“IOWA LITTY”
An Examination into the University of Iowa’s Drinking Culture

In 2013, The University of Iowa topped The Princeton Review's party school ranking, an annual list determined by student surveys. The UI has not appeared in the Top 20 Party Schools since 2018, but the reputation still sticks around. Many students still consider the UI to be a “party school” and although the UI’s proximity to the Iowa City Downtown District makes bars accessible to students, in the eyes of students, the UI does not do much to prevent or educate students about the consequences that could result from excessive drinking.

The UI Administration has made efforts to curb the party school reputation over the last ten years. The UI Division of Student Life has put out alcohol harm reduction plans every few years since 2010. There were crackdowns on Greek life, including a ban on out-of-state formals for fraternities after several student deaths while participating in such events. Despite these efforts, in an anonymous survey given to UI students, nearly 53% of students still agreed that the UI has a reputation as a party school and that the reputation is deserved.

Is the University of Iowa’s alcohol education for students working?

All UI freshmen are required to take Success at Iowa, an online two-credit-hour course which teaches — or attempts to teach — new students about the dangers of alcohol, drugs, and sexual harassment. The 36 students surveyed for this article were overwhelmingly critical when discussing the course.

“Success at Iowa I would say most students just view that as something that needs to get done, I wouldn’t say it’s useful whatsoever.”

“I remember learning about bystander intervention and not a lot else. Overall it was not helpful and I already knew a lot of what was taught.”

“Don’t drink too much and don’t be a creep. It was boring and easy to forget.”

Students were asked in the survey to evaluate the UI’s current alcohol education programs, and these quotes are a good summation of the general consensus; boring, don’t remember it, don’t care.

Of the 36 students who responded to the survey, eight had a misdemeanor charge and four were nearly charged. The most common misdemeanors among the students surveyed were in-bar, fake ID, alcohol in university housing, unlawful use of license, and possession of a controlled substance. While 24 of the students surveyed have never been charged — or never almost charged — everybody surveyed knew someone that had been.

Results from the full survey can be seen on the Iowa Drinking Culture infographic.

How is Downtown Iowa City contributing?
Alcohol use is prevalent at the University of Iowa, and some Iowa’s party school reputation might be attributed to the proximity to the Iowa City Downtown District, which hosts over 20 bars in close proximity to each other, and the lax ID enforcement at the doors of many of those bars. Fake IDs and underage drinking are the norm there.

The Summit, a nightclub-esque bar located on Clinton Street in downtown Iowa City, is known by the student body for having lax policies towards underage customers. Peter Compiano, a UI student and former bouncer for the Summit from August 2019 to January 2020 attributes that reputation to the limited ID training that bouncers receive.

“Right when I got there, there was absolutely no training that I had to go through in order to check IDs,” Compiano said. “I knew the IDs were fake, you know. I really wouldn’t say anything.”

Not every Iowa City bar is known for being relaxed towards underaged drinkers. Brothers Bar and Grill, a sports bar located in the Pedestrian Mall in downtown Iowa City, is notorious among students for stopping fake IDs at the door. This reputation alone keeps the under-21 crowd away from Brothers for the most part.

Derek Rogers, a UI student and current bartender and former bouncer at Brothers, attributes their reputation for strict policies to the fact that Brothers is a corporate-run bar.

“We have to make sure we’re strict on them because it’s not like we’re just an Iowa City bar… There is so much credibility associated with Brothers that we have to uphold,” Rogers said.

Rogers said that Brothers bouncers do not get extensive training in identifying fake IDs, but that the majority of his knowledge came from learning on the job and identifying behaviors. Brothers also has a binder of fake IDs from different states that new employees can study when learning how to spot a fake ID.

“You see so many IDs a night that it is so easy to tell after a short amount of time working there,” Rogers said.

Police patrol Clinton Street in downtown Iowa City during the late hours that students are out partying. Groups of police officers randomly walk into bars, and sometimes they take over the bouncer’s duty of checking IDs.

From Compiano’s experience at the Summit, the police show leniency towards college students.

“If you’re acting like a jackass to the police they’re gonna arrest you. They’re not gonna have any leniency for you at all. But if you’re reasonable with a police officer, then they’re most likely probably gonna take your fake ID and let you off the hook,” Compiano said.

Rogers has been working at Brothers for almost two years, and he said the staff has only called the police five or six times, and only twice while he was working. It is something that only happens if there is a threat, or there are not enough people working to handle an altercation.
“If there is a fight that is too hostile, that we cannot even control, [the police] will get involved. A lot of times people start fighting outside again once they are kicked out and the police get involved. We can’t have anything to do with them once they are outside of the bar,” Rogers said.

Dealing with aggressive patrons after kicking them out can be a liability for the bars so anything that happens outside of the bar becomes the police’s responsibility.

Rogers himself has gotten into legal trouble for being in the bars underage past 10 p.m., which is against the law in Iowa City. He said that although he violated the in-bar law, that offense wasn’t included on his ticket. He attributed that to his cooperative behavior with the police.

To some extent, avoiding — or not avoiding — criminal charges is up to luck.

According to director and attorney at UI Student Legal Services Amanda Elkins, in a large group of people who are drinking, behavior is typically the determining factor in who actually gets slapped with the public intoxication ticket. In that respect, acting natural can go a long way. Otherwise, the bar is pretty low for things like public intoxication.

“What does being intoxicated in public mean? Well, bloodshot, watery eyes, slurred speech, an odor of alcohol, admits to drinking. It’s subjective but it’s also pretty easy for police to have enough evidence to arrest somebody for that,” Elkins said.

People who look young are also more likely to be ID-ed.

“If you look like you are 15 but you are actually 18 or 19 or 20, those are the people who are being targeted,” Elkins said.

Aside from landlord/tenant disputes, UI Student Legal Services (SLS) mostly sees students to deal with alcohol-related misdemeanor offenses. The common violations are PAULA, public intoxication, and drunk driving.

“And then there’s other criminal charges that we see students for that aren’t actually, by definition alcohol-related, but typically do end up being alcohol-related. And that would be possession of a fake ID or even in-bar — being in a bar after 10 p.m. if you’re underage,” Elkins said.

**How is UISG advocating for students on these issues?**

Resident Assistants, students involved in sorority and fraternity life, and the leaders of student organizations have opportunities for better training. But Connor Wooff, newly elected President of the University of Iowa Student Government and former Director of Governmental Relations said it’s hard to advocate for better alcohol education for all students when Iowa legislators believe the stereotypes about the University of Iowa and its students.

“We have to be very specific on what we ask [the Iowa legislature] so we don’t further the stereotypes about the University of Iowa, because they already don’t really like us,” Wooff said.
Part of his job is to lobby for student interests in the state government.

“When you’re at the state level and you advocate for things coming from the University of Iowa, we have the stereotype that we’re a party school,” Wooff said.

The way the UI is perceived has an effect on the kinds of legislation UISG chooses to push. For example, Wooff said, UISG made the decision to not pursue a bill that makes the expungement process easier for students.

“Legislators are really old, they wouldn’t get the idea. They’d be like ‘Well public intoxication should stay on your record forever.’ So we wouldn’t want to waste our time. That’s why we shifted towards medical amnesty,” Wooff said.

Medical amnesty, also commonly referred to as “good samaritan” laws, exist in the campus dorms, but UISG has been working to make it a state law for the past four years. Medical amnesty would mainly protect underage students reporting an alcohol-related emergency from punitive action. Wooff has been advocating for this bill since his tenure began two years ago.

According to the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility, Iowa is currently one of seven states which have not enacted a “good samaritan” law covering alcohol-related situations. Wooff said states which have enacted “good samaritan” laws have seen an increase in calls for help in alcohol-related emergencies, while the drinking rates have stayed the same.

“So it’s not like people are drinking more, they’re using the emergency assistance,” Wooff said.

During his time as an RA, Wooff has used the medical amnesty policy offered under the UI’s Responsible Action Protocol to help his residents.

“I had to call for emergency assistance and the only things she kept saying were, ‘Am I going to get in trouble? Am I going to get kicked out?’ The fear is really real,” he said.

Although medical amnesty passed the Iowa House, it likely won’t pass the Senate for two more years due to COVID-19. Legislative sessions run two years, so a bill that was proposed two years ago and didn’t make it to the desk of Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds will have to start over at the beginning. This is medical amnesty’s second time through the legislature, and will likely be making a third round in the next two years.

**How Student Legal Services can help?**

When asked about potential resources for students who have been charged or need help with alcohol or drug-related misdemeanors, nearly a third of responses mentioned Student Legal Services by name. Elkins said that Student Legal Service’s main purpose is to educate students so they can make informed legal decisions.
Most students who come to SLS get their needs met in a conversation. If advice isn’t enough, SLS can help students review discovery, negotiate plea agreements, go to trial, and write appeals.

Elkins said students with alcohol-related misdemeanors are rarely sentenced with jail or prison time, but may be required to take substance abuse or driving classes. Community service may also be a term of probation in cases like fake ID and drunk driving violations. And there are the fines, which are inevitable unless the case is dismissed.

Depending on the offense, fines alone can be between $200 and $1,250. There are also the legal fees and the costs associated with restriction and rehabilitation sentencing requirements to consider. The fine for an OWI is $1,250, and then there’s the cost of drunk driver courses — about $400 — and, potentially, a breathalyzer. Increased transportation costs are also a factor.

“If you lose your driver’s license now you’ve got to figure out how to get around town. And then increased car insurance costs...” Elkins said. “So drunk driving, I think you’re talking thousands [of dollars], best case scenario.”

PAULA and in-bar offenses can only incur fines, which are $330 and $465, respectively. The fines for fake ID and public intoxication are less intense, but charges add up.

“Let’s say you had public intoxication and interference with official acts. And again, it depends on whether you have probation, what kind of plea agreement. But right there you could easily spend $600 or $700 on that,” Elkins said.

Legal fees, meanwhile, are typically less intense for students. SLS is able to keep its costs low because of funding from the UISG.

“I don’t think we ever charge more than $400 for anything. I know there’s private attorneys in town that are doing drunk driving cases for $3,000 — and that’s without a trial, that’s just pleading guilty,” Elkins said.

If SLS can’t help, most students qualify for a public defender, which costs about $60.

“There are definitely some cases where the attorney would cost significantly more than the ticket, and that’s kind of a cost-benefit analysis,” Elkins said.

Elkins said the judges in Johnson County are good about allowing for payment plans, which can be provided for those dealing with debt greater than $300. Otherwise, students with fake ID or drunk driving violations — or other cases which include probation — can pay off their fines through community service at $7.25 an hour.

“I know of students who have borrowed money from their parents to pay it, and then paid them back. Or do a combination of community service and pay-as-you-go,” Elkins said.
Aside from providing legal counsel, SLS helps students expunge their records and navigate criminal history disclosure on employment and graduate school applications.

“We are helping them write it so that it’s accurate, but also shows that, ‘Maybe I had one bad night and that was a couple years ago and this is how I’ve changed; this is not indicative of my character,’” Elkins said.

If students want to review the laws that affect them, the “Know Your Rights” section on the SLS website is a good place to start. Otherwise, the Iowa Judicial Branch website has a “For the Public” section which goes over common legal terms and self-representation.

Aside from legal consequences, the UI disciplines students for violating the law or university policy for alcohol consumption. In addition to legal violations, UI policy prohibits students from possessing or consuming alcoholic beverages in dorms, fraternity or sorority houses, UI outdoor property, and campus public spaces.

The UI meets violations with disciplinary measures which run the gamut from parent/guardian notification for students under 21 and mandatory alcohol education courses to residence hall contract cancellation and expulsion from the UI. Information on mandatory minimum sanctions can be found on the Dean of Students website.

The UI also mandates substance abuse counseling for violators. That involves undergoing a substance abuse evaluation and “all education or treatment programs recommended as a result of the evaluation in order to re-enroll,” according to the Dean of Students’ webpage on the UI’s illegal drugs and alcohol policy.

The UI’s Responsible Action Protocol protects students from some disciplinary measures when seeking emergency assistance for themselves or someone else.

Anyone concerned about their alcohol consumption or a friend’s should reach out for help. The UI student Substance Assistance Program does outreach and education and provides substance abuse assessment, referral, and counseling. Please contact Student Health and Wellness or the University Counseling Service for more information.

For assistance programs outside the UI, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) has a resource for college students, CollegeAIM (Alcohol Intervention Matrix). Prelude Behavioral Services in Iowa City also provides substance abuse assistance services. The Iowa Department of Public Health has a searchable online tool for information on similar resources across the state. For drug- or alcohol-related emergencies, call 911 immediately.