

“A Drinking School with a Catholic Problem”?: The Reality of Alcohol on CUA’s Campus

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The allowance of alcohol on Catholic University’s campus requires CUA establish regulations to monitor the potentially dangerous beverage. Regardless of the law and university policy, alcohol plays a role in the lives students under 21 and of age alike.

The Catholic University of America is a “wet campus.” This means alcohol is allowed on campus so long as the person in possession of the beverage is 21 or older. Most Resident Assistants, Resident Ministers, and Administrators of CUA believe the alcohol rules for residents are perfectly reasonable, simply mirroring the laws of the US government. Yet, physical safety is not CUA’s only concern. As an educational establishment Catholic University is not responsible for simply ensuring students do not engage in illegal action, but they also must invest an interest in the students motivation to drink and the impacts of excessive alcohol consumption. Catholic University has several protocols in place to make students feel safe and comfortable, but it seems students feel a pressure to engage in alcohol as an activity in an of itself.

“I wouldn’t necessarily consider our campus a wet campus,” Dean Amy Love, Dean of Student and former Community Director explains. The term wet campus seems to have a negative connotation that she feels CUA does not reflect. Alcohol is not allowed in every part of campus as the term suggests. Underclassman dorms are “dry,” and alcohol cannot be openly consumed in any community area unless it is monitored by a school sanctioned event. Of course, alcohol does not always stay contained in this way.

“If we’re gonna do something and it’s gonna be an occasion there’s gonna be alcohol,” Carson Collins, CUA senior, says. Alcohol has established a place of command in the social hierarchy of college students, and its presence at events is anticipated. “I wouldn’t say we’re a huge party school, but I would say we’re a huge going out school,” senior Morgan Kelleher reports, “A good deal of underclassmen have fakes and go to bars.” The way students discuss alcohol it seems to be a social obligation of sorts. There is culture around underage drinking, and Kelleher explains how many underclassman solidify friendships this way. A community forms of younger students who share information about which bars in town will take their fake IDs and which are a “safer” risk. Despite the illegality of the action, this part of college culture seems integral to the social interaction of many students.

According to CUA’s website, PEERS is “Catholic University's only peer education group that educates students on alcohol and other drug use and abuse, mental health awareness, sexual assault and violence education, healthy relationships and bystander intervention. PEERS, through the support of the Office of the Dean of Students, engages with students to create a safe and open dialogue about how we can raise awareness for these issues and shift the culture on our campus.” Dean Love says she feels it is important that students educate other students on sensitive topics such as alcohol use, drug use, and sexual violence, because the learning experience is more effective in a peer-peer relationship.

Yet despite these efforts when as if she would’ve felt comfortable reporting alcohol use to an RA in the case of safety as a freshman, Bethel Elias, current CUA junior, says, “I don’t

think so, I don't know, but sophomore year I had to.... I probably would've, I guess." She says she was not afraid of the RAs by any means. "We know the RAs are just going their jobs," she adds. Though she did, in fact, go to an RA as a sophomore, her recollection of her freshman self was rather hesitant.

RAs and RMs are expected to uphold the rules in place. RA Joseph McAlonan ('20) clarifies, "We're not out to get anyone... It's about building community not about catching people." RAs and RMs are tasked with keeping the community safe, which happens to include prohibiting unsafe drinking habits. The rules are fairly standard it seems. "It's pretty much just the law," Patrick Wyton, former RA and RM, says. McAlonan describes their protocol for hearing clanking bottles in an underaged dorm. The RAs are trained to knock, state their reason for knocking, and check IDs. If the IDs show those in possession of alcohol are not of age, the RAs accompany them to the bathroom to ensure the alcohol is discarded, and then the bottles are recycled. "Personally, I don't think the rules are too strict simply because - the argument I always use for guys is you can argue about the rules all you want, but it's the contract you signed," McAlonan adds.

Senior Morgan Kelleher, who has had four years to grow her understanding of the system, reflects on her earlier years saying, "They don't really advertize [The Amnesty Program] until after the fact." It is curious to consider why underclassman feel such pressure to rebel when the administration has CUA has established a margin for error. Dean Love says the Amnesty Program is starting to maintain a higher awareness among the student body, but regardless of

whether or not a student knows about the program, their initiative to call and seek help with protect them from disciplinary action. Dean Love says skits are performed at orientation to education freshman about their options in such situations, and the RAs discuss the topic at mandatory floor meetings, but she understands that not everyone is aware of the program.

“In a college environment people tend towards excessive drinking,” Wyton noticed. Perhaps because they are exploring, but more likely it seems the college social scene, at least in the US, has established drinking to excess as a sort of necessity-- a cornerstone of the college “experience.” “There is a pressure among students who are drinking I think where drinking is the focal point of the event,” Wyton adds. The real question is: why? The answer to the question seems to go far beyond CUA.

“I’ve always thought like ‘oh in college there’s parties... there will be drinking,’” Elias said. The pressures to grant alcohol a role in college life is not a CUA-specific phenomena. It is a cultural expectation. “Alcohol is not demonized,” McAlonan says. CUA’s relative legacy and amnesty policy is fighting against a feeling of rebellion associated with the act of consuming alcohol before the age of 21 established as a youthful freedom revolution on TV show, in music, and in movies. It seems regardless of CUA’s policies and expectations, or that of national laws, alcohol will continue to be associated with the quintessential college. It seems CUA is aware of this expectation, and they combat it with “social norming,” as Dean Love called it. Social norming is essentially a system of showing students that alcohol is not as prevalent among their peers as their perception of it suggests. Dean Love explains that they ask student questions about

what they think the statistics are concerning other students on campus and their drinking habits and almost always they assume numbers that far exceed the reality of the situation.

CUA and other universities must combat these false expectations of college paired with a pressure to fit in and be accepted. Administrators seem to be constantly working towards finding the balance between letting students explore their newfound freedom and maintaining a safe and healthy lifestyle. "I recognize that students are going to choose to consume alcohol, so as far as the education piece, we like to talk to the students about staying in the pleasure zone (below .05 BAC)." As students continue to grapple with their perception of alcohol and the reality and dangers of drinking, CUA will continue to present conversations about alcohol so they can continue the conversation about safety.