



Threatening Student Health:

The University's Dangerous Alcohol Policy and How to Fix It

A Publius Foundation Policy Briefing

**By
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Executive Summary

Parties, college. College, parties. The two are almost inseparable from one another. Whether being profiled in major publications like Playboy and U.S. News and World Reports as outstanding party schools or not, almost all major colleges and universities around the nation serve as havens for imbibing young adults to let loose.

Unfortunately, a byproduct of widespread availability of alcohol on college campuses is underage drinking. While we do not condone this illegal activity in any form, The Publius Foundation recognizes that it does happen. As long as there are large numbers of young adults in varying degrees of age and maturity gathered en masse anywhere, it will likely continue to happen, too.

In order to curtail underage drinking, the University of Pittsburgh implemented a zero-tolerance policy towards underage drinking that allows not only for charges to be brought against underage students by the city of Pittsburgh, but also that the University has the right to reprimand students — whether the incident occurred on school property or not.

Most dangerously, this policy extends through the doors of UPMC Presbyterian Hospital. Should one need medical attention after a night of excessive drinking, University of Pittsburgh Police stationed in the emergency room are prepared to cite underage students seeking medical attention and turn over their information to the Judicial Board for punishment. Interestingly enough, UPMC Mercy does not enforce the same policy.

Rather than discourage underage drinking, such a policy is excessively dangerous for students who may need medical attention after heavy alcohol consumption. In many cases, students will take the option of fending for themselves in a dorm room with other intoxicated students rather than be charged with an underage at the hospital's door. In the wake of this past school year when 18-year-old Penn State student Joseph Dado was found dead in a stairwell with a blood-alcohol level of 0.169, it serves to reason that rather than let new and inexperienced students fend for themselves — sometimes to very bad results — the University should aim to assist and educate students in a safe and productive manner rather than punish them for seeking medical help.¹

This briefing aims to dissect the policy, looking at its various facets with regard to:

- **The University's Stance.** Chancellor Mark Nordenberg won accolades for his condemnation of drinking at Pitt. But what steps has he or the University specifically taken to deserve such honors? Are they really that effective at reducing underage drinking and dangerous levels of intoxication?
- **Outside Institutions.** With neighbors like Duquesne University and Carnegie Mellon surrounding Pitt, one has to wonder how they handle the same issues. What sorts of results do they provide?
- **Additional Pitt Policies.** Here are noteworthy additional regulations Pitt institutes in enforcing its alcohol policy—above and beyond the law.

The University

Reducing irresponsible and excessive drinking should be a goal for any university official. We cannot disagree with Chancellor Nordenberg's goals in that respect. He won \$50,000 last November for policies he has instituted towards creating more late-night alcohol-free programs and helping create online alcohol awareness seminars for freshmen.²

In trying to further reduce drinking, however, he and the University administration stuck with antiquated campus-wide policies that ignore the nature of student behaviors and the realities that surround campus life. Included in such measures, the University stations police officers at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital's emergency room to cite students as they walk in the door for assistance.³ If cited, students can face legal fines as high as \$300 for first-time offenders on top of whatever punishment the University may deliver.⁴ If a less intoxicated underage person helps walk the person in need of medical attention through the doors of the hospital, he or she will be subject to the same level of punishment from both a legal and school standpoint. If you're under 21, you're fair game for citation no matter how little you may have had to drink.

In an April 2010 *Pitt News* article, then-19-year-old student Evan Wood said that he would "sit [the intoxicated person in need of medical attention] in a wheelchair, push them in [the hospital] and run" to avoid citation.⁵ Had Wood stayed, he could have explained the situation to the attending nurses and physicians, informed them of any allergies or possible drug interactions (Tylenol and alcohol is a little known but deadly combination), and generally facilitated his friend receiving better, more timely care. Instead, Wood and other students like him make a decision to avoid legal sanction, rather than to pursue the most rational choice (staying with the friend) in the situation.

Importantly, Wood's attitude is not an outlier and is instead shared by many students at Pitt as evidenced by other interviews conducted by The Pitt News and interviews conducted by The Publius Foundation.⁶

Pitt's policies regarding alcohol are not completely out of line. For instance, first-time offenders who violate University policies must attend the four-week-long Personal Education Assistance and Referral (PEAR) program for 90 minutes a week to learn how "alcohol affects the body, explore the culture and use and misuse on campus, and evaluate their own decision making through critical thinking."⁷ Additionally, there's a PEAR II program for repeat offenders. None of this excludes students from any legal ramifications he or she may face outside of the University as a result of their decision to drink underage.

This mandatory PEAR program represents a responsible and educational approach to underage drinking, letting students understand the consequences that come from bad decisions in a constructive atmosphere conducive to self-improvement.

However, due to Pitt's institutional policy that threatens arrest, fines, and student judicial board review, even punishing underage drinkers who are helping friends receive medical attention, the PEAR Courses may never come into play for some extremely inebriated students. The execution of this shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy where police stationed in UPMC Presbyterian are prepared to cite students for underage drinking raises questions about the University's ability to put its students' health and safety first.

Outside Institutions

Whereas Pitt's drinking policy is geared toward strictly enforcing a zero-tolerance policy, even citing students in the hospital, neighbor Carnegie Mellon University takes a more pragmatic approach towards maintaining the safety of its student body.

In an interview with *The Pitt News*, John Hendershot, a CMU police sergeant, said that hospitals generally don't call the police when intoxicated underage people come in.⁸ An anonymous official at UPMC Mercy Downtown said that their hospital personnel only call the parents of the intoxicated person in need of medical attention.⁹ CMU does not make arrests or citations in hospital emergency rooms, adhering strictly to enforcing on-campus regulations.

Hendershot added that Pitt's "policy is trying to prevent people from seeking medical attention when they need it."

However, Pitt police Commander Francis Walsh said that he defends Pitt's strict policy of making arrests in the hospital in spite of CMU's policies. "What CMU does is what CMU does. If we come in contact with someone under the age of 21, and if they have consumed alcohol, they will be cited. It's not harsh. It's the law," Walsh said."¹⁰

CMU's off-campus policies towards alcohol extend only so far as the laws enforced by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Violations for drinking in residence halls can result in a loss of a private room or a place to stay altogether.¹¹ Organizations without liquor licenses (such as fraternities) cannot charge money for alcohol and on-campus events with alcohol are to be held at the discretion of the University in the presence of a faculty supervisor.¹² In such cases, the supervisor has the responsibility of chaperoning events to make sure only people of legal age receive alcohol.

At Duquesne University, policies mirror Pitt's insofar as they mandate a class for offenders, but they leave the lines blurred as to how citation can occur.¹³ Mirroring Pitt's zero-tolerance policy, Duquesne states that, "Any student may be cited by a University official for public intoxication. It is to the University official's discretion whether or not a student may be considered publicly intoxicated."¹⁴ Neither CMU nor Duquesne station campus police at any of the city hospitals specifically for citing students.

Additional General Pitt Policies

On the other hand, Pitt boasts that its policies “exceed the legal requirements concerning alcohol use,”¹⁵ extending but not limited to:

- A stricter in-dorm amount a 21-year-old student may have in a resident hall than at Duquesne University.¹⁶
- Restricting alcohol within the “University community.”¹⁷
- University police referring cases to the Office of Student Conduct where students “could face sanctions up to and including dismissal from the University.”¹⁸

While Pitt’s branch campuses are run as independent affiliates within the University, the Pitt Titusville campus has gone as far as to institute a stricter 15-week Alcohol 101 class for first-time offenders versus the four-week PEAR program at Pitt main, as well as other additional fines such as \$50 for having empty bottles as decoration.¹⁹ The Johnstown campus limits in-room visitors to no more than five at a time if alcohol present in the room.²⁰

Conclusion

While college is not a free pass, it functions as a transition period between childhood and adulthood, allowing students to make mistakes in a somewhat controlled environment while developing into mature, responsible citizens. Experimentation happens. Exploration happens. And yes, even mistakes do happen.

But those mistakes are generally fixable. Whether through meeting with a professor during office hours or learning how to apologize to a friend, underage drinking that results in a hangover or other naturally punishing consequence offers an opportunity to learn from the experience and then to move on. Pitt, however, doesn’t see it this way. The University’s zero-tolerance policy and strict regulations of alcohol is a paternalistic encroachment on the opportunity of students to independently develop into adults. The punishments are excessively harsh — as if getting one’s stomach pumped, parents called and the ensuing medical bills aren’t punishment enough.

The University is right in hosting alcohol awareness classes for irresponsible students. But to rub salt into the wounds of Pitt students by stationing police at the hospital is an absurd, dangerous deterrent to students seeking or helping friends seek medical care for life-threatening alcohol poisoning. Likewise, Pitt’s instituting an abstinence-only alcohol policy for a campus of 17,000 undergraduate students is unrealistic and naïve considering the conditions and pressures that surround college students.

Where CMU and Duquesne allow burgeoning adults to be treated as such, Pitt’s policies do not respect students as maturing, independent adults. The Publius Foundation does not condone underage or excessive consumption of alcohol, but we recognize that it happens. The possibility that the presence of University police at UPMC Presbyterian’s emergency room could prevent even one student from seeking medical attention in an emergency or could prevent even one

student from helping a friend in need of medical attention represents an unconscionable threat to student health. In order to protect the lives of Pitt students, the University must immediately cease stationing police at UPMC Presbyterian with the purpose of citing students and should instead focus on expanding alcohol education programs. If University of Pittsburgh police remain stationed at UPMC Presbyterian for another purpose, they should be instructed not to issue underage citations for students seeking medical attention or helping a friend seek medical attention.

¹ Sara Ganim, "Coroner: Freshman had .169 BAC when he fell to his death on campus," *Centre Daily Times*, October 9, 2009.

² Sara Bauknecht, "Pitt Chancellor Mark Nordenberg honored for anti-drinking efforts," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 3, 2009.

³ Olivia Garber, "University zero-tolerance policy could discourage seeking help after drinking," *The Pitt News*, April 23, 2010.

⁴ Carnegie Mellon University, "Carnegie Mellon University Drug and Alcohol Brochure," accessed August 19, 2010.

⁵ Garber.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ University of Pittsburgh, "Personal Education, Assistance, & Referral," accessed August 19, 2010.

⁸ Garber.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Carnegie Mellon University.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Duquesne University, "Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities and Conduct 2009-2010," accessed August 19, 2010.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ University of Pittsburgh, "Alcohol/Drug Policy," accessed August 19, 2010.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ University of Pittsburgh at Titusville, "University of Pittsburgh at Titusville Student Handbook 2009-2010," accessed August 19, 2010.

²⁰ University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, "Alcohol Policy," accessed August 19, 2010.

About the Author and The Publius Foundation

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The Publius Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan student think tank dedicated to advancing personal and economic liberty in the Pittsburgh area. More information is available at www.PubliusFoundation.com.