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Parent notification policies for underage drinking evolve

By Jenna Johnson
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For years, Virginia Tech had a complicated system for deciding when to let parents know about their underage children's alcohol-related transgressions. Visits to the hospital or police station warranted immediate notification, but Mom and Dad didn't have to know about less-serious offenses, such as sneaking a six-pack into the dorm, unless it happened more than once.

But this semester, Virginia Tech joined a growing list of colleges that notify parents every time a student younger than 21 is caught drinking, drunk or in possession of alcohol. George Washington University also tightened its notification policy last year after a student died of alcohol poisoning.

Concerned about injuries, deaths, rising alcoholism rates and lawsuits, colleges and universities have realized that, in addition to levying official penalties, seeking parents' help can bolster anti-drinking efforts. Research shows that parents can have a significant influence on their children's drinking habits.

"Students are more concerned about their parents being notified than they are of the legal consequences," said Edward Spencer, vice president for student affairs at Virginia Tech.

Privacy laws prohibit university officials from communicating with parents about much more than tuition bills, but for more than a decade schools have had the legal authority to notify parents of students younger than 21 about alcohol- and drug-related matters. Many do so only for the most serious incidents. Others restrict parental notification to drug crimes.

Schools have found themselves in a delicate balancing act. Officials want to protect students' health and honor parents' demands for information, but they also want to help students develop a sense of independence.

Kevin Williams said he didn't know that GWU notified parents of all alcohol violations until he was busted for hosting a Halloween party in his dorm room when he was a freshman in 2008. He received a \$50 fine and had to go before a school judicial hearing but was relieved to learn that the incident would not go on his permanent record. About a week later, his mother called from New Jersey with a form letter from the school in hand and a lot of questions.

"It was not good," Williams said of the conversation. "She said: 'You're in college. I know you are going to be drinking. But are you going to be dumb and get caught?'"

Williams, now 20 and a sophomore, said he thinks parents should be notified if a student has a serious

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problem or is rushed to the hospital but "not if it's a minor getting-caught-having-fun-with-your-friends-on-Halloween thing."

Virginia Tech has long had some of the strictest alcohol sanctions in the region, including a three-strikes policy: two strikes for serious offenses, one for minor offenses. Students who rack up three or more strikes during their school careers are asked to leave for at least a semester.

The university decided to change its notification policy because officials had received complaints from parents who wanted to know whether their child had a drinking problem long before it got serious. The policy also applies to illegal drugs, including marijuana, but students caught with drugs are usually suspended.

Student body President Brandon Carroll said students were "shocked" when they heard about the new approach. Even though the university is legally able to share such information, that doesn't mean that it should, said Carroll, 21. "If the school calls someone's parent, that could put a lot of pressure on them. And how is that going to help?" he said.

College drinking is getting worse, according to researchers at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Between 1998 and 2005, the latest period for which figures are available, binge drinking rates increased, more students drove drunk and the number of alcohol-related deaths increased more than 25 percent, from 1,440 to 1,825.

"The problem is not getting better, but I think it can be turned around," said Ralph Hingson, the director of epidemiology and prevention research at the institute. "Interventions at multiple levels make a difference."

The federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 prevents universities from sharing most student information, but it allows them to contact parents if a child's health or safety is at risk. In 1998, the act was amended to give colleges and universities permission to notify parents anytime a student younger than 21 had any alcohol or drug violation.

That legislation was introduced by then-Sen. John Warner after five Virginia college students were killed in alcohol-related incidents in fall 1997, prompting a state investigation. Three were Virginia Tech students who died in two incidents over Halloween weekend.

Deaths at other campuses also have resulted in policy changes and, sometimes, lawsuits. In 2000, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology paid \$6 million to settle a wrongful-death lawsuit filed by the parents of a freshman who died of alcohol poisoning after a fraternity party in 1997.

Last year, a University of Kansas freshman died of alcohol poisoning less than two weeks after he was kicked out of campus housing for alcohol violations that his parents knew nothing about. Within months, the university began to notify parents about serious or repeat alcohol violations.

In 1997, the University of Delaware became one of the first schools to implement an "every time" notification policy. School officials say the policy, along with aggressive penalties, has reduced binge drinking on campus and curtailed the university's party-school reputation.

GWU soon followed and enhanced the policy last year, after the death of a student. The school now contacts parents within 24 hours in a serious case and follows up with parents when the student begins an alcohol education program. For a less-serious case, they send parents educational materials.

In the past five years, several schools have joined the movement, including the University of Georgia in 2006 and the University of New Mexico in 2007. In 2008, Tennessee passed a state law that requires all public higher-education institutions to notify parents of alcohol violations.

"There is no magical line here between May of their senior year of high school and college. When do they really become a responsible adult?" said John Zacker, director of student conduct at the University of Maryland, which notifies parents when a student's drinking threatens to get him or her kicked out of the dorms or school.

At the University of Virginia, students are usually given about 48 hours to call their parents before school officials do. The calls are made in the most serious cases, such as an arrest or hospitalization, or if a student shows an ongoing pattern of intoxication. But in most cases, Dean of Students Allen Groves said, he trusts his instincts.

"The easy thing to do is say, 'Here's a cookie-cutter process, and we are going to use this process the same way for every single case,' " Groves said. "But every case is not the same."

The effects of parental notification have not been widely studied, but the concept seems to work best when universities coach parents on how to react to the news, said Thomas Workman of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, who chairs a committee focused on alcohol education. Officials need to be mindful of family dynamics and cultural differences, he said.

"We can't assume a parent knows what to do and that they would do the right thing," he said. But if approached in the right way, parents can be the perfect partners for an intervention, he said.

"Even with cellphone technology, no student would call home four or five times a day a generation ago," Workman said. "We have a very different generation. And it's smart of institutions to say, 'We should take advantage of that.' "

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