

Solving Campus-Community Problems

By
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If asked, most university administrators and campus law enforcement officials probably would cite alcohol abuse among organized groups living on or near campus as the most exasperating problem facing them. Media reports have chronicled the phenomenon; Congress has demanded that universities account for their crime rates; women's groups have organized to protest the victimization of female students at fraternity-sponsored activities.

For the University of Washington, the 1992 fall quarter began violently with a confrontation between a group of football players and

members of a national fraternity. What started with racial epithets escalated into a free-for-all requiring a massive response by the Seattle Police Department (SPD). During the melee, a first-year female student was struck by a thrown beer bottle that shattered in her face, requiring the surgical removal of her right eye.

Local reporters had been following closely student alcohol abuse since a similarly disturbing incident occurred in 1989. During a football game, drunken fans took to the field, confronted police officers, and tore down a set of goal posts, nearly killing two students. Due to

the seriousness of that incident and the extensive media attention it generated, university administrators appointed a special task force to analyze the factors that led to the flare-up and to suggest ways to prevent a recurrence.

The community task force approach proved highly successful in addressing the specific factors that led to the 1989 disturbance. Hoping to find solutions for the wider issues that resulted in the tragic 1992 incident, administrators once again turned to this process. The new task force would focus on the serious problems caused by alcohol abuse on campus and in the off-campus

area known as "Greek Row" that housed fraternity and sorority groups.

NEED FOR THE TASK FORCE

Because of the success of the earlier task force, announcement of the new task force had an immediate calming effect on the media and the public. There was a sense that the process had credibility and that issues would not be "swept under the rug." Also, because task force findings were released into the public domain, the personal reputations of members rested on the results, or lack thereof.

Task force members quickly realized that although the two incidents shared some similarities, different factors fueled each situation. The 1989 incident was a recurring event that faced the university biennially, based on the intense rivalry between Washington State and the University of Washington.

Consequently, the factors surrounding the event were fairly easy to address.

By contrast, the 1992 incident pointed to a set of ongoing behavioral problems. These were complicated by the off-campus status of Greek Row and by the fact that the Seattle Police Department exercised primary police authority over the area. Greek Row actually constituted a collection of private corporations. Each fraternity or sorority possessed its own governing board, owned the property on which its house stood, and took an autonomous attitude with regard to internal disciplinary matters.

The SPD became increasingly frustrated by the lawless flavor of the area; one sector sergeant sent letters to the university newspaper openly complaining of the disorderly and often violent behavior of drunken fraternity members. Incidents had become so threatening that the SPD refused to dispatch

personnel into the area to restore order unless they were in a tactical unit formation. The same was true for emergency-aid crews of the Seattle Fire Department that responded to periodic injuries in the area.

Meanwhile, the public was frustrated by the university's perceived reluctance to meet its supervisory obligation over the fraternities. Residents also were upset that the Seattle Police Department failed to enforce State liquor laws uniformly to control behavior that often spilled into surrounding neighborhoods.


However, the university was in an untenable position. It could not exercise direct authority over the fraternities without exposing itself to major liability. Consequently, the university exercised what authority it had, not from a position of control, but rather by threatening to withhold recognition status from particular fraternities or sororities.

Despite repeated promises from fraternity leaders, very little was being done to correct the problems. This was due, in part, to the lack of institutional memory. Fraternity members literally came and left within 4-year cycles. And, despite the good faith efforts of the SPD, the department possessed no mechanism or authority to enter houses on a routine basis to enforce alcohol laws. The task force was tasked with addressing these and other fundamental issues.

THE TASK FORCE APPROACH

Building on Success

When the university's president created the new task force, he



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Chief Shanahan heads the University of Washington Police Department in Seattle.

extended membership to off-campus groups to include the police and fire departments, the Washington State Liquor Control Board, and a group representing the neighborhood immediately adjacent to the Greek Row area. The 19 members of the task force also included representatives from the student body, as well as university faculty, staff, and administrators. The group met 12 times over a 14-week period.

At the same time, the State legislature began a series of public hearings regarding the issue of behavioral problems at the University of Washington and other 4-year schools in the State. Commanding officers from the Seattle Police Department and the University of Washington Police Department (UWPD), as well as other university officials, appeared before the legislature to express their growing frustration with the lack of meaningful progress on the issue. Many of the speakers expressed hope that the task force approach would again produce positive results.

Never before had students, faculty, staff, administrators, police, fire officials, liquor control board officials, and representatives from the public sat down to confront one another and correct what had become a national embarrassment to higher education. Task force members realized almost from the outset that some form of compromise and contractual agreement that bound fraternities and sororities to certain codes of conduct would be necessary. To counter the effects of membership turnover within fraternities and sororities, many task force members also expressed a need for the direct and

active involvement of alumni groups.

Drafting a Document

With an assistant State attorney general acting as legal counsel, the task force began formulating the conditions that would constitute the basis of the contractual agreement. In many ways, the proposals read like a throwback to the rules and regulations that governed the behavior of fraternal organizations in the 1950s and early 1960s.



The measures advocated by the task force...proved to be an effective response to a problem that plagues many schools across the country.



At a minimum, the task force recommended that the contract agreement require all fraternity and sorority chapters to:

- Comply with all Federal, State, and local laws, with emphasis on adhering to minimum drinking-age requirements and practicing proper fire safety procedures
- Take responsibility for the off-campus conduct of their members and take meaningful disciplinary actions, forwarding reports to the Vice President of Student Affairs, as well as the Presidents of

the Interfraternity Council (IFC) and the Panhellenic Association

- Identify adult members and alumni leaders to be available to the police department or other agencies on a 24-hour basis
- Conduct uniform education programs concerning substance abuse and acquaintance rape
- Adhere to IFC and Panhellenic policies, including those regarding alcohol-free rushing and human dignity statements
- Enter into a written contract with the university that would be binding throughout the calendar year.

In addition to these points, the task force directly confronted the issues surrounding activities that often resulted in widespread disorder—"Greek" parties.

Regulating Parties

Party regulation became the most discussed area of the task force's work. Ultimately, a *party* was defined as any gathering of 25 or more people where alcoholic beverages are present. The task force encouraged that as a sponsoring entity, each fraternity or sorority be required to register any planned event with the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs at least 7 days in advance.

The organization also would be required to obtain a banquet permit from the State liquor control board. In order to receive such a permit, the petitioning organization had to meet a series of conditions:

- Permit notices must be conspicuously posted
- Party sponsors must ensure that alcohol is served only to invited guests who meet the State's drinking age
- The premises must be open for inspection on an announcement basis by liquor control agents or other law enforcement officers.

When two houses held a joint function, cosponsors, such as sorority leaders, would be required to sign for the permits, thereby incurring civil and criminal liability. Sponsoring organizations also would be required to maintain adequate security in order to regulate access to events. Each 7-day advance party notice would be transmitted by fax to the Seattle Police Department's North Precinct Commander. Any report, citation, or corrective notice issued by the SPD or the liquor control board would be forwarded to the university police. The UWPD then would advise the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. For the fraternal organization, contract violation sanctions could range from reprimand, fines, and financial restitution for property damage to probation, suspension, or "withdrawal of recognition" for up to 4 years.

The task force also recommended that each fraternity and sorority provide the university with yearly evidence that the groups maintained adequate property and liability insurance coverage. This condition assumed special importance because chapters could not hold the university responsible for any liability with regard to

their organizations' programs and activities.

THE LEGISLATURE'S RESPONSE

As the task force drew up its proposals, the State legislature seemed poised to enact its own legislation addressing the problems on campus. However, the sponsor of that legislation ultimately created a



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substitute bill based on the final task force report. During debate, an attempt by several fraternity members to protest the liquor permit application requirement met with stern rebuke from the Senate Majority Whip. By this time, it was clear that the legislature, as the representative of the people, no longer was willing to allow open defiance of the law. House Substitute Bill 1082 swept through both houses of the legislature with no dissenting votes.

IMPLEMENTATION AND RESULTS

Members of the law enforcement community and university administration quickly established mechanisms to implement the mandates of the task force. By the beginning of the 1993 fall quarter, nearly

all fraternities and sororities had signed "recognition agreements" based on the provisions outlined in the task force report. Those that fail to sign the agreement risk losing their status as recognized student organizations at the university.

The changes brought about by the task force recommendations yielded immediate results. For the Seattle Police Department, the fall 1993 quarter proved to be the least eventful in many years with regard to campus-related complaints. The press credited the fraternities and sororities for improving their behavior. In addition to a general improvement in behavior on campus, university police officers observed an ancillary effect at the football stadium: The 1993 season produced the lowest arrest and expulsion level in 2 decades.

LESSONS FOR OTHER CAMPUSES

The measures advocated by the task force and adopted by the University of Washington proved to be an effective response to a problem that plagues many schools across the country. Alcohol-induced misconduct can have catastrophic consequences, not only for the students but also for the institution involved and the surrounding communities.

Too often, alumni live in their fond memories of the "good old days," which represent in many ways a stark contrast to the conduct of some of today's youth. At the same time, universities often assume a position of benign neglect regarding the misconduct of fraternity and sorority members. Local police agencies also may be forced

to tolerate open disregard for liquor laws due to the sheer magnitude of the problem.

If the University of Washington experience has merit for other communities, it is because the response centers on the concept that a community policing approach involving both "town" and "gown" constituencies can work. The results show that real change is best accomplished through written agreements that have the force of organizational retribution either through firm enforcement of the contract's provisions or through the imposition of criminal penalties for State law violations.

CONCLUSION

Experience shows that the overwhelming majority of fraternity and sorority members go on to become productive citizens in their communities. College students as a whole do not represent a major criminal element. Still, it is unfair, both to students and to other residents, for communities to perpetuate a double standard of conduct for one group of people who is continually in direct violation of the law. The University of Washington task force provided a viable means to correct a long-standing discrepancy.

Unfortunately, it took a senseless and tragic incident to spark these very necessary changes. Perhaps other communities will act before similar preventable tragedies occur. If nothing else, the changes brought about by the University of Washington task force prove that something good can come from something **bad.**+