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Alcohol still a college issue

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Hundreds of students are using drugs and alcohol illegally at area colleges, but even as school officials try a variety of initiatives to tackle the problem, they're doubtful it will ever be completely eliminated.

A total of 2,181 on-campus liquor law violations and 221 on-campus drug law violations were reported to the federal government by 12 area colleges and universities for 2006, the most recent data available. In most cases, the infractions were treated as violations of school policy with consequences decided by college officials.

For young people, college often means living alone for the first time and exploring their newfound independence by experimenting with drugs and alcohol, school officials said. In most cases it amounts to nothing more than a minor detour on the road to maturity. But for others, it can become a serious distraction that interferes with their school work, health, academic success, and beyond.

To keep the phenomenon in check, college officials are using a range of disciplinary policies, special activities and peer counseling programs.

"It's everywhere," said Graciela Mohamedi-Smith, 26, of Rochester, a chemical engineering major at the University of Rochester.

"I know people who go home from class at 3 p.m. and just start drinking until the next day. And there are other people who don't drink at all," said Mohamedi-Smith.

"I think it's fairly normal on a college campus. I think for some people it's worse than others because some people crawl into it and can't get themselves out of it at all," she said.

The data

Colleges and universities annually report criminal activity to the U.S. Department of Education. Most schools in the Rochester area have very few incidents of violent crime or theft. But many of the schools report dozens of on-campus drug and liquor law violations, usually handled as violations of school policies and adjudicated by college officials.

- Nationwide, a total of 191,207 liquor law violations were reported by four-year private schools, four-year public schools and two-year public colleges, and 26,989 on-campus drug law violations were reported.
- Seven private four-year schools in the Rochester area averaged 194 on-campus liquor law violations in 2006, while the national average for the group was 179.
- The national average for on-campus liquor law violations at four-year public schools was 320. The number reported by the State University College at Brockport was 349 and by SUNY Geneseo, 256.
- The average number of on-campus liquor law violations in 2006 was 14 at two-year public colleges and the average number of drug law violations was four. Monroe Community College had nine drug law violations and 217 liquor law violations.

While MCC had many more liquor law violations than the average for its category, the school is atypical in other ways. MCC, where 772 students live on campus, is one of only 240 public two-year schools with on-campus housing, among about 1,000 schools in that group nationwide, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. And MCC has about 17,500 students enrolled in credit courses, while the average public community college has about 6,700 students in credit courses.

College and university officials caution against comparisons between schools and between a school and a group of peer institutions because the data is self-reported and the criteria is subject to interpretation.

At Nazareth College, for example, the number of on-campus liquor law violations reported to the federal government was 38 in 2004, 120 in 2005, and 384 in 2006. Bobby Maldonado, Nazareth College director of campus safety, explained that before he arrived on campus about 18 months ago, an alcohol violation involving several students was counted as a single incident. But Maldonado now counts each student involved separately, to which he attributed the dramatic increase in 2006.

Maldonado also cautioned that the number reported does not necessarily represent the total number of students actually disciplined.

"That merely means that those were the students written up for the violation. It doesn't necessarily mean that that was sustained as a violation," he said.

He said that 384 violations spread over a 30-week school year, each involving about four or five students, represents only about three drinking parties per week on campus.

"We don't consider Nazareth a school with a drinking problem. However, we're aggressive in enforcing the policy," he said.

Some schools have a strict prohibition against any alcohol in dorms, regardless of a student's age. On other campuses, such as the University of Rochester, alcohol is allowed for students who can drink legally. And some schools cite students caught in the presence of alcohol, regardless of whether or not the alcohol is found in their room or if they were actually drinking, while other colleges are less stringent.

The repercussions vary as well, with some schools having regimented discipline for violating school policy, while others take a more subjective, case-by-case approach.

Most college officials interviewed said it's unreasonable to expect that they could stop underage drinking and drug violations on campus.

"Alcohol has been part of the college culture for so many decades, and the media has been glorifying it for so many years, it's going to take a long, long time to curb it. I think one of the best things we can do is to really curb the binge drinking rates," said Katy Wilson, vice president for enrollment management and student affairs at Brockport.

Matt Burns, acting dean of students at UR, said college students, like non-students in their age group, tend to experiment with a lot of things.

"And drugs and alcohol are some of them. So I don't think the number will ever go down to zero because it's not the same students you're teaching every year," Burns said. "That's probably one of the transitional lessons people that age have to learn," he said.

Special efforts

Schools are trying innovative programs to battle drinking and drugs on campus. Many schools schedule late-night activities, especially on weekends, often at the same time as events where they presume alcohol will be consumed, to offer an alternative without drinking.

"Some of our peer institutions stay away from that because nobody attends it because they're all out drinking," Burns said.

Java Lu, 18, a freshman computer science major at Rochester Institute of Technology, said most of the drinking among his peers occurs on weekends when students don't have much else to do.

"People kind of low-key it. There are a lot of parties on Fridays, but it's not out of control. They know their limits," said Lu, who is from Shanghai, China.

RIT has instituted a new program this year called Tiger PAWS (Pair Alcohol With Safety), which recognizes the reality that students consume alcohol. "It's not an abstinence group, but it's a group to go out and make sure that people aren't driving drunk and they're being responsible and providing information," said Dawn Soufleris, RIT's assistant vice president for student affairs.

On Feb. 3, the RIT student government sponsored a Super Bowl party where alcohol was available and Tiger PAWS student volunteers were there.

"They were ... keeping a watchful eye, but being available for students in the event they needed assistance or had questions about alcohol," Soufleris said. "What we're trying to do is have peer influence to be more responsible possibly than they have been in the past and to think about what they're doing before they do it," she said.

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