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A delicate balance

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A delicate balance

“Each student has a responsibility to respect the rights of every other student and to support the right of Furman University to establish institutional standards designed to achieve its goals and objectives.”

— *The Helmsman*

Since the beginning of higher education in America, colleges and universities have tried to balance students' desires for individual freedom with the responsibilities inherent in being a member of a community. Through the years, as colleges have attempted to maintain a certain level of control over student conduct, heated debates have frequently broken out between students and administrators as to how to assure the rights of individuals while creating a community of learning built on mutual respect, caring and responsibility.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, institutions took a hard-line approach to student life. Faculty served as disciplinarians and had the ultimate authority to prescribe rules of conduct — and to enforce them. Students had little voice in campus life.

In 1913, the Supreme Court issued a ruling (in the *Gott vs. Berea* case) that first applied the term “in loco parentis” to higher education — suggesting that schools, teachers and administrators had the right to act with parental authority while students are under their direction. The Court stated, “College authorities stand in loco parentis concerning the physical and moral welfare and mental training of the pupils, and we are unable to see why to that end they may not make any rule or regulation for the government or betterment of their pupils that a parent could do for their same purpose.” As a result, in loco parentis became the norm at Furman and other colleges, and remained so for many years.

Indeed, for years Furman women faced strict curfews, visitation between men and women in residence hall rooms took place only on special occasions (and with the doors wide open), dances were forbidden on campus, men were required to wear socks to class, and women could not wear shorts or slacks in the classroom or dining hall. Women even had to wear a raincoat over their shorts to and from physical education classes. As a student from 1962 to 1966, I thought that Furman had carried this in loco parentis bit way too far.

Of course, the societal upheavals of the '60s had a major impact on student life throughout higher education. As students began to assert their right to a voice in campus policies, many rules were liberalized — although I'm sure there are still plenty of Furman students who believe that the word “liberal” should never be associated with Furman's regulations.

Despite the changes over the years, though, debate continues on how to balance student desires for independence with their need for guidance. However,

the major concerns are no longer curfews, dress codes and campus dances. Instead, issues of tolerance, respect and acceptance have taken center stage as the general student population becomes increasingly diverse.

Another key question is alcohol. Intense media coverage of student deaths from excessive drinking has drawn attention to the use and abuse of alcohol among today's young people — and to what is perceived as a lack of institutional oversight.

In a recent Carnegie Foundation survey, college presidents cited student alcohol abuse as the foremost campus problem, the cause of rising legal liabilities and associated expenses, and the precipitant for numerous tragic deaths. Many schools have made the decision to prohibit alcohol on campus property. Furman's alcohol policy maintains the university's commitment to providing a campus environment that supports the educational program and promotes the general welfare of those within the university community. Within this context, we work very hard to educate students regarding the dangers of excessive drinking.

Recent court decisions make it clear that colleges and universities do have supervisory and protective responsibilities that go far beyond those of landlords or employers. So we continue to wrestle with the difficult distinction between governance and what students define as interference.

With this in mind, Furman has placed renewed emphasis on educating the whole person — intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually. The university's strategic plan specifically addresses the need for faculty and staff to become better educated about the developmental stages of college-age students. In addition, a Community Relations Committee composed of all segments of the university is discussing ways to ensure a proper balance between individual rights and institutional standards.

Even though the doctrine of in loco parentis has gone the way of dress codes, Furman still strives to nurture students during four critical years of their lives — and to provide a safe, balanced learning environment that creates positive experiences for young people as they grow from adolescence to adulthood.

— **Harry B. Shucker**

Harry Shucker '66 is vice president for student services at Furman.

