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## Parental notification policies, practices, and impacts in 2000 and 2002

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TRENDS

# Parental Notification Policies, Practices, and Impacts in 2000 and 2002

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the enactment of the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act Amendments of 1989, there have been several additional attempts by Congress to address the problem of alcohol abuse on college campuses. In 1990, Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act containing a provision requiring institutions to notify students of the number of arrests for liquor law violations. In the 1998 Higher Education Amendments (HEA), Congress proposed a set of initiatives institutions should take "to change the culture of alcohol consumption on college campuses." Entitled The Collegiate Initiative to Reduce Binge Drinking and Illegal Consumption, this particular section of HEA was not law, but only a resolution expressing the sense of Congress. HEA also renamed the Campus Security Act as the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act and expanded the data regarding alcohol violations that institutions were required to report. Prior to the 1998 Amendments, institutions were mandated only to keep and distribute data on the number of arrests for alcohol violations. HEA broadened that requirement to include "persons referred for campus disciplinary action for liquor law violations." Finally, HEA included changes to the Family Educational Rights

and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) to allow institutions to notify the parents of students under the age of 21, if those students violated "Federal, State, or local laws or any rule or policy of the institution governing the use or possession of alcohol." This is now commonly referred to as parental notification.

Research examining the impact of Federal legislation on alcohol problems in higher education (Palmer, Gehring, & Guthrie, 1992) has generally found that the efforts of Congress have had very little, if any, effect; however, there is one exception. A national study conducted by Palmer, Lohman, Gehring, Carlson, and Garrett (2001) found that, at least in the opinion of many institutional judicial officers, parental notification policies and practices had contributed to reductions in the numbers of alcohol violations on their campuses. However, that research was conducted less than two years after Congress passed the parental notification amendment to FERPA, and many judicial officers who participated in the study indicated that it was simply too early to assess the extent to which parental notification was effective in addressing alcohol concerns on campus. Thus, a second study (Lowery, Palmer, & Gehring, 2002), modeled after the first study, but providing additional information, was conducted two years later. The purposes of this article are to compare the results of the earlier study with more recent data and discuss the implications of the findings from both studies. This information is particularly important to college and university housing administrators, as they are most often called upon to deal with alcohol violations on campus. Understanding how parental notification policies have been implemented on other campuses and what impact such policies have had on alcohol violations (particularly recidivism) is helpful to housing officers in making decisions regarding parental notification policies and practices at their own institutions.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDIES

National studies conducted in 2000 and 2002 assessed the extent to which, reasons for which, means by which, and circumstances under which parental notification policies and practices had been implemented by institutions of higher education. These studies also attempted to assess the level of parental support for these policies and the effects of the policies on the numbers of alcohol violations on campus. The results of the

initial study, based on an e-mail survey completed by senior judicial officers (members of the Association for Student Judicial Affairs, ASJA) at 189 colleges and universities, were reported by Palmer et al. (2001) and are summarized in this article.

The second study was conducted by Lowery, et al. (2002) and is not yet published. To follow up on and extend the earlier study, some revisions were made to the original survey form. Selected members of ASJA (one per institution) were contacted again by e-mail and invited to provide information regarding parental notification, this time by completing an on-line survey. Approximately 350 institutions participated in this study. Although the data analysis for the 2002 study is not yet complete, this article provides a summary of the major findings that are currently available and that provide a means to compare the results of the 2000 and 2002 studies.

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSIDERATION OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

The first study found that 44% of the participating institutions had formal (written) parental notification policies and that of those that did not, 26% notified parents in practice and 44% were actively considering adopting a policy. In the second study, 46% of the respondents indicated that their institutions had policies, and of those without such a policy, approximately 30% notified parents in practice and 40% were actively considering instituting a policy. These findings suggest little change between 2000 and 2002 in the extent to which parental notification policies and practices had been implemented or were being considered.

In the samples for both studies, 30% of the institutions that did not have policies (15% of the total institutions) had neither practices nor plans to implement policies. When asked why, respondents most commonly cited the demographic characteristics of their students (e.g., few students under the age of 21, no students living on campus), state laws or state constitutional provisions that prohibit parental notification, and philosophical positions that oppose such notification on the grounds that college students are adults. For example, in the Lowery et al. (2002) study one respondent said, "We believe that our students are adults, and that we need to treat them as adults and hold them responsible for their actions. Notifying parents seems to be contrary to the belief that

our students are, in fact, adults." This statement is similar to a comment made by a respondent two years earlier: "We want to treat our students as adults, whether they act like adults or not" (Palmer et al., 2001, p. 379).

## **How and When Parents Are Notified**

In both studies, the majority of institutions with policies most often notified parents by letter, although notifications by telephone, often followed by a letter, were also common. The policies themselves varied widely from those that allowed for notification only at the discretion of a senior administrator to those virtually mandating notification in all cases involving violations of institutional alcohol policies. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the policies described in the first study allowed for notification following the first violation, but actual notifications were almost evenly divided between first violations (34%) and second violations (35%). In the second study, almost three-quarters of the policies allowed for notification after the first offense, but again actual notifications (approximately one-quarter each) were divided between first and second offenses.

It should be noted that the revised survey form provided more response options for questions concerning the circumstances under which parental notifications are allowed by policy and are actually made in practice. Many participants in the original study had noted that actual notifications were most commonly made (regardless of whether a first, second, or third violation was involved) when students required medical treatment, when a second policy also was violated (e.g., when an intoxicated student became violent, vandalized property, or threatened a staff member), or when judicial sanctions included conduct probation, eviction from residence halls, or suspension or dismissal from the institution. Clearly, policies stating that institutions *may* (as opposed to *will*) notify parents after a first offense would *allow* administrators to notify parents in more serious cases where it is deemed necessary or prudent to do so without *requiring* such notification for a less serious first-time offense.

## **Parental Support and Effects of Policies on Alcohol Violations**

Institutions having parental notification policies in effect throughout the term preceding the first study (fall 1999) had found a total of 5,828

students responsible for violating institutional alcohol policies during that term and had notified parents in 2,359 (40%) of these cases. Respondents indicated that the vast majority of these parents were somewhat or very supportive of the policy. In fact, only slightly more than 1% of these parents were reported to be somewhat or very unsupportive of the policy. Similarly broad support by parents was found in the second study, as was support by student affairs staff (a question not asked in the first study).

Most importantly, what effect does parental notification have on the incidence of alcohol violations? Of the first study's respondents from institutions with parental notification policies, slightly more than half indicated that the policies had slightly reduced (40%) or significantly reduced (13%) the number of alcohol violations on their campuses, but many noted in marginal comments that the effects were greatest on recidivism (repeat offenses by students whose parents had been notified). Consequently, an item regarding recidivism was included on the survey form for the second study. Like two years earlier, only slightly more than 10% of the respondents with policies said they had significantly reduced the number of alcohol violations overall, whereas 25% said they had significantly reduced recidivism. In other words, implementing policies by notifying parents seems to have a greater effect on students who are directly involved than the mere existence of policies has on the student population as a whole.

### **Differences Between Private and Public Institutions**

Although data comparing private to public institutions are not yet available from the second study, the first study involved 85 (45%) private and 104 (55%) public institutions and found several differences between these two groups. First, the average student enrollment at the public institutions (14,762) was more than four times as high as at the private institutions (3,083), but the proportion of students living in on-campus housing at the private institutions (44%) was more than twice as high as at the public institutions (21%). Parental notification policies had been in effect at 32% of the private and only 5% of the public institutions before the Higher Education Reauthorization Act went into effect in October 1998. In January 2000 (when the first study was conducted), private institutions were more likely to have policies (58% private, 33% public) and

practices without policies (20% private, 11% public) and less likely to be either actively considering (15% private, 33% public), or not actively considering (5% private, 24% public) adopting policies.

Policies at the private institutions were slightly less likely to allow for parental notification following the first alcohol violation (61% private, 68% public), and actual notification after the first violation was somewhat less common at private institutions (29% private, 41% public). Perhaps as a result, the private institutions having policies in effect throughout the fall of 1999 had notified a slightly lower percentage (35% private, 47% public) of the parents of students who had been found responsible for alcohol policy violations during that term. At both types of institutions, most of the notified parents were reported to be supportive of the policies and the majority of respondents with policies believed that the policies had slightly or significantly reduced the number of alcohol violations on their campuses.

### **DISCUSSION**

Although conducted two years later and involving about twice as many institutions of higher education, the second study generally supported the major findings from the first study. In both studies, approximately 85% of the institutions had parental notification policies or practices or were actively considering adopting such policies. The remaining institutions that were prohibited by state laws from notifying parents, did not deem policies necessary because they had primarily commuter or older student populations, or believed that parental notification was incompatible with their desire to treat students as adults. Indeed, those who indicated that they are considering, but have not yet adopted a policy, may be debating this issue on their campuses. This debate requires administrators to balance concerns about a return to *in loco parentis* with concerns about alcohol-related incidents that disrupt the learning environment, adversely affect roommates or other members of the residence hall community, are commonly associated with other incidents such as vandalism or acquaintance rape, and may result in accidental injury or even death.

The majority of the parental notification policies that had been implemented at institutions involved in both studies allowed for notification following the first alcohol policy violation, but actual notifications (usually by letter, or by a telephone call followed by a letter) were about

equally likely to occur after the second as after the first violation. Parental notifications also are common in cases involving violations of other policies in addition to alcohol policies; students who require medical attention; and judicial sanctions including probation, eviction, suspension, or dismissal. Nevertheless, it is clear that policies *allowing* notification do not necessarily *require* notification. In fact, it appears that many administrators consider each student's unique set of circumstances and use considerable discretion in determining whether, when, how, and by whom parents should be notified. Witness the research finding that, at institutions having parental notification policies, the parents of only 40% of the students found responsible for violating institutional alcohol policies had actually been notified.

Respondents from institutions having parental notification policies reported that most parents who were notified as well as student affairs staff were supportive of such policies. Many indicated that the policies had affected (slightly or significantly reduced) the number of alcohol violations on campus and had an even greater impact on the recidivism of students whose parents had actually been notified. Nevertheless, how effective institutions are in making their parental notification policies known to students and the extent to which such knowledge serves as a deterrent to alcohol violations remain unknown. Even after parents have been notified, it is unclear whether students actually drink less alcohol less often (or not at all) or simply use greater discretion in choosing where, when, or with whom they drink so that their drinking will not come to the attention of institutional officials. That is, does parental notification lead to a reduction in *actual* violations or simply a reduction in *reported* violations? Further research on the effects of parental notification policies and practices on student behaviors related to alcohol is clearly needed.

## CONCLUSION

It would seem prudent for colleges and universities to establish—and clearly communicate to students and parents—policies that *allow* parental notification, even though they may not *require* such notification. At the very least, such policies provide fair notice that institutions reserve the right to notify parents when it is deemed necessary to do so. However, administrators should not depend on these or any other policies to address

concerns related to alcohol in the most effective manner possible. Policies should supplement and support, but certainly not reduce or replace alcohol awareness efforts, alcohol-free social and recreational activities, alcohol education provided in courses or co-curricular programs, staff training pertaining to alcohol, medical treatment or counseling for students with alcohol problems, and other programs and services designed to address alcohol concerns on campus.

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