

Parental Notification

by Karen L. Zweig and Julie Thompson

 Should parents be told if a college student violates an alcohol or other drug policy? That question is being debated on campuses across the country, as officials reexamine their policies in light of revised guidelines from the federal government.

In October 1998, the Higher Education Amendments were signed into law, providing assistance to colleges and universities in their efforts to address student alcohol and other drug use. Section 952 clarified that institutions of higher education are allowed (but not required) to notify parents if a student under the age of 21 at the time of notification commits a disciplinary violation involving alcohol or a controlled substance. In July 2000, the U.S. Department of Education's final regulations further clarified the intent of the 1998 amendment, stating that campus officials may notify parents whenever they determine that a disciplinary violation has occurred, and that those determinations can be made without conducting a formal disciplinary proceeding or hearing. Institutions now clearly have broad discretion to determine their own process and criteria for notifying parents. Indeed, given recent court decisions, some institutions are using parental notification as a way to both help meet their responsibility to provide a safe environment and manage their potential liability for a student's high-risk use of alcohol.

Spurred by these developments, many colleges and universities have begun disclosing alcohol- and other drug-related problems to parents. To assess the initial results of those efforts, researchers at Bowling Green State University analyzed survey responses from judicial affairs officers at 189 institutions. As of January 2000, 58.7 percent indicated they had parental notification policies or practices in effect (77.6 percent of private institutions, 43.3 percent of public), and 24.9 percent were actively considering adopting such a policy. Most campuses chose to notify parents by letter (59 percent), though a significant number utilized both telephone and letter (25.3 percent). Although 63.9 percent of policies allow for notification after a first violation, in practice notifications are about evenly divided between first and second violations.

How do parents react when they receive a letter or telephone call about their child's alcohol or other drug infraction? The Bowling Green survey indicates that of the parents who received such notice, campus officials rated 72.0 percent as "very supportive" and 6.7 percent as "supportive," in contrast to only 0.3 percent as "very unsupportive" and 1.1 percent as "somewhat unsupportive," with the level of support being unknown for 19.8 percent.

Evidence of Effectiveness

The Bowling Green research provides preliminary data indicating that parental notification policies work in terms of reducing alcohol-related problems. Of the judicial affairs officers utilizing parental notification, more than half reported positive results, with 39.7 percent indicating slight and 12.7 percent indicating significant reductions in the number of alcohol violations following implementation of the policy.

Another indicator of effectiveness is the number of repeat violations among students whose parents were notified of a violation. Several institutions, including the University of Delaware, Texas A&M, Radford University, Utah State, Ohio University in Athens, and the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), have noted reduced rates of recidivism after they began notifying parents of violations as part of their overall alcohol and other drug prevention efforts. Many of these campuses, and others that have instituted parental notification within a comprehensive approach to prevention, have reported additional positive results, including fewer suspensions, less vandalism, higher retention rates, fewer hospitalizations, and increased upperclass student interest in living in residence halls.

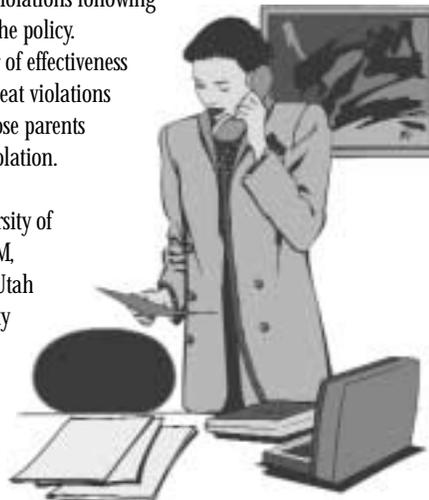
Balancing Goals

Administrators strive to treat students in ways that will promote personal responsibility and allow them to learn from their mistakes. Those objectives must be balanced against the desire of parents to know early on rather than at the moment of tragedy if problems have developed. Colleges and universities are finding that parents can be partners in helping students develop into responsible adults, and that notifying parents of problems is often a way to involve them at a crucial point. In addition, the resulting dialogue may yield information that staff can use to respond better to a particular student's needs.

Miami University in Ohio carefully considered the pros and cons of parental notification and then came down firmly on the side of notification. Miami President James C. Garland offered this explanation for the decision: "I love telling parents that their child made the dean's list. I don't want to notify them that their child has been airlifted to a trauma center because of alcohol poisoning. My hope is that involving parents at the first sign of a drinking problem will prevent that from being necessary."

Developing Suitable Policies

As with any alcohol and other drug prevention strategy, the details of a parental notification policy should be tailored to fit the needs of individual campuses. Few institutions have a strict policy that requires notification in all instances. In fact, the Bowling Green study noted that schools with parental notification policies in place reported 5,828 violations during the fall of 1999, but parents were notified in only 2,359 or 40.5 percent of those cases. In arriving at a policy suited to your specific institution, there are several factors to consider:



PREVENTION UPDATES

What Type of Offenses Should Merit Disclosure?

Some policies, such as those at Lafayette College, provide for notification for first violations. Other institutions only notify parents for serious violations, such as driving under the influence, fighting, destruction of property, hospitalization, sexual assault, rape, or illicit drug involvement. Some policies provide for notification of repeat offenses regardless of the severity of the offense. Under such policies, parents are informed the second time an underage student is found in possession of alcohol.

At What Point Should Parents Be Notified?

Some institutions contact parents when a student is charged with violating a campus policy. Although no judicial process or finding is required before campuses can notify parents, others only disclose an offense if a judicial process has been completed. Some institutions notify parents only if a student is placed on academic or housing probation. For example, at the Georgia Institute of Technology, parents are notified if a subsequent violation is likely to result in a student being removed from housing or suspended. At Otterbein College, notification is also based on sanction, not offense; parents are notified of housing dismissal, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

In practice, most campuses offer students the opportunity to contact their parents before the institution does. Such direct contact is to be encouraged.

Should There Be Exceptions?

A written parental notification policy should provide for flexibility to deal with special circumstances. For example, officials need to be able to exercise their discretion in cases where an abusive or dysfunctional family situation would make notification counterproductive or would present a danger to a student's well-being. Some institutions may choose not to notify parents if a student is self-supporting, although the Department of Education's regulations specify that institutions may notify parents without regard to a student's tax status as a dependent.

Resources Required

Ideally, a cross section of the campus community, including students, will be involved in developing a new parental notification policy, which must then be

widely distributed to faculty, staff, administrators, students, and parents. Appropriate staff will need to know what their role is in implementing the policy, and a system will need to be set up to issue and track notices and to monitor the policy's effectiveness.

Some campuses have hesitated to implement parental notification for fear that an inordinate amount of resources will be required, especially to handle parents' reactions once notices are issued. Institutions with a few years of experience have found that investment of time to be worthwhile. At Penn State, during the first year of the program, 30 percent of the parents called, with the average call lasting 20 minutes. The percentage of parents calling may drop as the policy becomes more established. For example, during the first semester the policy was in place at the University of Delaware, 25 percent of the parents called for more information; that number subsequently dropped to 10 percent. At Texas A&M, only 5 percent of the parents sought additional information, with those calls averaging 15 minutes each.

Conclusion

While parental notification cannot be viewed as a simple fix to the complex problems associated with student alcohol and other drug use, initial results from a wide range of campuses indicate that it can be a powerful tool. In a statement to the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, Joe Puzycki, director of judicial affairs at Penn State, attested to the benefits of such a policy: "I am confident that, when appropriately applied, parental notification helps to deter students from engaging in further misconduct, acts as a catalyst for self-reflection, and provides additional support to at-risk students."

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Resources

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention

The Parent Connection section of the Center's Web site, <http://www.edc.org/hec>, includes sample policies and notification letters, along with articles and links to additional resources.

Inter-Association Task Force on Alcohol and Other Substance Abuse Issues

The IATF working report on parental notification takes no position on the issue, but includes a discussion of the pros and cons. It is available at <http://www.iatf.org/parent1a.htm>.

Bowling Green State University Survey Results

A complete report of the parental notification study conducted by researchers at Bowling Green State University can be found in a journal published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). See Palmer, C.J., Lohman, G., Gehring, D.D., Carlson, S., and Garret, O. (2001). "Parental Notification: A New Strategy to Reduce Alcohol Abuse on Campus," *NASPA Journal* 38 (3): 372-385.

Higher Education Act Amendment

Section 952 of the 1998 amendment to the Higher Education Act contains language pertaining to parental notification. That section can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/HEA/sec952.html>.



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