

# Professor says alcohol part of 'worrisome' riots



Graphic by Jarrett Jester

were called in to control the crowd, which grew to between 400 and 500 people, most of them high school and University students.

When the officers arrived, some of the rioters at the scene threw bottles and cans at the officers and their cars. Windows were smashed and the street was littered with broken bottles and cans.

One University student was sent to the hospital and received 15 stitches to her forehead. Two full shifts of EPD officers were at the scene wearing helmets by the riot's end; two students were arrested and charged with rioting and another for disorderly conduct.

- a snowball fight the night of Feb. 2 between dorm residents on the "Humpy Lumpy" field near Bean Complex that turned into a chaotic melee as 200 students lined Agate Street and started pelting passing cars, pedestrians and bicyclists with snow.

One car slid into a power pole as a result, and hundreds of dollars in additional damage was done to a dorm window and car windshields. When EPD officers attempted to re-route traffic, they were forced to leave as the snowballs were turned on them.

- a fight between members of the Beta Theta Pi and Chi Psi fraternities the night of Jan. 14 that resulted in the arrest of one fraternity member for being a minor in possession of alcohol.

Both houses sustained broken windows and other minor damage. Incidentally, the University placed both houses on "social probation," limiting their social function and rush privileges.

It probably would be easy to label the incidents as "crowd mentality" gone awry.

However, a University sociology professor said the tendency to label the actions of a group as "mob" behavior is not an accurate way to view the group's actions if it turns violent.

"I really hesitate to use words like 'crowd psychology' and 'mob mentality,'" said Jack Whalen, an assistant sociology professor. "There's a tendency when people do things to label them as crazy or immoral, and that's not really accurate."

"If we want to figure out how to stop these things, we should stop thinking of them as crowd psychology," Whalen said. "That doesn't give you a good way to stop. Whatever they did, it seemed to be the right thing to do."

Whalen said sociologists prefer the term "collective action," which means that members of a group will tend to follow the actions of others around them. This behavior is normal enough, Whalen said. Sometimes, however, the behavior can be violent.

Whalen cited an incident from the "free speech" riots at Berkeley in the late 1960s as one example of collective action. When a student was arrested for distributing civil rights literature, a group of students peacefully sat around the police car he was held in for 24 hours until he was set free.

"But the people who were arrested for throwing bottles are probably asking themselves 'What in the hell did I get myself into?'" he said. "The people who sat around the police car knew quite well what they were doing."

"The people at Berkeley were guided by deeply felt moral principles," Whalen said. "If there was any code guiding the people on May 5 it was an alcohol-assisted anger they felt in having their party interrupted."

Whalen used recent demonstrations over U.S. policy in Central America and animal research as collective action on campus guided by moral feeling.

The situations were similar to the May 5 riot and the snowball fight because police showed up to block the "goal" of the group. Both the parties and snowball throwers were "having a good time."

But certain factors in the May 5 riot and the earlier fraternity fight, most notably alcohol, made the two incidents, and perhaps the snowball fight, go awry.

"At the same time there is an increasing concern for alcohol abuse, there is more abuse, at least displayed in public," Whalen said. "I'm not quite sure why that is."

"Why people feel that they have to drink themselves into oblivion, that's disturbing to me," he said. "Two of these student collective actions have been concentrated around defending alcohol abuse, and attacking other students in the case of those two fraternities."

Elaine Green, acting dean of students, said a variety of things are being looked into concerning the incidents, specifically the recent riot incident. One of the factors under investigation is the banning of kegs from Greek houses earlier this year, which may have contributed to parties being moved off campus in settings with less supervision.

"Part of the question would be were there these types of incidents before the keg decision," Green said. "That kind of behavior, being unresponsive to reasonable requests from police, is inexcusable wherever it takes place."

"What has happened in recent years is perhaps an increasing enthusiasm for this kind of self-destructive behavior," Whalen said. "I know people want to see some master trend here. I'm not sure I see one yet. But it is worrisome."

By Christopher Blair  
Emerald Reporter

Is it something in the air? In the water? In the beer?

Whatever the cause, fights or riots on or near campus are becoming more and more frequent.

Officials at the Eugene Police Department and the Office of Public Safety say the past few years on campus have been relatively quiet.

This year, however, has seen three "ugly" incidents where groups of people become violent toward each other, their surroundings or even the police.

Cases in point:  
• a riot resulting from almost 100 people attempting to crash a collection of parties near 14th Avenue and Ferry Street the night of May 5. EPD officers

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