

Saturday, October 7, 2006

Bad things at Miami U. trace mostly to drinking

'There's not a whole lot to do'

OXFORD - The streets here start to fill after 2 a.m., women in short skirts teetering on their stilettos, men in flip-flops with beer on their breath. They spill out of bars and onto the sidewalks, some playfully scuffling, some shouting into cell phones, one man inexplicably cursing at a slice of pizza he's thrown on the ground.

Outside one club, a girl pulls away from her friends, saying she's ready to leave. She stumbles up the street.

They call out to her, telling her to wait.

"I walked home by myself yesterday," she shouts back. "I'm fine."

And this is how it can start. A lot of beer, a few too many shots, and Miami University students start making questionable decisions, school officials say - ones that, especially recently, have led to tragic consequences for some.

In mid-September, 21-year-old Joshua Miller ended up with a concussion and six staples in his head after he said he was beaten by a group of men outside an Oxford bar. In August, an 18-year-old reported being forced to the sidewalk and raped as she was walking home at 2:45 a.m. In January, a student who witnesses said appeared heavily intoxicated was picked up in a van just before 3 a.m. and driven to Richmond, Ind., where he was beaten and robbed and left on the side of the road. He spent days in intensive care.

What the attacks have in common, police say, is alcohol. Overindulgence in booze is making students both perpetrators and victims, school officials agree, linking much of Oxford's serious crime to alcohol. Oxford's police chief says his department would practically be out of business without booze, as alcohol is involved in 80 percent to 85 percent of the city's crime.

"We struggle with (drinking-related crimes) all the time, and it's not a battle that we're winning right now," said Steve Schwein, chief of the Oxford Police Department, which has 26 full-time and two part-time officers.

New, 'radical' approaches

Miami is hardly the most raucous university out there - it didn't, for instance, make the Princeton Review's 2007 list of top 20 party schools, which was topped by the University of Texas at Austin - and there's no indication its drinking or alcohol-related crime are worse than anyone else's. But Miami and Oxford officials say they've had enough of out-of-control drinking.

Alcohol abuse had become such a concern at Miami that the school's former president, James Garland, made the issue a highlight of his August 2005 State of the University address and set up a task force to try to curb student drinking.

His speech came four months after three students with blood-alcohol levels more than twice the legal driving limit perished in an early morning off-campus house fire. The coroner later said they might have been too impaired to escape.

"Despite our best efforts, we have not been able to rein in or even significantly slow down the student misuse of alcoholic beverages," Garland said, noting that in the 2004-05 school year Miami had issued 1,191 alcohol citations and Oxford had experienced 32 sexual assaults, most of them related to alcohol.

"For years, we have vigorously attacked the problem but still, the problem persists," Garland said. "In my opinion it is now time for us to stand back and take stock of all of our efforts, to assess what works and what doesn't work, and to try some new, possibly radical approaches."

The president's alcohol abuse task force was told to be bold in its thinking. The committee came back in March with 41 suggestions.

Their ideas ranged from the simple - a ban on on-campus liquor deliveries, which took effect in July - to the extreme - creating a holding facility to care for students who are dangerously intoxicated, an idea that's still being explored.

One recommendation was to increase the percentage of undergraduate classes scheduled for early mornings and Fridays, in the hopes that an early wake-up would discourage all-night drinking. Another was to increase fees for alcohol violations and suspend students who are found guilty of using a fake ID for a second time. Those ideas also are still being considered.

"We have said as an institution we are not going to turn a blind eye to this problem," said Vice President for Student Affairs Richard Nault, who's overseeing the implementation of the committee's recommendations. "We're not saying stop all drinking, but you don't need to get trashed."

Can't handle it

As another Thursday winds down in Oxford, a group of students gather on the steps of an off-campus apartment, smoking cigarettes and drinking cans of beer. After warming up at

home, a large group partying inside the apartment will pile out and head to the High Street bars to polish off the night.

Among the stair-dwellers are 21-year-old Elizabeth Tracz from Washington, D.C., who has a strong opinion of the administration's attempts to crack down on drinking. She expresses her disapproval with profanity.

Sobering up Miami would make it the "most boring, dry campus ever," Tracz says. "(Alcohol) does not lead to crime. It leads to people relaxing and having good times."

A 19-year-old sophomore sitting next to her, though, has a different opinion. He has a can of beer in his hand and so naturally doesn't want to give his name. He said he was suspended last year after three alcohol violations despite having a perfect grade-point average and making the dean's list. But he still sees what has officials concerned.

"Everything has to do with drinking at this school," he says. "I think Miami got the reputation of being a drinking school.

"Personally," he says, "I think (crime and drinking are) related. So many kids can't handle it."

The university handled 1,696 alcohol violations last year, according to the school, and suspended 16 students for alcohol abuse.

'Affects every facet of life'

Much of the crime happens beyond campus borders and within the 22,000-resident city of Oxford, where bars pack in students.

The start to this school year was especially rough for police. During the first two weekends and the week between, Oxford officers handled two rapes, 17 assaults and seven burglaries, far more than they did during the same period last year.

They made 97 arrests - up from 66 last year - and recorded 52 alcohol offenses, up from 35. (These are not all Miami students - beyond local residents, Oxford police say the city draws many outsiders, some of whom view the students as easy targets.) Relief came in the following weeks when two dozen extra officers, some from Oxford Township, Miami and the Butler County Sheriff's Office, started patrolling Oxford streets on the weekends.

Schwein said most of the city's crime is tied to drinking. People do things under the influence they'd never do when sober, he said. They urinate in yards and kick over flower pots. They knock mirrors off cars. They walk home alone and are defenseless when they get jumped, robbed or raped.

"(Drinking) is one of our top concerns," he said. "It pretty much affects every facet of life."

To Schwein, the university's new attempt to cut down alcohol abuse - a task that's been taken up by new President David Hodge - is more forceful.

"For a long time I've thought Miami's done a good job of *tackling* the problem," Schwein said. "But now I think it's an all-out *assault* on the problem."

Beth Morgan, who has sent two children to Miami - daughter Kate, 19, is a sophomore - said the reports of violence near campus haven't caused her to worry about Kate's safety. She said similar things go on at colleges throughout the nation, but Miami's crime might gain more attention because of Oxford's small size.

Still, she said, parents are always concerned about drinking. Morgan is a member of the university's parents' council and said alcohol is high on the agenda during the group's twice-yearly meetings.

"We feel we're making great strides," Morgan said, "and alcohol use is something that continues to be in the forefront."

Will it work, though? With drinking so ingrained in campus culture - parents visiting on weekends are even known to throw back a few too many - will the university's plans ever get anywhere?

"It's definitely good they've recognized a problem and started taking a stand," says Brian Wafzig, a 21-year-old senior standing outside a bar. "I think in a town like Oxford there's not a whole lot to do. Kids see (drinking) as something they can do, and yeah, it's a problem."

But at a house party farther down the road, where students are dancing on the lawn and hoisting plastic cups, some are doubtful.

"I don't think Miami can regulate it," says Chris Kopech, a 22-year-old senior. The woman standing next to him, who doesn't give her name, agrees. She says early morning classes, for instance, would "just equate to more classes being skipped."

Still, Nault and the task force will continue trying. If he didn't believe in the effort, Nault said, he wouldn't come to work. He talks about the successful fight against tobacco and thinks cutting back on drinking might also become a gradual societal change.

"We have to really chip away at things," he said. "The one thing we know is there's no silver bullet."