

Party's over at 'Animal House'

Editor's note: "In My Opinion" is a column of guest commentaries. Send submissions to Helen Colwell Adams, Sunday News, P.O. Box 1328, Lancaster, Pa. 17608-1328; e-mail hcolwell@lnpnews.com.

By Theodore E. Long
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IN MY OPINION

House' era. Good riddance, I say.

Though most people were drawn to this story by the large price tag attached to the settlement, the real significance in this agreement between the Krueger family and MIT is the acknowledgement that colleges do share some responsibility for the actions and behavior of their students.

Many college students, especially the youngest members of our campus communities, are woefully ignorant about alcohol and other drugs. Placed in a less-inhibitive environment and lacking accurate information, many unfortunately will find out the hard way. The romance of binge drinking depicted in movies like "Animal House" is brutally divorced from the ugly reality that faces campus security departments each weekend.

We are not their parents, my colleagues stated over

the years. Treat us like adults, students demanded with equal fervor. Painted into the corner by these twin arguments for decades, college administrators either pretended that there was no problem or resigned themselves to an uncomfortable powerlessness. Colleges left students to fend for themselves. Not anymore.

■ I believe that colleges can do three things to positively address the issue of drinking on campus. These answers demand more complicated solutions than simply outlawing or penalizing fraternalities, as the ineffectual Dean Wormer tried to do in "Animal House."

Rather, meaningful solutions must arise from our institutional heritages and missions. At Elizabethtown College, with a century-long affiliation with the Church of the Brethren, we work to educate our students to respect themselves, each other and the law of the land without treating these young people like children.

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The very first thing we must do is to provide students with an accurate picture of drinking and its costs, both in society and on campus. A popular misperception of life on American college campuses is the "Big Party," with most students regularly participating in binge drinking.

However, my friend and colleague **Wes Perkins**, who directs the Alcohol and Other Drug Education Project at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York, has begun to successfully implement a "social norming" approach to combat abuse with education about drinking myths and realities.

According to the Journal of American College Health, the drinking reality is that less than half (44 percent) of all college students nationwide engage in this activity. In other words, the "Big Party" at which everyone is drinking, according to Perkins, is a myth. But how many impressionable freshmen know this? Step one is to address this question, especially in orientation programs, as soon as our students step on to campus.

Perkins is seeing results: property damage related to drinking is down 36 percent, missed classes because of drinking is down 31 percent, and frequency of heavy drinking is down 21 percent.

The second thing we must do is to stop demonizing alcohol as if it were an illegal drug. As a parent who has navigated the raising of

two children, I know that this approach is counterproductive.

Elizabethtown College has never served alcohol, even to students of age. However, we also have a heritage of tolerance and respect for the conscientious acts of others. Our residential students of legal age are allowed to possess moderate quantities of alcohol and may consume it in the privacy of their own rooms or apartments.

Admittedly this policy does not always result in perfect practice, and our students may not always agree with it, but even the disagreement has provided ample opportunity for public and beneficial dialogue on the issue.

The last part of addressing the challenge is something called "curriculum infusion." In other words, we encourage faculty and staff to address issues relating to alcohol and alcohol abuse in their work and in their teaching.

■ No college president enjoys having his or her institution labeled a "party school." Given the amount of interest — and now the legal and financial incentives — to address the issue of alcohol abuse on college campuses, we may finally be able to bury the curse of "Animal House."

Then we can turn to the real educational mission of our institutions, including the education of our students about responsible behavior towards alcohol.

Theodore E. Long is president of Elizabethtown College.