The Morning After

Everyone agrees that the riots have to stop. Now the question becomes, how?

One University of New Hampshire police sergeant called it a scenario for “The Perfect Storm.” A spring evening with temperatures in the 70s; students drinking; UNH vs. Minnesota in the national hockey championship game; and, in the late evening, a heart-breaking loss for UNH. “Everything exploded at 10 o’clock,” recalls UNH police Sgt. Ron Welliver.

Although student unrest is not a new phenomenon—it was known in ancient Greece and has occurred in the United States since colonial times—incidents of celebratory disturbances have risen sharply in the last two decades. Similar episodes have taken place at colleges and universities across the country. In New Hampshire, for months afterward it would be referred to as the “Hockey Riot,” when an estimated 4,000 people, many of them UNH students, took over part of Durham’s downtown. In the end, students were arrested and sanctioned through the university’s student conduct system, and UNH was in the spotlight for weeks afterward. Student leaders felt particularly caught in the middle between their peers and the administration. “I remember standing on Main Street that night,” recalls Sean Kay ’03, former student body president. “So many things were going wrong. It was out of control, and all I could think about was the finger-pointing that I knew would happen on Monday morning: students blaming police, police blaming students, the town blaming the university. I didn’t know what it would take, but I knew everything had to change. Not one thing, but everything.”

In the coming days, Kay and other students began to think that UNH could become an agent of change. Reading the news, they could see that UNH was not the only campus dealing with student behavior problems, and in many cases other campuses were struggling with worse situations.

With the support of President Ann Weaver Hart, students were given the green light to plan a national student-led summit, the first of its kind in the nation, to examine, and seek solutions for, student unrest. In addition to supporting and attending the summit, the UNH administration has taken a number of steps to stem the rising tide of student disruptions.

The judicial process has been revised so that cases can be heard more quickly and students sanctioned more rapidly. Student rules have been revised so that crimes committed in downtown Durham can be taken through the student conduct process. President Hart wrote letters to students and to parents, reminding them of the responsibilities of good citizenship and the consequences of illegal behavior. Planning meetings have been held in advance of high-visibility weekends to highlight university-sponsored activities around campus. In addition, the University System of New Hampshire board of trustees revised the mandatory student fee policy so it can no longer be used for the legal representation of students for criminal offenses.
The trustees also authorized campus presidents to use part of student fee reserves retroactively to reimburse communities for their costs during and following student disturbances. On Jan. 17, the Alumni Association board of directors unanimously passed a resolution endorsing the administration’s efforts.

UNH’s Student Summit: Promoting Responsible Celebrations was the first national student-led initiative on the issue of student behavior. Students and administrators from UNH and nine universities spent more than two days in September talking about ways to shift student attitudes. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which released a study on post-game behavior last February, also sent a representative.

“What UNH did was precisely what needed to happen,” says Daniel Wann, professor of psychology at Murray State University, and a national authority on celebratory behavior who was the summit’s keynote speaker. “The one certain way to shift the culture of behavior is to build a critical mass, and in order to increase the number of people who want that shift, there needs to be a close examination of the problem. The summit started the process.”

The summit brought together student leaders, administrators, law enforcement officials, student athletes, town officials, members of fraternities and sororities and students who had been a part of a riot elsewhere. With two UNH facilitators, assistant provost Jim Varn ’76 and professor of communication Sheila McNamee, groups met to talk about their experiences with student disturbances.

Some of the common themes that emerged were predictable: significant alcohol consumption, strong police presence and the phenomenon of cell phones as a means to draw additional revelers. But less predictable themes surfaced as well: that police and administrators were just as afraid as the students; how the large crowd provided anonymity to students who threw beer bottles and rocks.

Insights shared during the discussions led to developing ideas to change things. The question posed by McNamee was a simple one: “Imagine that your campus is known for the most wonderful and engaging student celebration. What would it look like?”

Answers came from all corners of the room: “Nobody would get hurt, and there would be no property damage.” “There would be a field with music, and dancing—neighbors with children, students, the elderly.” “Everyone would wear shorts and half the town would be there.”

Mark Rubinstein, vice president for student and academic services, recalls it became “a conversation of what we are heading toward, not what we’re trying to get away from.” For Rubinstein and other top administrators, it was important to emphasize a sustained approach to the prevention of disturbances.

By the closing session, the groups agreed that what will most likely stop future disturbances is a combination of peer pressure, more creative programming and stiffer penalties for students found responsible for unlawful behavior.

For UNH, those next steps include a Faculty Senate task force to study the possible links between student behavior and the university’s expectations of student achievement. A group of students, working with staff, talked to fellow students on the consequences of large gatherings run amok. Others are working on student programming for weekends. And the dialog continues on an e-mail discussion list hosted by UNH.

McNamee and others are facilitating a series of “study circles” on alcohol use on campus. Faculty, students and staff meet in an informal setting on a weekly basis to talk about problems and solutions around the issue of high-risk drinking.

“The summit was a real turning point, especially for the students,” says Cat Clarke ’05, student body vice president. “We finally saw that there was light at the end of the tunnel. It will take a long time, but we will come out on the other side of this.”

—Kim Billings ’81