to determine if parents/guardians should be notified are listed on the enclosed sheet. _____ was found responsible for being in violation of university policy and/or state law when (he or she) _____. Based on (his or her) judicial record, (he or she) was issued the sanctions of disciplinary probation until (date), and required to complete a program and a service.

General information about student rights and responsibilities and the campus judicial system can be found in the Code of Students Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct. _____ should have a copy of the Code, which can also be accessed at <http://sce.alteredstate.edu/ethics.html>.

Please know the purpose of this letter is not to imply any responsibility on your part for the behavior of _____ or to create any conflict between you and _____. Because the goals of the campus judicial systems are educational, I believe by revealing this information to you, we can share responsibility for providing as educational an outcome as possible for (him or her) regarding this incident.

Again, I hope you will discuss this incident with _____. If you have questions about (his or her) judicial record with Altered State University, I urge you to have (him or her) complete a Release of Information form in my office. Once that form is received, staff who works with the campus judicial system will be glad to speak with you.

Sincerely,

Sandra S. Stone
Altered State University President
Office of University Affairs

Enc.

Teacher's Guide

1. What liability/responsibility does the ASU Administration hold regarding student safety?
2. What other agencies do you feel should have been added to the Alcohol Prevention Task Force?
3. What barriers may the Task Force have encountered in implementing this new policy?
4. Do the higher statistics in the 2nd year of the policy imply that there are more students drinking, or that the policies are being more heavily enforced? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think the parental notification policy did not have the results expected by the Alcohol Prevention Task Force?
6. How could the Task Force/ASU Administration make the policy more widely known and followed by ASU students?
7. What core public health concept is featured in this case study?