

MEMORANDUM

FRM: Charlie Dobb, VSA VP for Student Life
Renee Pabst, Director of Health Education

TO: Catharine Hill, President
Chris Roellke, Dean of the College
Jonathan Chenette, Dean of the Faculty & Chair of the Committee on Curricular Policy
Janet Gray, Professor of Psychology & Director of Science, Technology, and Society, in her capacity as Chair of the Faculty Policy and Conference Committee
Jeff Carter, Head Athletic Trainer, in his capacity as Chair of the Drug & Alcohol Education Committee
Teresa Quinn, Assistant Dean of the College for Campus Activities
David “D.B.” Brown, Dean of Students
Ed Pittman, Associate Dean of the College for Campus Life & Diversity
Joanne Long, Dean of Studies
Ben Lotto, Dean of Freshmen
Belinda Guthrie, Associate Dean of the College, in her capacity as Title IX Coordinator
Luis Inoa, Director of Residential Life

CC: Michael Moore, incoming VSA VP for Student Life

RE: Alcohol Task Force (ATF) Findings & Recommendations

DTE: April 17, 2012

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2011, the Alcohol Task Force was chartered as a joint student, faculty, administrator self-study of alcohol on campus. The Task Force used a variety of methods in addressing this task, including campus-wide surveys, focus groups, and a two-week behavioral tracking study. From its research, the Task Force has identified six specific topics for further conversation, most striking among them the profound impact of perceived student superiors on other students’ drinking habits including a culture of initiation, a problematic dissatisfaction with available campus programs, concerning trends of students normalizing irresponsible and dangerous drinking behaviors including memory loss, and a consensus that the College must settle on a consistent safety oriented message regarding drinking. The Task Force makes a wide variety of recommendations, central among them collaborative efforts to educate and reduce incidents of hazing, incentivizing diverse programming on campus that is not music or dance focused, develop a consistent official message on drinking, and improve the integration of alcohol and wellness conversations into the academic environment that students have great respect for.

Introduction

The Alcohol Task Force (ATF, sometimes hereinafter the “Task Force”) was chartered by the Vassar Student Association (VSA) in the fall of 2011 with the charge of

“conducting extensive campus-specific research and synthesizing that data into a report...for the purposes of informing policy and furthering the dialogue around the campus relationship to alcohol.” This memorandum, in conjunction with the presentation given before the Committee on College Life (CCL) and the VSA Council, available online, constitutes the ATF’s report. The Task Force was a project in partnership with the Dean of the College division, with both the division and VSA contributing funding. The construction of the ATF was as follows:

Charlie Dobb ‘12, VSA VP for Student Life (Co-Chair)
Renee Pabst, Director of Health Education (Co-Chair)
Randy Cornelius, Chair of the Psychology Department
Jeff Carter, Head Athletic Trainer, in his capacity as Chair of the Drug & Alcohol Education Committee
Terry Hanlon, House Advisor for Cushing and Noyes and Assistant Director for Residential Wellness Programs
Alejandro Montoya ‘12, VSA President of the Town Houses
Benedict Nguyen ‘15, VSA President of the Class of 2015
Dallas Robinson ‘14, VSA President of Lathrop House

The Committee met periodically, as needed, both in full and as subcommittees. The Committees complete data sets are available on request through the VSA. In partnership with the Dean of the College, the Task Force brought Thomas Vander Ven, Associate Professor of Sociology at Ohio University and author of *Getting Wasted*, to campus for a lecture accompanying the launch of the Task Force’s preliminary findings. The lecture was exceptionally well attended.

Methodology

The ATF adopted three separate techniques, a mix of qualitative and quantitative, in conducting its self-study. The following lays out the methodology for each of the three studies conducted:

a. DEC Regular Campus-Wide Survey

In the fall of 2011, the DEC launched its semi-regular campus-wide survey regarding alcohol and other drug use. The survey was based on the Core Institute of Southern Illinois University’s standard alcohol and drug survey, used nationwide. Participation was incentivized with entrance into a lottery for various amounts of v-cash, ranging from \$10-\$50. A total of 1,092 students responded, with demographic data such as class year and gender reflective when compared to entrance data.

b. Focus Groups

A total of five focus groups were eventually conducted (six were contemplated, but the senior class group had insufficient participation). The five groups conducted included one freshmen group, one sophomore group, one junior group, and two mixed-year control groups. All groups were led by two facilitators from the group’s respective year (with the control groups having two facilitators, each from different class years).

Facilitators received a \$15 v-cash incentive and six hours of training, with the exception of two which received modified shorter training due to illness. A Standardized discussion guide was used across groups, with facilitators allowed to deviate as they felt necessary to adequately follow up or pursue topics as they developed. Student note takers were present for each group. No non-students were present for groups, except a videographer as necessary. Each group was transcribed, and videotapes were sent to be transcribed and anonymized by a third party. While every effort to preserve substantive integrity has been made, quotes used herein have had extraneous colloquial language removed for ease of readership. Each participant was coded to allow transcriptionists to anonymize the transcripts. Participation was incentivized with \$10 v-cash. Recruitment was done in two waves: the first using random samples generated from the Registrar's office, the second self-selecting based on response to campus-wide e-mails. Participation per group ranged from six-12 students.

c. Tracking Study

The ATF, in partnership with Computing and Information Services, developed a completely custom tracking survey accessible from a Smartphone or traditional computer. The tracking study asked a group of students to daily track various behaviors, including drinking, number of drinks, use of additional substances, academic commitments including class and work volume, and emotions. Forty-one students were enrolled from a random sample of 200 from the registrar's office. The study was conducted over two weeks, with participants receiving daily reminders via e-mail to complete that day's survey for the previous 24 hours. Demographic information, including class year, gender, height and weight (for body mass index calculation) and relationship status were gathered prior to the commencement of the study. Submissions were anonymous. Participation was incentivized with \$10 v-cash.

Findings

A wide range of conclusions can be drawn from the available data. Analysis of the data sets remains ongoing, and the Task Force welcomes requests of the data sets for further analysis. After preliminary analysis, the Task Force identifies the following particular areas of findings:

a. Influence of Perceived Superiors

One of the most striking and clear findings was that students' drinking behavior grows increasingly unhealthy over the course of their Vassar career. Roughly 30% of the freshmen class reports not drinking, with that number declining steadily for each class year to a low of roughly 6% in the senior year. Rate of binge drinking (5+ drinks in an episode), on the other hand, increased steadily over the course of a Vassar career, from a low of 10.2% in the freshmen class to a high of 17.3% in the senior class. Rates of memory loss (discussed in more detail in the "Blackout Culture" section below), another indicator of unhealthy drinking, showed a similar pattern of increase over the Vassar career, peaking in the senior year. Steepest spikes in binge drinking and memory loss rates occur from freshmen to sophomore year, suggesting that transition is problematic, and reinforcing the idea that it is integration into the Vassar environment that

contributes to this concerning pattern. One respondent summarized it concisely in a focus group: “I think that’s something that is a scary Vassar reality that the longer you’re here the more you drink. And then you get out just in time before you have a serious, serious problem.”

This data is particularly concerning when interpreted in conjunction with qualitative data suggesting an unusually strong influence of perceived superiors and upper classmen on the drinking behavior of other students. Respondents across all five focus groups cited house leadership, student fellows, organizational leaders, and other perceived superiors as prominent influences. One student gave a concerning summary: “Early on my student fellow never offered us to drink, but she’d come back stumbling drunk. So that definitely did have an effect on how we viewed drinking.” This influence of perceived superiors extended even further into behavior considered hazing under college regulations. It is important to note that, while some experience akin to hazing was expressed in all five focus groups, no participant identified the behavior as hazing. This speaks strongly to the value of qualitative work in this area, as had students been asked if they’d experienced hazing, they likely would have responded no, though their narratives suggest otherwise.

b. Pregaming

Roughly 60% of respondents campus-wide indicated that they pregame weekend events some or most of the time. Consistent with other findings, rate of pregame spikes from freshmen to sophomore year and remains relatively high for the duration of a Vassar career, suggesting pregame is a behavior learned once on campus.

It is important to note that the validity of that question, however, is challenging due to variations in the definition of pregame. Many focus group participants, for example, clarified that pregame was often *the game*, in other words the beginning and end of an evening. As one participant put it “oftentimes the pregame wasn’t for anything. It was pregame, but we didn’t end up going out.... In other words technically it’s not called pregame but that’s how we thought of it, as that event.” Focus group participants suggested the reason this has become an activity in itself is because it is highly ritualistic, often occurring with the same group, around the same time, in the same or similar places, contributing to a sense of comfort with the activity and reinforcing the idea that it is safe and responsible.

c. Programming

On campus programming was repeatedly identified in focus groups as problematic and a major contributing source of problematic drinking on campus. Findings in this section are reinforced and supplemented by a survey conducted by the Office of Campus Activities in the spring of 2012. Because that survey was conducted separate from the ATF’s work, it is not analyzed here, however that data set is available from the Campus Activities Office upon request.

One student’s chilling summary of programming on campus was “the only way to be obsessed with something like some of these parties that we go to is to be really drunk, which means not remembering some things.” One focus group described campus

programming “monotonous,” “prevalent,” and “the norm.” An individual in another group referred to programming as “ritualistic” and “comforting” but “awful.”

d. Alcohol & the “Hook Up” Culture

Not surprisingly, qualitative data suggests drinking and “the hookup culture” are deeply connected. One respondent asserts that the relationship between drinking and the hookup culture “cannot be disagreed with.” Scant data suggests the connection is rooted in social anxieties. One respondent, for example, notes it is a “big deal” meeting some “sober and in the daylight” and that there is a “high difference” between that and being with someone drunk. The Task Force notes that data on this is limited, but suggests that a more thorough and intentional study would yield results. It is recommended that this issue is further investigated.

Quantitative data suggests some concerning trends about the intersection between alcohol and sex on campus. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents reported a sexual experience they later regretted while intoxicated in the last year, and roughly 8% reported feeling sexually violated while intoxicated in the last year. It’s worth noting that topics like these are difficult to broach in qualitative research, but the Task Force again recommends more complete research in this area.

e. “Blackout Culture”

The Task Force found that dangerous behavior is frequently normalized on campus in specific ways. In focus groups, one respondent identified what he called the “blackout culture” as a “big deal” that “definitely informed how I was drinking [as a freshman].” The blackout culture was a term the Task Force adopted in describing a culture which normalizes memory loss and other indicators of unhealthy drinking. As one respondent put it “We’ve gotten very used to seeing people stumbling drunk and hearing people talk about blacking out to the degree that it’s not atypical for us anymore and it doesn’t seem as odd to us. It just seems like ‘oh you had a night’ like ‘you had a weekend.’”

Quantitative data supports this observation. Asked how often they suffered memory loss in the last year due to drinking, roughly 2 in 5 said at least once. That, like most other indicators of unhealthy drinking, increased steadily each class year, with seniors reporting a frequency of 1 in 2 having experienced memory loss from drinking in the past year. One in 10 seniors reported losing memory in the last year six or more times due to drinking.

How such behavior is normalized is suggested somewhat by the respondent’s statement above that it is simply accepted as “a weekend” and dismissed. A section of Professor Vander Ven’s *Getting Wasted* investigating the social concept of shame provides a potential lens through which to further view this phenomenon. Professor Vander Ven borrows from the sociologist Thomas Scheff to settle on a definition of shame as “a sense that one’s connection to the rest of the social body has been seriously damaged.”¹

¹ Thomas Vander Ven, *Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party so Hard* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 146.

Noting how difficult coping with this sense of shame is, Professor Vander Ven goes on to suggest “college drinkers rely on positive reflected appraisals to help them to reclaim their sober identity. Thus, regret is often filtered through a social process in which codrinkers help their emotionally sensitive cohorts by justifying, and sometimes even celebrating, their intoxicated exploits the night before.”² Preliminary data suggests this phenomenon is prevalent on campus and a major source of dangerous normalization, but further research is necessary.

f. Peer Support

Respondents indicated again and again a strong sense of student-to-student support. They often cited the good Samaritan policy as reinforcing this sensibility. One respondent said “that was something I was really taught to do here; check in with friends, make sure they’re okay, keep your eye out for them, always be supportive in a group.” Another said “I just think that [the good Samaritan policy is] a much more practical way of approaching it and [is] much more easy for people to respect and take seriously.” These sentiments were fairly consistent across groups and reinforced by the finding that 91% of respondents indicated they would feel comfortable calling EMS for a friend if they felt it necessary.

A potential barrier to peer-to-peer support was a frequent and strong sense of disdain for students who respondents deemed drank “irresponsibly” or “do not know how to drink.” One respondent summarized it curtly “I feel like it’s really really easy to drink responsibly...so if you black out or throw up or something, I have very little sympathy for you.” This kind of dislike or irresponsible drinking behavior can be protective, but can also act as a potential barrier to peer-to-peer intervention. It is also worth noting that, across groups, respondents thought of peer-to-peer intervention as reactive rather than proactive, often not even considering or discussing what steps could be taken to prevent or slow unhealthy drinking.

g. Official Messaging

Respondents were very clear that the college promulgates a mixed message with regard to drinking on campus. “I think it’s very mixed. It’s a totally mixed message,” stated one respondent plainly. The respondent elaborated what he believed to be the position of the college: “on the one hand we want you to be safe. On the other hand, it seems like the message is, we’d really like you to stop [drinking].” This was a sentiment that recurred across groups.

It is also quite clear that strong academic commitment is an exceptionally strong protective factor on this campus. One respondent stated plainly “I used to go to jazz night all the time and I never drank for that because they were on Tuesday nights. I had school the next day.” All quantitative indices supported that students were considerably less likely to drink when they had academic commitments the next day, particularly class

² Ibid., 162.

but also just a heavy workload.

Recommendations

The Task Force has attempted to generate a preliminary list of recommendations based on the findings above. It is important to note, however, that this is by no means exhaustive. It is the Task Force's hope that these findings will be reviewed by various offices and groups on campus and new and creative responses will be generated. The following is a summary list of recommendations:

- The College, in partnership with the VSA, develop intentional programming geared towards the sophomore class with promotes cohesion, healthy coping, and other factors that may contribute to the apparent "sophomore spike."
- The College partner with the VSA to promote education regarding hazing or "initiation," and that investigative policies and practices be put in place to appropriately investigate and sanction incidents.
- The VSA reallocate 25% of funds currently designated for music-centered all-campus programming in order to incentivize creative and diverse programs, as well as programs both on and off campus.
- Improve promotion of alcohol-free events.
- Require a percentage of funding for all-campus events to be used to simultaneously fund another option (offer "counter-programming").
- Create a joint working group of students and administrators to act as a resource for student planning all-campus events on how to foster safer environments and decrease the perceived need to binge drink or pregame.
- Encourage and further expand on the existing sense of community support with an ongoing strong investment in bystander intervention training and programming.
- Capitalize on student's respect for their academics by increasing Friday course offerings and continuing to intersect academic interests with discussions of "wellness" and the "whole person" (examples may include offering courses on alcohol and other drug use, dedicating course days to discussions on these issues, increasing house fellow programming around these issues, or offering panels, lectures, or other similar activities).
- Continued faculty engagement with committees dedicated to issues of wellness.
- Administration partner with VSA, faculty, and other constituencies on campus to develop a consistent message to the student body on alcohol, from entrance through graduation, keeping in mind students' reaction to "safe" and "responsible" drinking messaging.

Conclusion

Some of the Task Force's recommendations are already being addressed. For example, the VSA recently partnered with the Dean of the College division to charter the programming board, a collaborative effort that will provide \$15,000 in support to new and innovative programming on campus. In addition, the Fall Leadership Conference

committee has already allocated time to discussing these findings and hazing during the annual upcoming Fall Leadership Conference.

Next steps must be collaborative. Like all good research, the Task Force's findings in many ways ask more questions than provide answers. Further research must be done into issues of hooking up, sexual victimization, methods of normalizing unhealthy behavior, and what successful programming might look like, just to identify a few areas. In addition, the Task Force hopes that these data are shared broadly, and that areas across campus, including students, faculty, and administration think critically about these findings and develop their own innovative solutions and responses. And, importantly, these groups must receive the support, financially and otherwise, to see these attempts through. We must cultivate a culture of experimentation, in the hope that if we try enough well-informed and thought out solutions, a few will stick. However, there are certain steps various administrative, faculty, student and other offices can make at this juncture. It is the Task Force's sincere hope that this further research is undertaken, but that in the interim what has been learned can be acted upon.