

World Wide Web Edition

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Headline: Are police finally cracking down on drinking?

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Despite worries caused by recent arrests, the University's alcohol policy remains unchanged.

By Zander Dryer

Seiji Shirane's, SY '04, biggest mistake last Saturday night was not looking both ways before crossing High Street. Had he done so, he would have noticed the Yale Police officer bicycling toward him. Perhaps he would have hidden the telltale red plastic cup in his hand. But Shirane did not look both ways. He did not notice the officer. And as he and friends left a party to head for Naples, he took a sip of beer from his plastic cup. Then, like many other freshmen last weekend, Shirane looked up to find himself busted: the police officer had stopped short right in front of him.

Shirane tried to talk his way out of trouble. "We were just leaving," he said. "I'll pour it out and we'll move along." "I'm sorry," said the police officer as he got off his bike. "Drinking in public is against the law. I'll have to fine you \$77." Shirane's friends protested after all, he had "learned his lesson." But the officer was insistent, and Shirane paid the fine.

The last few weeks have not been good for Yale's partygoers. Two weekends ago, New Haven police arrested seven students at an SAE party, leading to an investigation by the fraternity's national headquarters. And just last weekend, many students like Shirane faced fines and citations for violating city and state drinking laws. Then rumors began to fly that even Naples had fallen victim to the trend. Although that story proved to be untrue, by the beginning of this week, students were already whispering about the University's new "crackdown" on drinking.

A real crackdown?

"The events at the beginning of this semester, specifically Timothy Dwight's Exotic Erotic when many people had to be taken to local hospitals for detoxification should be a concern for everyone," Yale Chief of Police James Perrotti said of what seems to be the University's sudden anxiety over underage drinking. But Perrotti objected to the term "crackdown" and insisted that police action this fall has all been part of "standard operating procedure."

"We are not aggressively trying to find parties, but they do come to our attention due to their effect on neighbors or neighborhoods," he said. "The parties often become disruptive, and neighbors call the police." As for Shirane, the freshman who faced the \$77 citation, Perrotti pointed out that "there is an ordinance in New Haven that prohibits public drinking and it is enforced on a regular basis."

Dean of Student Affairs Betty Trachtenberg agreed with Chief Perrotti's assessment of police action this fall. "I don't see our attitude as evolving or changing," she told the Herald this week. "If there were a change in the law, then there might be a change in how we view underage drinking." As far as the perceived "crackdown" is concerned, Dean Trachtenberg asserted, "The recent arrests are a result of students bringing attention to themselves."

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Perhaps, but students' edginess about perceived changes to Yale's drinking policy might not be just paranoia. Indeed, the last few years have seen a debate about college drinking sweep the country.

Party time is over

Just last fall, the University of Pennsylvania adopted a more stringent attitude toward underage drinking than it ever had before. Penn's new drinking policy included monitoring students more closely, banning all hard liquor, and requiring that alcohol be available only on a BYOB basis (a clause that is currently under review).

The new policy was prompted by a string of alcohol-related incidents in March 1999, capped by the death of 1994 graduate Michael Tobin, who engaged in a night of heavy drinking at a reunion of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity. Days after Tobin's death, Penn President Judith Rodin instituted a temporary ban on all alcohol while Provost Robert Barchi convened the committee that ultimately drew up the new regulations. The temporary alcohol ban was widely unpopular, and the new regulations have been met with extensive student protest. But while Penn's policy is perhaps the Ivies' most striking example of the hard line colleges are drawing, it does not stand alone.

The problem of excessive drinking first appeared prominently on colleges' radar screens in 1993, prompted by the work of a researcher at Harvard. In a now-famous study, Henry Wechsler concluded that 44 percent of students engaged in binge drinking. For the purpose of the study, "binge drinkers" were defined as women who consumed four drinks and men who drank five in a single evening at least once during the previous two weeks. Although critics pointed out that Wechsler did not take into account the weight of the student, what the student may have eaten while drinking, or the time over which the drinking occurred, the study was enough to terrify colleges. Many believed that an epidemic had arrived.

The immediate reaction of many universities was to tighten their rules and scare students into not drinking. Colleges instituted new regulations on the what, when and where of drinking; founded new counseling and education programs; and plastered campuses with posters decrying alcohol's role in increasing the risks of injury, sexual assault and death.

A new trend emerges

At the same time, however, a few colleges began to buck the trend. Rather than base their drinking policies on the work of Dr. Wechsler, some universities chose to focus on the work of a sociology professor at **Hobart and William Smith College**, H. Wesley Perkins. Perkins observed that, when filling out surveys, students tended to overestimate how much their peers drank. His assertion was that the more students overestimated, the more likely they were to drink, in order to fit into the perceived "college culture." Place less emphasis on binge drinking, he said, and students will feel less of a need to drink.

And, according to a study reported in *The New York Times* on Tues., Oct. 3, colleges that have downplayed drinking emphasizing the fact that most students are not binge drinkers have actually seen tremendous results. The findings indicated that both drinking and alcohol-related problems have declined sharply at these universities. Although the merit of these so-called "social norms" studies are still under contention (Wechsler published a study last month showing that binge drinking held steady at 44 percent in 1999), colleges across the country are becoming quick converts.

This fall, for example, Cornell gave out Frisbees reading "Zero to 3" pointing out to students that most of their peers consumed three or fewer drinks when they go out. And, the same colleges across the country that cracked down on drinking in the early nineties including Dartmouth, UNC-Chapel Hill, and the University of Arizona now seem to be following Professor Perkins' lead.

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Ahead of the curve?

Given these trends, Yale may be ahead of the curve. "Yale College recognizes its students to be responsible adults and believes that they should behave in a manner that does not endanger themselves or others," reads the beginning of the University's policy on alcohol and drugs. Indeed, Yale has historically avoided heavy-handed drinking enforcement or scare tactics. "We don't have people monitoring the entryways of the residential colleges," Perrotti said.

"We believe that when people come here they are mature enough to conduct themselves in a lawful way," Trachtenberg added. "I think that, by and large, our attitude works." But, according to Trachtenberg, that does not mean Yale can turn a blind eye to illegal activity. "We have police officers here who are sworn officers of the law, and New Haven has a police force," she said. "It's their responsibility to uphold the law. Although Yale does not arrest people, the police force does. Students are fined based on Connecticut's statutes and laws."

Yale has not formally studied the research of Professor Perkins, but Trachtenberg said other colleges' experience with "social norms" campaigns "seemed very familiar." "I think students, especially younger students, feel a great deal of pressure to fit in to their surroundings and to the culture of the place," she said. "I can't tell you scientifically or quantitatively what the incidence of drinking or binge drinking is at Yale. And I would say, with caution, that other schools don't know that either."

Trachtenberg emphasized that the University's attitude is based on common sense and faith in Yale students. "The constant concern is of the health of the students," she said. "And when a student gets drunk or stoned, there's a concern for the health of the student. And that transcends where we are at any given moment in terms of alcohol policy."

Graphic by Eugene Wong. Photo by Tanya Palomo.

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