

## **Association of Fraternity Advisors Risk Management Committee**

### **21<sup>st</sup> Birthdays: A Rite of Passage or A Dangerous Milestone**

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Each year thousands of college students embark upon the time-honored rite of passage of turning 21 years of age. For some, this is a date of great expectation, while for others it is a day filled with angst and nervous tension. There is a sense of freedom in college for some that when they turn 21 as they no longer need a fake ID or a friend to purchase alcohol for them, and now they have a chance to go to the bars without worry of being arrested. There is also a period of worry. This worry is brought about by the anticipation of what will actually happen during their birthday celebration.

For many, turning 21 is a chance to go out with close friends or brothers and sisters to celebrate a newfound independence. They have heard wild stories about others who have gone out and had the times of their lives. There are also many who do not actually recall most of the time spent out on their birthdays. They spend days trying to piece together the events of the evening, usually much to the laughter of their friends reminding them of what actually occurred, what they did, and possibly how much of a fool they made of themselves. Some paid a visit to the emergency room. There are also those forgotten few who never get the chance to recall their birthdays and will never celebrate another. The Denver Post listed several examples of alcohol deaths due to 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations in a September 2004 article.

- “May 2004 – California State University-Long Beach student and President’s Scholar Jason Kirsinas dies after lapsing into a coma following a night of drinking on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.”
- “March 2004 – Jason Reinhardt, a former student of Minnesota State University-Moorhead, dies of alcohol poisoning on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday at he Phi Sigma Kappa house. Reinhardt has 16 drinks between midnight and 1 a.m. at a Moorhead, Minn., bar before going to the fraternity house with friends. His blood-alcohol content was 0.36.”
- “April 2000 – University of California-Davis senior David Thornton dies after downing 21 drinks to celebrate his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.”
- “August 1999 – Texas A&M University student Michael Wagener dies of alcohol poisoning after celebrating his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. His blood alcohol level was .48.”
- “November 1998 – Michigan State University junior Bradley McCue dies of alcohol poisoning after drinking to celebrate his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. McCue drank more than 24 shots in less than two hours. His blood alcohol level was .44.”

In many fraternity/sorority chapters, the celebration of a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is also a rite of passage. It is the stage when the individual becomes one of the older members and part of the crowd that goes to happy hour every Friday. Many times younger members have an extreme desire to be part of that group as well. One of the most dangerous traditions associated with celebration drinking is the “21 for 21,” a practice that includes 21 shots of alcohol during your birthday celebration. The degree of peer pressure and perceived expectation to perform this task exists in many peer groups, but is extremely strong in the fraternity or sorority community.

The fraternal world is constantly challenged for the way that alcohol use and abuse plays such a role in our chapters’ and students’ lives. Each week stories of fighting, hazing, sexual assaults, and injuries or death, plague our conscience as they are portrayed in the media. Many of us breathe a sigh of relief that it

is not our campus in the headlines. Some staff and the public who see and read about these incidences can't imagine how such a tragedy could happen when they appear to be so preventable.

As a campus advisors, headquarters volunteers and employees we are constantly challenged to educate our members. We perform alcohol assessments, pay for public speakers, refer our students to counseling, and refer them to the judicial process. We beg and plead for our members to be safe this semester, only to repeat the same story again the following. So what can we do?

In a unique approach to education regarding dangerous 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations, Michigan State University became the first university to send out birthday cards to students about to turn 21. This was prompted by the death of Bradley McCue in November of 1998 from acute alcohol poisoning following the celebration of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Since then, many campuses across the nation have followed Michigan State's lead and send out variations of these birthday cards. The birthday cards, a collaborative effort between Michigan State and BRAD (Be Responsible About Drinking), remind students to celebrate safely and includes a laminated wallet-sized card with information about alcohol poisoning. The cards are also personally signed by John and Cindy McCue, Bradley's parents. Since the inception of such programs, many institutions have evaluated their effectiveness and found very favorable results. Students learned new information from the cards and thought about it during their birthday celebrations (Be Responsible About Drinking, Inc., 2005).

Some institutions are taking different approaches to the issue. Indiana University of Pennsylvania includes "A Guide for Tavern Owners and Staff" on their website. This guide provides tavern owners information about the risk and liability of 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations and bar crawls. It also provides practical tips for addressing the issue. In an effort to change the culture that allows dangerous 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations to continue, we must continue to build collaborations and relationships with all the various constituencies. IUP has also made a great start on educating and working with bar owners (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2005).

From the legislative side, a bill was proposed in February 2005 in Texas that would make it illegal for someone to drink alcohol at a bar or restaurant before 7 a.m. on his or her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. And if for birthdays falling on a Sunday, the individual would have to wait until noon. This bill, dubbed the "Cinderella Bill," would prevent individuals from going out at midnight on their birthday and binging for 2 hours before the bars close. While the intention isn't to stop the celebration, sponsors of the bill feel it would delay the celebration a bit and perhaps encourage individuals to celebrate in a more timely and safe manner. Currently, 24 states and the District of Columbia have similar laws.

What else can we do as administrators to help prevent needless tragedies such as these? Engage your students who are turning 21 in conversations about a responsible celebration of their birthday. Parents can be another very influential partner. Information about dangerous 21<sup>st</sup> birthday practices should be shared parents, along with questions, points to talk about, or ideas for celebrating with their son or daughter. A multifaceted approach is necessary if we truly wish to address this issue and make a change in the culture of our campuses.

Celebration drinking can cause havoc on a student and can have tremendous effects on a community as well. There is an urgent need to continue to find ways to educate students about this dangerous practice and by working together, discussing the issue, following the lead of some of our counterparts, and supporting a culture where celebration drinking isn't necessary, perhaps we can prevent any additional tragedies from taking place.

## References

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