



PITT ADDRESSES SAFETY, CITATIONS, UNDERAGE DRINKING

By Robert Hill

The current discussion in the media and on campus of the University of Pittsburgh's student drinking-related police procedures presents an opportunity to clarify and explain the University's position.

Pitt has long been a leader in its efforts to discourage underage drinking. Just last year, in fact, the University's successes "in promoting a vibrant intellectual and social campus climate that de-emphasizes the role of alcohol" were recognized through the receipt of the 2009 Gordie Award. That award is presented by six major national higher education organizations and is named in the memory of a University of Colorado undergraduate who died of alcohol poisoning following a fraternity hazing incident.

From the outset of their Pitt educational experience, students are informed that drinking to excess at any age endangers health, jeopardizes academic success, undermines relationships, and, more generally, does not mix well with anything. For example, Chancellor Nordenberg's remarks at the most recent Freshman Convocation included the following cautionary comments: "Virtually every year, newspapers bring us stories of alcohol or drug-related tragedies from other campuses. And occasionally, we have witnessed such tragedies ourselves. In fact, just last spring, a student from one of our regional campuses died from alcohol poisoning after participating in a party at a neighboring campus, where he had earlier been a student. None of us needs an experience like that to mar what otherwise should be a great year."

The University's Code of Student Conduct states that "substance abuse is a major problem in our country" and advises that the University has established a comprehensive policy concerning the use and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. That code further declares, "It is of the utmost importance that each student read and is familiar with University policies regarding alcohol and other drugs."

As in all matters involving students, health and safety are Pitt's primary priority. In the area of alcohol abuse, that priority is reflected in the educational initiatives, alcohol-free social activities, and counseling services supported by the University. It also is reflected in the fact that the Pitt Police respond swiftly

when they are called for assistance regarding an individual who may require medical attention as a result of the excess consumption of alcohol.

It should be noted, however, that it also is the responsibility of police officers to enforce the laws that have been enacted to promote public health and safety. Therefore, when the Pitt Police are called to the scene to render assistance to someone younger than 21 who has consumed alcohol to the point of requiring medical attention, they will meet that responsibility by issuing a citation for underage drinking. When medics transport such victims to the hospital, it has been the case, on rare occasions, that the accompanying police officer, whose involvement began in the field, has not been able to complete the citation until after the student has arrived at the hospital. The listed location for the issuance of the citation, then, would be the hospital.

To be clear, however, reports that the Pitt Police assign officers to hospital emergency rooms in order to issue citations to underage drinkers are simply incorrect. In fact, UPMC contracts with the Pitt Police to provide security support to hospital emergency room staff. Officers functioning in this role do not issue citations to underage drinkers. Furthermore, emergency room personnel are prohibited from releasing personal medical information to unauthorized individuals, including those police officers.

Historically, first-time underage drinkers have been treated with understanding by local magistrates. Typically, the University judicial board also has assessed first-time offenders minimal fines, community service, and mandatory drug and alcohol education classes.

Clearly, the avoidance of a citation is never worth risking potential long-term medical consequences, and students never should hesitate to contact Pitt police when emergency care is needed. It should be equally clear that the best approach, one advanced by Pitt's alcohol education programs and supported by virtually every other form of public health information, is to use alcohol responsibly and in accordance with governing laws and to avoid ever being put in the position of having to take advantage of these emergency services because of excessive or illegal alcohol consumption.