

Clemson University's Medical Alcohol Amnesty Policy: Ethical Considerations

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Student affairs administrators routinely confront the consequences of problematic student alcohol use. An estimated 40 to 44% of college students engage in heavy drinking, which is defined as five or more drinks in a row at least once during a two-week period (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). Extant literature documents negative outcomes of students' misuse of alcohol. For example, the most frequently cited reason for unwanted sexual intercourse among college students was impaired judgment due to alcohol (Flack, et al., 2007). Negative consequences of student alcohol use range from academic failure to motor vehicle crashes to death (Perkins, 2002). As a result, higher education institutions contend with loss of revenue due to student dropouts, strain on relationships with the surrounding community, as well as costs of human resources to deal with these consequences (Perkins, 2002).

Due to a perceived hesitancy by students to seek help in dealing with the negative consequences of alcohol misuse, some college campuses have implemented medical alcohol amnesty policies (Oster-Aaland & Eighmy, 2007). Clemson University publicly coped with problematic student alcohol use after the death of a student last fall ("Clemson Students," 2008). This semester, Clemson University announced the establishment of its own medical alcohol amnesty policy (Denny, 2008). Medical alcohol amnesty policies operate under the assumption that when a student is suffering from the symptoms of alcohol poisoning, other students are afraid to seek help for fear of facing consequences imposed by the university (Oster-Aaland & Eighmy, 2007). The implementation of Clemson's medical alcohol amnesty policy includes an educational campaign in which students are assured that they will not be sanctioned by the University if they seek help for an intoxicated peer (Denny, 2008). It is important to note that Clemson's policy, like most medical alcohol amnesty policies, does not apply to legal consequences; thus, the amnesty offered is specific to Clemson University's judicial process (Denny, 2008; Oster-Aaland & Eighmy, 2007). In response to alcohol-related issues on campus, Clemson's new medical alcohol amnesty policy is designed to benefit individuals in medical emergencies related to alcohol consumption (Denny, 2008).

The implementation of Clemson University's new policy requires an examination of the ethical considerations surrounding this policy. Shapiro and Stefkovich suggest using multiple paradigms—the ethics of justice, critique, care, and the profession—when considering ethical dilemmas (2001). Examination of Clemson's medical alcohol amnesty policy using these four paradigms follows an excellent model of ethical leadership and decision making in education.

When considering the ethic of justice, it is important to note that college administrators stand in loco parentis regarding the welfare and training of students and, therefore, may create any policy for the betterment of students as long as the policy is not inconsistent with public laws (*Gott v. Berea College*, 1913). Clemson's new policy does not exempt students from arrest or criminal prosecution for violating alcohol- or drug-related laws and applies only to enforcement

of the University's student conduct code (Denny, 2008). Therefore, Clemson's medical alcohol amnesty policy is consistent with the ethic of justice.

The ethic of critique calls for further research about medical alcohol amnesty policies. While it is admirable that universities are attempting to address problematic student alcohol use by implementing medical alcohol amnesty policies, it is concerning that little research exists to justify the need for the policies or to examine their efficacy (Oster-Aaland & Eighmy, 2007). Given the lack of research evidence, college administrators are currently implementing these policies with little knowledge of whether or not they will help or harm students.

In student affairs, the ethics of care and the profession are strongly interconnected. The ethic of care prompts educators to consider questions such as: Who will benefit from what I decide? (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). In educational administration, Shapiro and Stefkovich assert that there is a moral imperative to serve the best interests of the student (2001). With a focus on student learning and development, the ethical principles and standards of student affairs administrators are consistent with Shapiro and Stefkovich's stance on ethics of care and the profession (American College Personnel Association, 2006).

Examination of Clemson University's medical alcohol amnesty policy through the lens of multiple paradigms is important for ethical leadership and decision making. The ethics of justice, care, and the profession support this new policy. However, further research about medical alcohol amnesty policies is required to satisfy the ethic of critique. Overall, Clemson University's decision to implement a medical alcohol amnesty policy is ethically sound.

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