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Bilateral moderation key to Univ. drinking policy

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Guest Column

The "Bright College Years" of free-flowing alcohol seem to be numbered. Last week, Harvard University announced its stricter-than-ever tailgate regulations for The Game, and next week, Connecticut's new no-exceptions alcohol policy takes effect. For better or worse, these new policies are a fait accompli, and the onus is now on students and administrators about how to react. While many are concerned the extra regulations will cause students to start binge drinking even more in private, I put more faith in Yalies. As long as the University maintains its valuable health-based approach, we students can help change the culture of binge drinking while maintaining the fun and excitement that is Yale.

While some may want to ignore the new rules entirely, they were designed to address some very important issues. Alcohol will always be part of our society, and we shouldn't go out of the way to punish the moderate drinker. Nevertheless, we do need to recognize the real threat of binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row for guys and four or more drinks for girls). You don't need a high school health class to know that alcohol is one of the leading causes of death for our age group and that binge drinking is linked to a whole range of ugly consequences, such as drunk driving and date rape. The Ivy League is not immune: 41 percent of Yalies report binge drinking, which is close to the average of many other schools. As rates of frequent binge drinking rise at campuses across the country, policymakers' desires to pass stricter rules are noble attempts to address a key problem, and like it or not, the law is the law.

Given the fact that we have these new rules, a major question at hand is how to enforce them. The answer here is clear: Yale's health-based approach is much better at minimizing health risk than Harvard's zero-tolerance policy that punishes students who seek treatment. All evidence suggests that this respectful policy will continue at Yale even with Connecticut's new law. While dorms, our "private residence," are no longer off-limits, cops and administrators will still need a reason to break up the party in the first place, as before. I could elaborate on the benefits of the health-based approach versus the "War on Drugs" approach adopted by our Puritan neighbors to the north, but it's probably superfluous to have another editorial stressing what 1,800 Cantabs have already admitted: Harvard sucks.

The broader public health question at hand, however, is not how to address alcohol poisoning after it happens, but how to prevent students from binge drinking in the first place. A major concern cited in both of the News' editorials about the new drinking regulations is that students will engage in even more risky behavior if they are placed under increased regulation - that students will pregame more for the tailgate in Cambridge, and that they will endanger their health binge drinking even more in the privacy of their own rooms in New Haven. While these critiques are well-founded, students also have another choice: the healthy one.

While alcohol is common, it doesn't have to be this way. A study at Princeton University showed that most students feel that they are less comfortable with the average student's alcohol habits than the average student.

Moreover, alcohol doesn't define the Yale experience. My fondest memories of Camp Yale, for example, were not how much I drank, but rather the other Yalies I met. Those who decry the loss of the Game's traditions forget the best traditions of the Game. Perhaps it would be good to forget the football team's performance in recent years, but nobody wants to blackout the whole day. If you wanted to spend four years in an alcohol-induced haze, you have chosen the wrong school. Probably because you wanted to grow as a person, you came to Yale.

Soon we'll start to see whether any of these new policies make any difference in their important goal of reducing underage drinking. While Yale's health-based approach to enforcement will likely remain more effective than Harvard's hard-line approach at promoting student safety, my guess is that students, not administrators, will have to drive the broad goal of reducing dangerous student binge drinking on campus. Changing the culture is always hard and many factors are beyond our control, but if Yalies could use a bit of their resourcefulness and creativity, we could create a healthier Eli tradition that will improve people's lives for years to come.

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