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Position Paper on the Task Force on Alcohol Abuse Report

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First let me say that I am impressed by the effort that the Task Force has put into assessing the situation at SSU and in looking at programs at other institutions. Much of what is in the report is good important and should not be lost. However I have several serious problems with certain aspects of the report. Because of this I am adamantly opposed to beginning to implement it until there have been substantive revisions.

The problem of alcohol abuse is a very complex one that must be addressed can be lessened but will never be solved. It is important to keep this in mind. Any plan whose goal is to eliminate all problems with alcohol is doomed to failure and is likely to make the existing problems worse by driving them further underground. Therefore it makes sense to concentrate on ensuring that there are viable alternatives to drinking in student social life and that there are opportunities to drink responsibly. Naturally because of the way the laws are currently written and enforced it is not really possible to offer the latter to students who are under 21. In the following remarks I refer to specifics of the Report and the reader may wish to have a copy on hand for reference. I first address the part of the Report with which I agree wholeheartedly then I address that which needs some modification and finally I discuss the parts of the report that are particularly problematic.

With this in mind the section of the report subtitled: Reconfigure Existing Facilities and Improve their Utilization containing recommendations 16 through 22 is excellent. It has always struck me that this campus does not really encourage students to congregate informally. As the Report points out if you are studying at Blackwell at night the nearest place to get a cup of coffee or conversation is the bar across Rt 13. Not only that but as you are entering the library there are signs promising drastic sanctions if you are caught with food or drink inside the library. Obviously the existence of such signs indicate a demand for a location in or near the library for food and drink. Rather than cracking down on students who bring food into the library we should be looking at how we can address their need to have some area near the library to study interact with one another and eat and drink. Our priorities are clearly out of line with our self proclaimed student-centeredness. This situation is pervasive in the facilities management at the university. Ensuring a pleasant appearance always seems to take precedence over whether a campus location is functional or serves student needs. Recommendation 22 is essential to building a campus that is truly student centered. The lounges that do exist for students (the math department seminar room

and the biology department resource room for example) are heavily utilized; however in the plans for a new science building we are unable to retain the space we presently have. I applaud the Task Force for including this section I only wish it would have been more prominent in the report; I would like to see a revised report in which it is more prominent. This section would by itself constitute a reasonable and positive first response to the CORE survey.

In this vein several of the other recommendations made in the report are good (although not necessarily the rationale surrounding them. Recommendations 8 9 10 11 and 12 are all good. There should be an effort to increase the amount of student life that occurs on campus and the number of alternatives to "drinking parties"⁽¹⁾ available to students. However I do not think that these recommendations are as important as 16 through 22. If there is more opportunity for informal interaction on campus it is likely that the other will follow.

Recommendation 13 deserves consideration; however some caution is necessary. We need to ensure that we do not so overload the calendar with special events that there is no room for academics. I have noticed over the past few years that students are increasingly involved with extra-curricular activities that impede their ability to participate in curricular or co-curricular activities. There should be time in a student's schedule for homework reflection conversation and for participation in department fostered academic events. We should avoid the "solution" that if we keep them busy enough they won't have time to get into trouble. That may be true but there are other things (like learning and growing) that they also won't have time for.

I have some problems with Recommendation 14 and for similar reasons with Recommendation 26 I'm all for encouraging departments and student organizations to sponsor events that are not alcohol-centered. The decision whether or not to have alcohol present should depend on the situation. The Math Club regularly sponsors two picnics a year which usually are alcohol free. However on occasion they have been hosted by a faculty member who offers beer to those faculty and students who are over 21. There has never been an alcohol problem at one of these picnics; no one who is under 21 has ever had a beer. To institute a policy that prohibits the presence of alcohol is only likely to make some faculty think twice before volunteering to host the picnic. A strict policy like the one proposed would lead one to the following questions:

- If I host the picnic and allow the students to use the refrigerator must I get rid of any beer or wine that might be in there first?
- Do I have to lock up any alcohol I might have?
- What is my level of liability if someone who is over 21 does bring alcohol?
- Can I end up being fired if that happens?
- Would I have to confront them and ask them to leave?

- Just when does the event end --if a few faculty and non-traditional students linger do I still have to make sure we don't have a beer? ...

and to the conclusion that it would be far easier and safer just not to get involved.

What about trips to meetings that are sponsored by the club? Frequently at professional meetings much of the informal discussion occurs at cocktail parties or in hotel lounges or restaurants where alcohol is served. It is quite possible to participate in these discussions without drinking but I don't particularly want to ask students who are over 21 not to order a drink if they so please. I don't have any problem with asking students under 21 not to drink and in fact I've never had one of the students who is under 21 try to order a drink. They don't make an issue of it they just order a coke and participate in the discussion just like everyone else. These trips allow students an opportunity to have informal discussions with faculty from other institutions and to participate in the social life of the discipline. On one occasion at a summer meeting in Maine the invited speaker was internationally renown mathematician John Conway. On the evening of the first day of the meetings the Association for Women in Mathematics hosted it's traditional first night cocktail party (ie there was alcohol present) John Conway came late and spent the entire time he was there talking with my students. If recommendation 26 had been in place as written the students would not have been able to be there. I would **STRONGLY** oppose any policy that removed these opportunities. I would also be very uncomfortable serving and possibly unwilling to serve as a faculty advisor on these trips if recommendation 26 is adopted as it stands. I cannot and have no desire to babysit adult students on these trips. I cannot spend 24 hours a day with them to be sure that they don't go to a bar without me; and I would be unwilling to give up my ability to participate in the discipline to avoid situations where alcohol is present.

If a club has a dinner at a restaurant I can see no reason why those who are of age should not be allowed to order a drink.

In addition it is difficult to model responsible drinking if one cannot drink when students are present. The present tone of the report and of these two recommendations has already lead one faculty member to suggest that faculty who gather at Pickles on Friday afternoons pick a more remote location where we are less likely to run into students. We do not need to promote a "big brother is watching" type of paranoia among students or faculty nor should faculty feel that they are at risk if they socialize with or around students.

These recommendations could be altered to:

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- Recommendation 14: Encourage academic departments to sponsor events that are not alcohol-centered which foster student and student/faculty socializing.

and

- Recommendation 26: No student organization will provide alcohol at off-campus events. Any alcohol present at these events should be provided by licensed vendors such as restaurants or by individuals. In addition student organizations will respect the laws of the greater community and no person who is under the legal age limit for consuming alcohol will do so at any event sponsored by any university-sponsored organization.

I believe these altered recommendations still meet the task force's intentions ie to discourage keg parties or "case parties" where bulk purchase of alcohol encourages over-consumption and to encourage alternatives to parties where alcohol is the focus. However they would not have the deleterious side effects mentioned above that I'm sure the task force did not intend.

There are however two major things about the report that I find very distressing and potentially disastrous. One is the view of the appropriate role of faculty in student life and the second is the general attitude towards alcohol use towards abusers of alcohol including the definition of abuse and towards those who are struggling with alcohol problems of those to whom they are close.

First I wish to speak to the role of faculty. While it may be strictly speaking true that:

*No segment of the University is **solely** responsible for either the social or intellectual life of the community...*

It is certainly true that the faculty are **primarily** responsible for the intellectual life of the community and that the appropriate administrators are **primarily** responsible for the social life of the university. That is why searches for faculty look for individuals with academic credentials and searches for counselors look for individuals with credentials in that area. The only assignment of responsibility that makes any sense is to assign people primary responsibility for that area of University life for which they are best qualified and for which they were hired. While the two areas do overlap and should complement each other responsibility for fostering them must remain in the appropriate hands. SSU is not a seminary; our student population is diverse and should remain so. I will not repeat here what was said so eloquently by [Don Whaley](#) at the April Forum meeting; rather I refer you to the minutes of that meeting for his comments. Let me just add my voice to his in asking that we not attempt a 150 year regression in the evolution of the University.

In particular reference to recommendations 6 and 7 faculty are hired for their expertise in subject areas and for their ability to share that expertise. They are not hired to be counselors and they generally do not have any qualifications in that area. It is unreasonable to expect that all faculty would be either interested in or qualified to serve as advisors to student organizations and putting pressure on faculty who do not feel comfortable in that role to assume it anyway would be highly counterproductive. On the other hand some faculty are well suited to advising organizations and this service should certainly be recognized and rewarded. The suggestion is made on page 12 that: *faculty and staff should model integrity and responsible action and be willing to advise both individual students and student organizations*. It is really not a good idea to pressure people to advise in a situation in which they are uncomfortable doing so. If a student has a serious problem and seeks my advice I should refer him/her to people who are trained to advise in this situation. I don't want Kathy Reading to teach Calculus and I have no intention of doing her job either. It would be very unwise of the University to ask people to assume roles for which they are unqualified. This is a prescription for doing real damage. If on the other hand a student wants my advice on which math courses to take or simply wants to chat about minor problems I'm perfectly comfortable. On the later however I think rather than advise I can help through discussion the student to explore options or different perspectives. And of course everyone not just faculty and staff should *model integrity and responsible action*. I don't see any reason why our expectations in this regard for faculty and staff of the university should be any different than our expectations of any other member of the community in which we live.

I must point out however that the classroom is a very different environment than a student organization event. In my interactions with students I assume three very different roles that of instructor that of academic advisor and that of advisor to student organizations or in some cases that of friend. It is important to keep those roles distinct and to act appropriately in different settings. Students who have registered for my classes have voluntarily entered into an academic relationship with me. They have not necessarily agreed to anything more than that. In particular they have not authorized me to interest myself in their personal affairs. If they wish to broaden the scope of our interactions that is fine and it can enhance the academic relationship. Some of them choose to enter into a social relationship by conversing outside of class or by attending Math Club events. BUT it is not my place to force such interactions or to allow the existence or non-existence of such relationships to influence in any way my evaluation of their performance academically. It is also my duty as a professor to distinguish between knowledge and opinion; to allow students to disagree with me but to grade them on the strength of their arguments not on whether I agree with them. I would therefor strongly object to having the extent to which they agree with my philosophy of life or my sense of what a community should be as the yardstick by which my success in the classroom is measured. We should be here to educate not to indoctrinate. As free thinking faculty we should be able to appreciate the possibility for two intelligent critical thinkers to disagree. Thus we should not expect that our students even if we do a perfect job of educating them will agree with us on our

position about alcohol or about any other particular issue. This speaks in particular to the second half of recommendation 3 and more generally to recommendations 2 through 5. I could not endorse a report containing any of these recommendations.

The first half of recommendation 3 is frankly frightening. It is important to keep in mind that we must be careful to consider not just what we think the task force meant by certain sections of the report but also the way the report could be interpreted by a reader who does not know or deliberately misinterprets the intentions of the task force. The section containing recommendations 2 through 7 smacks of engineering the university and could easily be interpreted in ways I'm sure the task force would not approve.

As for the attitude towards alcohol embodied in the report it is important that the end product the task force comes up with be something that the entire community can buy into. Feelings about attitudes towards and habits regarding alcohol vary considerably among individuals. The tone of the report is condemning (or at least it can be read that way) of the practices of a good number of faculty and staff. There are two excerpts that particularly illustrate this tone. The first is:

- We believe that over-emphasis on drinking has a deleterious effect on *both* the individual abusers and the institution as a whole. **Reliance on alcohol even when it does not lead to intoxication** [note: do we imply that anyone who regularly uses alcohol for example someone who "relies" on Friday afternoon happy hour to unwind at the end of the week is an abuser?] **inhibits the physical emotional intellectual and spiritual flourishing of the human person.** It discourages participation in the academic and cultural life of the university. And it interferes with and can even prevent the development of authentic and meaningful social relationships.

This is very difficult to refute and equally difficult to support. Couldn't we say essentially the same thing about reliance on anything? How about coffee. I'd like to suggest a coffee-free campus. If we committed ourselves to a coffee-free environment then those of us who wish to avoid coffee abuse would be given more viable alternatives to drinking coffee. The singling out of alcohol and the associated demonization of normal users of alcohol is worse than any *reliance* on alcohol that *does not lead to intoxication*.

The second excerpt is

- Recommendation 31: Introduce "enabling" issues into all alcohol-education programs.

While most students prior to arriving at the University have been exposed to educational programs emphasizing the effects of alcohol abuse most of them have

little understanding of enabling issues and often confuse being an "enabler" with being a friend. **Our alcohol education programs should help students faculty and staff realize that these are antonyms not synonyms.**

The last statement simply isn't true. The word friend and the less well defined word "enabler" are NEITHER synonyms NOR antonyms! Human interactions are incredibly diverse and complicated. Such over-simplified nonsense exhibits an insensitivity to those caught up in the alcohol problems of friends or relatives. First it is frequently unclear when alcohol use becomes abuse and we would certainly not all agree on what constitutes abuse. It is never clear what is the best tactic to use in dealing with an alcoholic. Friends and family members are constantly being put in situations where there is no right answer and they are forced to determine which choice is least wrong. Attitudes like those embodied in the statement above only make their lives more difficult and make it harder for them to go for help when they need it. Labels like "enabler" not only oversimplify the problem they alienate. It is one thing to talk about behavior that "enables" alcohol abuse. It is quite another to label people because of that behavior. Sometimes "enabling" the abuse is better than the alternative. If my alcoholic friend is drunk and wants more liquor I can refuse to enable his abuse. If he then drives to get liquor and kills himself or someone else I can sleep peacefully in the knowledge that I wasn't an "enabler" right? Use of the word/label enabler is a red flag and should be avoided throughout the document.

Regarding recommendations 33 through 36 curricular decisions should be made for academic reasons not to influence or change behavior. There may be sound academic reasons for some of these suggestions although I certainly do not want to set a precedent for the University mandating course content. In any event although suggestions such as these might be made to appropriate departments I do not think they should be official recommendations of a task force on alcohol abuse. If an interdisciplinary course is to be created I would like to have a sense of the intended audience and the purpose of the course. We do not have that in Recommendation 35

I don't have strong opinions one way or the other on recommendations 23 27 29 or 37 through 42 except to say that when we recommend compensation (rec. 40 and rec. 29) for one type of activity we need to look at those involved in similar activities and I'd like to know where the money is to come **from**. Recommendations 25 30 and 32 are probably good. I'm not sure what recommendation 24 means but some might object to it on "freedom of religion" and "separation of church and state" grounds. I wouldn't even want to try to define what someone else's spirituality is. On recommendation 43 I certainly would not want to ask that students be treated any differently than any one else when it comes to alcohol or any other type of problem. I don't think the University should take an official position on how the law should be enforced or on what the law should be. Members of the University community are likely to have (and should have if we are a free-thinking community) differing views on this issue and we should exercise our responsibilities as citizens appropriately in this regard.

Recommendations 44 45 and 46 are worth looking into further but need to be fleshed out some. I'm not comfortable with the University attempting to dictate to area businesses but I don't have a problem with initiating discussion. Recommendations 47 and 48 are related to recommendations 2 through 7 discussed earlier. I'm not sure how the task force envisions our becoming an "active participant in the national dialogue among colleges and universities regarding alcohol-related issues" [rec 49] but I suspect it might be a good idea.

I also recommend some continued discussion on the tension so clear in the report especially in section D between the desire for strict enforcement of alcohol policies and the knowledge that such enforcement doesn't solve the problem and only drives it underground where it is more difficult to address. I recognize that it is much easier to criticize a completed report than it is to construct the report in the first place and I do not want to belittle the efforts of the task force. I hope that we can take this report which makes several good recommendations and which should at the very least initiate discussion on a number of important issues and work with it to come up with a plan that the community as a whole is comfortable with. I would hope that we could find the common ground and begin moving on the issues there immediately that we not let the disagreements over the more controversial elements of the Report kill the recommendations on which we can all come to some agreement.

1. Note the there is a distinction between "drinking parties" where alcohol is the focus of the occasion and events or parties where alcohol is present but it is not the focus. At the latter individuals may choose to consume (responsibly) alcohol or not without effecting their level of participation in the event.

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