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The New Prohibition

Will new laws mean the end of fun at Yale?

by Kate Aitken

When asked if he had ever partied at Harvard, Howard Locker '07 could only say he tried. He remembers watching his macho Harvard friends pop open their Mike's Hard Lemonades and chug them with glee, and his disbelief that this passed for a Cantab party. It was the 2004 Game weekend, and students sat around drinking wine coolers with the lights on, mostly talking about schoolwork or how drunk they planned to get that night, unaware that their lame attempts at fun did not qualify as a good time.

When it comes to explaining Harvard's campus culture - specifically, explaining the administration's new tailgate regulations as representative of the social scene - Yalies think they have all the answers.

"They suck," Mimi Wang '09 said of Harvard. "They even said they sucked. They claim their new tailgate policy is an attempt to curb drinking, but really I think they're still just bitter over the whole 'We suck' thing."

"I think they're just bitter over the fact that they're all still virgins," said Joan Payson '09. "And they're pussies."

But not even trash-talking can fully explain Harvard's decisions. Situated in Boston proper, Ohiri Field - the location of this year's Game - leaves Harvard accountable to local authorities.

"The Boston Police Department has jurisdiction, and they really haven't been happy about the amount of drinking in the past," Harvard senior Alvin Wong said.

For years, New Haven has been blessed with a statute that prohibited the purchase and serving of alcohol by those under 21, but neglected to forbid actual drinking. But on Oct. 1, the state of Connecticut's new law banning the underage possession of alcohol went into effect, prompting a crackdown from New Haven's police. What remains unclear is whether Yale will become complicit in enforcing the state's new directive, and whether the New Haven Police Department's recent stringency will be as brief as a Toad's quickie or last as long as a Harvard student's virginity.

The burden of safety

Confiscating a keg is one of those things that sounds infinitely better in theory than in actuality, as one

freshman counselor discovered earlier this year. After her freshmen forgot the golden rule of campus drinking - no kegs in freshman dorms - the freshman counselor in question had to painstakingly bear their alcoholic booty from Old Campus back to her residential college, pausing frequently to rest her arms and trailed the whole way by a herd of curious lightweight rowers intent on following the keg to its final destination.

Historically, Yale's administration has recognized that many alcohol policies are easier to write than to implement. As a result, many administrators at the residential college level elect to trust in their students' personal responsibility and maturity. Master Judith Krauss of Silliman College - who also chairs the Council of Masters at Yale - said experience demonstrates that treating students as adults tends to foster maturity and encourages them to make adult decisions.

"Yale's philosophy, which is often quoted as safety first, is really safety and responsibility first," Krauss said in an e-mail. "I believe part of our roles as masters and deans is to help students make safe and responsible decisions about a lot of things, including decisions about the use of alcohol."

If the "no kegs in freshman dorms" rule is generally obeyed on campus, it is only because there have always been so many other opportunities and locations for students to drink. While students technically were never allowed to walk down Elm Street holding a Solo cup full of beer, many did so with impunity and loved Yale and New Haven for letting them.

"The Yale Police and the New Haven Police Departments' priority when policing is, and always has been, safety first," Lt. Michael Patten of the Yale Police Department said.

The rules governing parties on campus, found in the Yale Undergraduate Regulations, specify that any on-campus gathering ranging from 20 to 50 people qualifies as a party and must be registered with a residential college master, and a party with alcohol must register a party host over the age of 21 to serve alcohol and ensure that no underage guests consume alcohol.

Master Jonathan Holloway of Calhoun College has always ensured that student hosts are reachable by cell phone, so that he can issue a warning phone call before a party gets broken up, and said he will continue to do so in the wake of the new law. Krauss said rules like Holloway's and the Yale Undergraduate Regulations will not change, but that residential colleges are more concerned with enforcing the existing regulations since the October 1 law went into effect.

Molly Howard '07, head freshman counselor for Pierson College, said counselors have the additional burden of walking the fine line between pleasing their freshmen and enforcing the Dean's Office's policies.

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"We're never going to look for a party, but at the same time the college masters and deans are sending us very strong messages about rules that need to be enforced, because they are now liable under the new law," Howard said.

Harvard takes the hard line

By contrast, Harvard's RAs tend to err on the side of discipline and punishment, one of many differences in campus culture between the two schools that accounts for the drinking styles at each, Aniket Shah '09 said.

"The great thing about Yale is that drinking accompanies socializing, whereas at Harvard, it kind of replaces it," Shah said.

That crucial difference, students at Yale said, is a result of systemic differences in the way Harvard and Yale approach monitoring students and promoting social life.

Last year, Shah traveled to Cambridge to attend a friend's 21st birthday party, only to learn, upon his arrival, that the party had been limited to 15 guests because his friend's RA had an exam the next day and didn't feel like dealing with the potential noise level. Shah's friend, a Harvard senior, said the RA was "pretty strict about the whole thing" and seemed ready to enforce his rule if necessary.

Harvard RAs are responsible for reporting students caught breaking college rules and are endowed with the authority to shut down parties and confiscate alcohol, while Yale freshman counselors primarily serve as the master's eyes and ears in freshman dorms. If "fro-cos" - as they are affectionately known - find freshmen drinking, they can issue a first warning and, ultimately, report students to a college master, but the fro-cos themselves have no binding authority.

"Our only choice is to try to be positive examples as role models and help [the freshmen] make good decisions," Locker, a freshman counselor, said.

At Yale, freshman counselors are intended to be 24/7 resources for their students and, as a result, freshmen feel comfortable turning to their fro-cos for anything, Marisol Ryu '10 said.

"I love my fro-co," Ryu said. "He relates to me because he's a student himself. The counselors help us with everything from doing homework to finding a party. They're like parents, but also like friends."

Students at Harvard remain under the watchful eye of their RAs for all four of their undergraduate years, in stark contrast to the freedom upperclassmen at Yale enjoy. Harvard RAs are also graduate students, and therefore significantly older than the senior undergraduate students that Yale employs. Wong said

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that the separation between the RAs and their charges puts the RAs in a better position to be professional. Harvard's students, Wong said, tend to turn to RAs more for career advice than for friendship in any case.

Additionally, Harvard's social scene is dominated by finals clubs, whereas Yale's secret societies contribute nothing to campus life for non-members. Such is the conundrum of the average male Harvard freshman: Attractive freshman girls are often admitted to finals clubs and upperclass parties, while freshman guys are denied entrance, Harvard freshman Maxwell Nwaru said.

This kind of discouragement in turn encourages Harvard students to seek their fun on the town in Cambridge, or even in Boston where they can easily mingle with students from other schools, including Boston College, MIT and Wellesley.

"Their social lives are increasingly decentralized," Shah said of Harvard students. "Going out to Boston every weekend isn't the same as socializing with students at home on your own campus."

But sometimes Yale's narrower on-campus party scene proves too alcohol-fueled for prospective students.

"It may be a draw, but it's also a turnoff," Dean of Student Affairs Betty Trachtenberg said of the University's social scene. "We hear that a lot from parents after Bulldog Days."

Is the party over?

Since October 1, the long arm of the state law has embraced a number of Yale students in the form of arrests for public drunkenness and Toad's raids. What remains to be seen is whether the New Haven Police are being strict as a temporary reminder of the new law or cracking down for good. Two students were arrested for public drunkenness, although they maintain that they were neither belligerent nor uncooperative. Another student refused to part with her fake ID and was subsequently arrested outside of Toad's Place.

But for the most part, students seem content to play by the rules, which may be all that the New Haven Police are hoping for, Noah Mamis '08 said.

"Unregistered parties will probably get shut down and IDs may get taken, but that was always a risk anyway," Mamis said. "As far as everything else, we'll just have to wait and see."

Many Yalies are looking to the annual Harvard-Yale tailgate as a litmus test of the effectiveness of a more hard-line approach to alcohol. In a letter to Harvard's House Committee chairs, Harvard College Dean Benedict Gross outlined the new provisions of this year's tailgate regulations: No alcohol or intoxicated students will be

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permitted to enter the tailgate, and the tailgate will close at halftime.

Students have countered that such prohibitive measures are bound to encourage more hazardous drinking habits or even alternative drug use, and questioned the real motives behind Harvard's tightening of the tailgating policy.

"It places unnecessary restrictions and encourages underground binge drinking," Locker said. "And the fact that Harvard is charging for alcohol is just a penny-pinching move on their part."

But Harvard students on the whole seemed less upset at the prospect of a dry undergraduate tailgate.

"The tailgate policy is inconvenient, but there's not much we can do," Wong said. "I'm sure people will have fun regardless."

As for the tailgate, it's anyone's guess as to how successful Harvard will be in implementing its new restrictions.

"Between the two schools, you've got some of the smartest kids in the world," Wang said. "They're going to find a way around your policies."

Wang and Payson said they could easily list a host of possible ways a student or alum could sneak alcohol into the designated tailgating area, but declined to comment.

"The Harvard administration probably has nothing better to do than read this article and figure out how to steal Yale students' alcohol on their way into the tailgate anyway," Wang said.