

The  
Frostburg  
State  
University  
Magazine

# profile

# Passing It On

Learning to Link Hands, Heads and Hearts





# BATTLING BINGE DRINKING

**FSU fights for the lives and futures of its students, but its reputation is at stake, too.**

by Liz Douglas Medcalf

**Picture the typical college house party: A hundred or more young people crammed into a basement, each holding a plastic cup of beer or something stronger, music blaring, someone at the door collecting five bucks or so a head. This could be any university in America. This could be Frostburg State University.**

**Across the country, it's a picture that has gone relatively unchanged for decades, but today at FSU, attitudes are beginning to change – attitudes of students, the administration and the community – and statistics and anecdotes are starting to paint a different picture.**

## The Truth About the Myths

American college campuses and high-risk drinking seem to be enduringly intertwined. The phenomenon is celebrated in the culture, mythologized in movies. Thirty years of national surveys on binge-drinking among college students show only a minimal decline. For the past 30 years, between 40 and 45 percent of American college students drank to excess (five drinks or more in a row) at least once in the two weeks before they were surveyed.

Part of the myth is that binge drinking among college students is a harmless pastime, just kids sowing their wild oats before going out into the world to become productive citizens. In reality, according to the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence, approximately 1,700 college students between ages 18 and 24 die each year because of alcohol-related activity, primarily from accidents or alcohol poisoning. Countless more are injured or injure others.

According to Outside the Classroom, an organization that is dedicated to helping educational institutions fight binge drinking, this is truly a phenomenon among college students – something they have dubbed “The College Effect.” It describes the sharp uptick in use of alcohol among students from the moment they enter college, especially in the

first six weeks. Students who already drink, drink more. More students who didn't drink before college start drinking. The most telling statistic, the one linking it to college life, is that young people in college drink more than people the same age who did not go to college.

Those on the front lines in the battle against college binge drinking have a different view of that quintessential house party: They see a fire hazard. They see alcohol being sold without a license. They see underage drinkers. They see students who will sleep through their next class – or fall asleep while in class – because they are hung over. They see potential victims of crime who are lowering their guard more with each drink. They see neighbors who can't sleep because of the noise, or who wake up to trash and vomit in their yards. They see people drinking beyond drunkenness to stupor or unconsciousness. They see potential trips to the hospital or the morgue. And they see actions and habits that can follow a person throughout life.

“This is a serious national problem, but so many schools seem to just ignore it. They don't want to deal with it,” said FSU President Jonathan Gibraltar. His first month as president at Frostburg, Gibraltar was faced with an alcohol-fueled tragedy when a community member was severely injured outside an off-campus party. This sobering crisis led Gibraltar to take immediate action by creating a wide-ranging Alcohol Task Force, which has guided and given momentum to FSU's efforts to fight the college alcohol culture.

## Consequences at FSU

Frostburg State University unfortunately is no stranger to heavy college drinking and its consequences. Over the years, students have died, been injured or injured others. The 1996 death of John Stinner from alcohol poisoning, a case that led to charges against other members of his unrecognized fraternity, was the highest-profile. But other students have died, and while in many cases alcohol wasn't listed as the primary cause of death, it was a contributing factor.

It's the other consequences – assaults, injuries, hospitalizations, arrests, academic failure – that keep FSU's student affairs staff busy trying to keep these problems from ending a student's academic career, or worse, his or her life.

But beyond the risk to the individual students, the binge-drinking culture poses risks to the community and the institution as well.

Much of what passes for town-gown tension between Frostburg residents and

Frostburg students is related to alcohol consumption and parties. City police are stretched by policing underage drinking, public drunkenness, parties illegally selling alcohol or pushing the capacity of houses in town far beyond fire codes, and by responding to fights, assaults and accidents among students in which alcohol is a contributing factor. Neighbors in the college district, both long-time residents and current students, complain of noise and trash following large parties and “party houses,” houses in which no one lives, but which are packed with scores of people on the weekends. The situations did not go unnoticed by FSU's administration.

“My first year here, on Sunday of Homecoming, I drove by a house where they were using a rake to get all the beer cans out,” Gibraltar said.

Jesse Ketterman, FSU's dean of students, who for several years was FSU's point man with the community – and by extension on the alcohol issue – points out that the party culture in town is not all FSU students. Students from the region's two-year colleges, former FSU students who flunked out but never left, and people just looking for a party – or trouble – are drawn to the area.

## Branded

Beyond the immediate neighborhood is a broader, more insidious impact, that of FSU's “brand,” what people think of when they hear the words Frostburg State University. For Frostburg, the “party school” brand has been hard to shake, regardless of the reality.

“There's a direct correlation between party school image and brand recognition,” said Outside the Classroom CEO Brandon Busteded, who has worked closely with FSU for a number of years.

OTC closely monitors studies on the issue, and a body of research is beginning to draw some conclusions: High-risk drinking weakens the perception of a school's academic commitment, which can turn off high-caliber candidates, and employers may be less inclined to hire graduates of perceived party schools.

The erosion of FSU's “brand” can happen in subtle ways: snide laughter that astronaut and FSU alumnus Ricky Arnold '85 heard from an interviewer on a Baltimore TV station when he talked about his days as a Frostburg student, the bewildered reaction some alums received from their friends at the news that the alums are encouraging their own children to attend Frostburg, or the scene at college fairs when a prospective student starts to approach FSU's table but is

shooed away by a parent who won't let them consider a "party school."

"Campuses that have addressed the party school image have shown increased brand value," Busted said. "Alumni are benefitting from this."

Alumni themselves can be guilty of perpetuating the reputation out of pride or bragging rights. But, often, it can be to their own detriment and erode the value of their own degree, Busted said. The perception becomes that successful alumni achieve not because of their education at Frostburg, but in spite of it.

"A lot of alumni look at the alcohol issue as a happy part of the experience. Stories are told and repeated" and become more feeling than fact, Busted said. "But when they really look at what they achieved as part of it, they may see it differently."

## Adjusting the Picture

The thing is, the story really is different these days, and Frostburg now has statistics to back it up.

FSU has offered AlcoholEdu, Outside the Classroom's online education program, since 2002. It's now required of all freshmen and offered to their parents as well. Data received from the students who complete the course indicates that between 2004 and 2008, the number of students who enter FSU who are nondrinkers went from 40 percent to 57 percent, a trend that is outpacing the national average by two and a half times.

"That means the makeup of the student body is changing," Busted said. At least among prospective students, so is FSU's image.

Don Swogger, director of the S.A.F.E. office and advisor to the BURG Peer Education Group, which promotes healthy choices, conducts an informal survey of incoming freshmen, asking them to raise their hands if they had heard of FSU being a party school. Over the past decade, the number of hands has gradually diminished, although the parents, especially parents who are alumni, are more likely to consider FSU a party school than their children do.

Swogger sees that as one of the challenges. "We need to get the word out that this is a much different institution than it was 30 years ago."

In addition, every three years since 1997, Dr. Spencer Deakin, director of the FSU Counseling Center, has administered the national Core Survey – an assessment of use, attitudes and impact of alcohol and drug

use – to students. In its first year, 59 percent of students surveyed reported binge drinking within the previous two weeks, well above the national average. However, over the past 12 years, that rate has steadily decreased, now coming in line with the national average at 43 percent, over a period when the national average has barely budged.

Progress is showing in other areas, too. For example, in 1997, 90 percent of FSU students drank alcohol at least once in the month before they were surveyed, but in 2009, that number was 69.5 percent. And those who did drink are drinking less, down from an average of 9.5 drinks consumed in a week to 5.2 drinks.

"Less than a dozen universities nationwide have shown this kind of success over this period of time," said Busted about FSU. One of the highest profile, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, managed that decline with the help of a \$500,000 grant, something that FSU has been doing only with a shift in priorities and current resources.

"That's real, tangible progress," Busted said. "Frostburg has made a real commitment to this, not just the student affairs office, but across the whole university. ... All the folks at Frostburg are on the same page. They want to tackle this."

## Changing Behaviors

Beyond statistics, there are other signs that behaviors are changing.

Senior Tierney Callahan-Harding, a member of the unrecognized group, Delta Delta (formed after Phi Sigma Sigma was barred from campus in 1999 for hazing), has personally witnessed the change in her four years at FSU.

"People used to 'rage' here – that was the

word everyone used. House parties are so much smaller now. It's not the huge, raging house parties any more," she said. "Parties were getting busted, and people got tired of running from the cops."

One of FSU's fastest-growing fraternities, Phi Mu Delta, chartered just three years ago, still has parties and still allows beer, but from the very beginning, the choice was made that they would be different, according to member Zach Bensley. Each party has a guest list requiring RSVPs. Guests are limited to the amount of beer they can bring – there's no keg – and steps are taken to make sure that underage guests don't drink.

And other on-campus Greek organizations are starting to follow suit, doing more to prevent their guests from over-indulging and to keep underage guests from drinking at all.

Phi Mu Delta takes pride in its leadership on the issue. "This semester, all the other organizations got stricter, so we got even stricter still," Bensley said.

The big parties off campus still exist, especially on big weekends like Halloween and Homecoming, but they're shrinking, becoming less frequent, and becoming less brazen. To Gibraltar, that's still progress. A smaller party is just a safer place to be.

"I don't want to ban drinking or parties. I just don't want a student to die," the president said.

FSU's student activities staff is also seeing an increase in students participating in campus programming, according to Robert Cooper, director of student activities. The increase is partly due to changes in timing, with many activities starting around 10 p.m., the same time as the local parties gear up or students start rolling into bars. Cooper said students, and, in particular, the campus Greeks have played a large role in identifying programming that resonates with their fellow students; it's now activities like Laser Tag tournaments that draw numbers.

Students were also behind the creation of SafeRide, the van service that has already provided thousands of late-night rides home from Frostburg parties and bars on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. (See related story p. 8.) After overcoming an initial reluctance on the part of the FSU administration, which feared that the service would encourage drinking, SafeRide has been in operation since spring of 2008, supported by the University, but staffed almost entirely by students.

## Nine Effective Strategies in Use

**National data shows that of the 11 alcohol prevention strategies determined to be most effective, FSU is already using nine of them. They are:**

- Online education (AlcoholEdu)
- BASICS (Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students)
- Social norms marketing
- Alcohol-free options
- Social marketing
- Substance-free housing
- Peer engagement (BURG Peer Education Network, Greeks)
- Responsible beverage service training (FSU paid for training for local bar owners and their servers.)
- Parental notification (Once FSU started notifying parents of alcohol-related infractions, the number of second offenses dropped dramatically.)

## Where's This All Coming From?

FSU's student affairs staff has been fighting the good fight for years now, and they deserve credit for those early declines in binge drinking. For more than a decade, the University has been using social norming, in which a student's often exaggerated perception of the amount people drank is given a dose of reality, using data from the Core Survey. The BURG Peer Education Network has been active for 23 years and is currently at 50 members. Educational programs, "alternative" activities and more intensive, small-group counseling for students with addiction issues are all part of the arsenal.

"Whatever we do, some students will continue to press the envelope," Swogger said. "We have to keep pressing on. Being complacent is the worst place to be."

FSU's Alcohol Task Force, created early in Gibraltar's administration, an answer to that early tragedy and to the culture of binge drinking that he saw putting so many students at risk, has been directing the next steps, always looking for the next front in the battle. The Task Force is a broad-based coalition of people from throughout FSU – students, faculty, counseling staff, activities staff, athletics staff, University Police – as well as interested members of the community. Two of the newest members are the manager of a local pub and a rental property manager.

The Task Force has looked at FSU's relationship with its surrounding community, reviewed current policies and procedures and worked to find programming and activities that will resonate with the student of today. Meetings have been held with Frostburg city law enforcement and local alcohol-serving businesses, and letters have been sent to local landlords and FSU parents.

The Task Force members continue to look for areas of improvement. One area of current focus is off-campus, unsanctioned organizations – most adopting Greek letters, but many with little in common with recognized groups, and among which some of the most dangerous behavior exists.

"The majority of these groups just exist as drinking clubs, and they create a very risky environment," Ketterman said.

Last fall, a former student and member of one of these groups died as a result of what is believed to be taking a combination of alcohol and pain killers. The subsequent police investigation opened the door to some information to which the University previously had no access. Of 22 members with a definite affiliation with FSU, only nine were current students – six of them on academic probation

– while another nine had been academically dismissed.

The members of Delta Delta, also unrecognized, but with a goal of regaining recognition someday, can see the difference, and they're bothered to be lumped in with the groups who primarily exist to facilitate drunkenness.

"We're based on friendship and sisterhood, not based on drinking," Callahan-Harding said.

## The Role of Leadership

Gibraltar remains committed to changing the predominant college culture – at least on FSU's campus – and change has happened. But he knows there is still work to be done at FSU, since even with the reduced numbers, 43 percent of FSU students can be classified as binge drinkers.

"We get a new group of freshman each year, and we have to start all over with them," he said.

In the past year, as a result of the Presidential Leadership Award given to Gibraltar from seven higher education organizations, including Outside the Classroom, he has been called upon frequently to talk about what's happening at FSU and to talk about ways to address the binge-drinking issue. He encourages his counterparts at other universities to get involved.

"Often University presidents shy away from this issue because of the fear of bad press," he said, "but a president's leadership empowers everyone else – students, staff, faculty, alumni and the community – to do their own part."

Ketterman agrees. "Presidential leadership is the key. It motivates us, pushes us forward."

Gibraltar also knows that progress against binge drinking leads to progress elsewhere. There is clear national data on the detrimental impact that binge drinking has on academic performance, student engagement and retention. At Frostburg, in just the three years of the high-profile push, retention has improved by 5 percentage points.

Gibraltar was asked by a reporter early on whether he thought taking on Frostburg's party school image might hurt enrollment. He mulled the question for a minute, then said, "there's a silent majority out there who don't always speak their mind, but who really want an environment where alcohol is not so rampant."

It may be a coincidence, but this fall Frostburg State University posted the largest undergraduate enrollment in its 111-year history. ■

## Work of the Alcohol Task Force

Because the problem of binge drinking among college students is a multifaceted issue, Frostburg State University is addressing it from multiple angles. Students, faculty, counseling staff, activities staff, athletics staff, law enforcement, parents, alcohol-serving businesses, landlords and local residents all have a part to play.

Frostburg State University's Alcohol Task Force encompasses all the above groups. It began by breaking down the examination of the issue into subgroups:

- Campus and the Community
- Policies and Practices
- Alternative Programming/Today's Student

Each subgroup identified and prioritized issues within its individual focus, collecting information from a wide range of sources.

Among the groups the Task Force has met with are:

- University Neighbors (a coalition of residents and students in the neighborhood surrounding the University)
- Allegany County Liquor Control Board
- Local liquor establishments
- Local law enforcement agencies (Regular meetings are now conducted, and a member of FSU's police force is part of the Allegany County Combined Criminal Investigations unit.)
- Officials at Allegany College of Maryland and Potomac State College, regional two-year institutions.

Among the other efforts or recommendations of the Task Force:

- Alerted landlords to excessive noise citations at their properties
- Alerted those who rent venues of alcohol policies, unrecognized groups and risk management procedures
- Paid for Training Intervention Procedures (TIPS) for local establishments
- Worked with the City of Frostburg for code enforcement
- Expanded parental notification to off-campus infractions
- Examined the nature of incidents to identify "at-risk" students, referring them directly to an alcohol support group

