

# OUR OPINION: Springfest change can help cut high-risk drinking

By [Tom Dennis](#) Today at 5:00 a.m.

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Times change — and society's tolerance levels change, too. Including tolerance levels for behaviors such as spanking children, smoking cigarettes, driving without a seat belt — and getting massively, dangerously drunk.

The latter change now has reached Grand Forks, where it has prompted officials from UND and City Hall to take aim at Springfest as their first big target.

Good.

Springfest served a purpose in Grand Forks, and some thousands of UND graduates likely look back on it with fondness.

But times change, as mentioned above. America no longer is inclined to "tolerate" the deaths of 1,800 college students nationwide and the serious injury of many thousands a year more.

The culture of high-risk drinking, in college and elsewhere, now is perceived as being too permanently costly for its various fleeting gains.

UND and the city of Grand Forks are smart to try to do something about it. And very importantly, they're going about it the right way, too: They're discouraging high-risk drinking without trying to ban alcohol or prevent students from having fun.

And as a result, the policy is a lot more likely to work.

Now, let's be clear. Does "work" mean ending students' habit of high-risk drinking? It had better not, because humanity has wrestled with alcohol abuse for thousands of years — and nothing, but nothing, has succeeded at making it go away.

But if success is defined as decreasing the incidence of high-risk drinking, then policies such as ending support for Springfest very likely will move the needle in the right direction.

It already has happened on some American campuses. Frostburg State University in Maryland is one.

"When Jonathan Gibraltar became president in 2006, he says, he found the party scene 'out of control,'" National Public Radio reported last year.

"As at other schools, heavy drinking at Frostburg has led to injuries and deaths. It's also linked to poor grades, mental health problems and is a factor in the majority of campus sexual assaults.

"But since 2006, the share of Frostburg students who binge drink at least once every two weeks has fallen from 57 percent to 41 percent, according to the university. The average number of drinks students have each week has dropped in half, from eight to four."

And Frostburg State used basically the same approach UND now is attempting:

"Changing the culture around drinking and what students consider 'normal,'" as NPR described.

In Maryland, that meant giving town and campus police joint jurisdiction, so that each could monitor parties both off campus and on. It meant the university helping to pay overtime for late-night Frostburg Police patrols. It meant scheduling more Friday morning classes to discourage Thursday night drinking.

And in a move Grand Forks emulated two years ago, it meant forming "a coalition that includes not just police but also city officials, parents and businesses to tackle underage drinking across the community," as NPR described.

It worked in Frostburg, Md. It can work in Grand Forks, too.

Again, the goal isn't prohibition. The goal is avoiding catastrophe. That still leaves plenty of room for students to have fun; it simply points toward more responsible, less dangerous and destructive ways of doing so. Which is terrific, because times change.

— Tom Dennis for the Herald

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