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# Watered Down: How One University Stumbled In Its Attack on Alcohol Abuse—As Industry Resisted Change, Florida State’s President Focused on Campus Image—‘Beer Pong’ and Phony IDs

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Tallahassee, Fla.—Determined to shed its party-school image, Florida State University four years ago created a coalition to curb student alcohol abuse. The Partnership for Alcohol Responsibility mapped an ambitious plan: outlaw “ladies drink free” nights and other discount specials, prohibit anyone under 21 years old from entering bars and stiffen penalties for serving underage drinkers.

The local alcohol industry, invited to cooperate, instead used its money and political clout to persuade FSU to shun its own reform group in favor of more-moderate efforts. Leading the charge was Susie Busch-Transou, co-owner of the local Budweiser distributorship and daughter of the chairman of St. Louis brewing giant Anheuser-Busch Cos.

On the other side was Daniel Skiles, the aggressive campus substance-abuse activist the university brought in to run the partnership. He had the backing of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which frequently battles alcohol interests over college drinking policies.

In the middle was Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte, then FSU’s president. The courtly, silver-haired former state legislator wanted something done about student drinking, but he worried about how the acrimonious debate was affecting his school’s image. What happened here in Florida’s capital shows how difficult it can be to curb student drinking in the face of industry resistance and ambivalent academic leadership.

Excessive student drinking wreaks a huge toll across the U.S. The National Academy of Sciences estimated last month that underage drinking in the U.S. costs \$53 billion a year in alcohol-related traffic accidents, violent crime and other harmful consequences. At FSU, three students have died in alcohol-related incidents since the partnership began its work in 1999, including a 23-year-old senior who died Sept. 1 after a car crash. In a survey by the Harvard School of Public Health this year, 57% of FSU undergraduates who drink said one main reason they do so is “to get drunk.”

Today, despite the efforts of its anti-abuse partnership, FSU’s party culture

remains vibrant. Within two miles of the 29,000-student school’s cozy enclave of red-brick buildings and palm trees, more than 150 bars, restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores and supermarkets sell beer, wine and hard liquor. The campus newspaper, the FSView, recently ran a two-page spread of ads for half-priced “fish bowls” at Yianni’s, 2-for-1 mixed drinks at Po’ Boys and free margaritas for women at the Painted Lady.

Much social life revolves around alcohol. At an off-campus residence last month, six FSU students under the legal drinking age of 21 toasted the Seminoles’ football home opener with shot after shot of rum and vodka. They drank around a makeshift tiki bar decorated with Miller Lite flags reading, “Please Think Before You Drink.” All six were armed with fake identification for an expedition that night to Potbelly’s, another pub near campus.

One Monday in August 1999, FSU’s Mr. D’Alemberte, wearing his customary bow tie, stepped before TV cameras in downtown Tallahassee to talk about student drinking. The university president, a nationally known

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attorney and former head of the American Bar Association, was concerned primarily that day with protecting his school's academic reputation.

He had called the press conference to bestow a mock award—the “Golden Gargoyle”—on the Princeton Review, publisher of a popular college guide. The review had just named FSU the nation's top “party school” for the second time in four years. Holding up a frog-like figurine, Mr. D'Alemberte, now 70 years old, denounced the review for using “bogus, manipulative” research. (Rob Franek, the guide's author, defends the designation as based on interviews with 65,000 students nationwide.)

In an interview, Mr. D'Alemberte says he wanted FSU to be seen as a world-class institution. Its party-school reputation had hindered efforts to lure faculty and students, he says, and even impeded professors from obtaining research grants.

Around the time of Mr. D'Alemberte's press conference, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health had compiled a survey that classified 53% of FSU students as “binge drinkers.” In similar research at 119 colleges and universities nationwide, the researchers have found the average rate to be 44%. FSU ranked in the top third of those 119 schools. Harvard defines a binge drinker as a man who has consumed at least five drinks in a sitting within the past two weeks, or a woman who has consumed at least four. Harvard says that drinking at these levels makes young people more likely to drive drunk, have unprotected sex or otherwise get into trouble.

Mr. D'Alemberte committed FSU that fall of 1999 to doing something serious about alcohol. The university had obtained a five-year \$700,000 grant from the Johnson Foundation in Princeton, N.J. With that money, FSU formed the Partnership for Alcohol Responsibility, a coalition of about 50 faculty members, students, civic leaders, bar owners and others.

FSU told the foundation that the group would seek campus rule changes and new state and local laws restricting youth drinking. The project was part of a larger Johnson-funded program designed to test the effectiveness of strict regulation in reducing drinking on 10 campuses around the country.

To run FSU's partnership, the school hired Mr. Skiles, now 57, who had worked for more than 15 years in substance-abuse programs. In earlier work at two colleges, he says, he had become convinced that policy changes—for instance, state laws that have raised the drinking age to 21—did more to curtail abuse than just talking about moderation. With 85% of FSU students living off-campus, changing state and local laws would be especially important, in his view.

The partnership's executive committee included James McDonough, Florida's antidrug czar, and Winston Scott, a retired astronaut who was then FSU's vice president for student affairs. The chairman was Steve Meisburg, then a Tallahassee city commissioner. “I was very excited,” Mr. Skiles recalls. “With all of these people here, how could we fail?”

Another participant was Ms. Busch-Transou, vice-president of Tri-Eagle Sales, the local Anheuser distributorship.

Vivacious and articulate, the daughter of August Busch III, the Anheuser chairman, is well known in Tallahassee for civic and charitable activities and e-mails peppered with exclamation points. “When I get involved in anything, I jump in with both feet, arms, legs and eyes,” she says in an interview. Tri-Eagle, which she owns with her husband, sold more than three million cases of beer in Tallahassee and nine surrounding counties last year, for a 71% share of the market.

The distributorship supports boat races, chili cook-offs and other local events with money and sometimes beer. It recently bought a private box at Doak Campbell Stadium, where FSU's Seminoles play football. The company donates at least \$11,000 a year to the Seminole booster club, qualifying as a “Double Golden Chief.” At the state capitol, the Anheuser logo is engraved on a plaque commemorating the Anheuser-Busch Foundation's \$1 million contribution to environmental education and to construction of a fountain embellished with leaping stainless-steel dolphins.

Ms. Busch-Transou, now 38, says her family has been committed to combating abusive drinking for generations. She recalls the topic being discussed at the dinner table when she was a child. “Anything bad associated with our product is bad for our business,” she says. Last year, Tri-Eagle and Anheuser successfully lobbied for legislation in Florida that toughened drunk-driving penalties and made it a felony to manufacture fake IDs.

Anheuser requires distributors to spend at least a penny on anti-abuse efforts for every 24-beer case. For Tri-Eagle, that amounted to about \$31,000 last

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year. But Ms. Busch-Transou says her company spends much more than that to pay for numerous programs, including distribution of booklets on talking with children about drinking. The company's poster-size Seminole football schedule—pinned up in bars and restaurants around town—advertises Tri-Eagle products and prominently bears the slogan, "Thanks for drinking responsibly."

FSU's Mr. D'Alemberte says initially he was reluctant to offer Tri-Eagle a major role in the partnership because he assumed the company would oppose measures that might reduce beer consumption. But eventually he decided Ms. Busch-Transou should join the executive committee. "I came to believe that there was an enlightened self-interest here, that the alcohol industry could look around and see what happened to the tobacco people," he says.

A prominent figure in Florida politics since the early 1970s, when he served as chairman of the state House Judiciary Committee, Mr. D'Alemberte had long experience handling knotty public-policy and image problems. During his tenure as ABA president in the early 1990s, he had defended the state of the American legal system against attacks by then-Vice President Dan Quayle and others.

But Mr. Skiles and other executive-committee members thought the diplomatic Mr. D'Alemberte was going too far to accommodate the industry. They balked at including Ms. Busch-Transou on the committee. "It would be like starting an antismoking campaign with Philip Morris as a member," Mr. McDonough, the state drug-control director, recalls saying.

Blocked from the committee, Ms. Busch-Transou nevertheless attended most public partnership meetings, frequently challenging the group's leaders. Some drink specials were irresponsible, she conceded, but "happy hours" and other discounts weren't necessarily harmful. Yes, drunks sometimes do horrible things, she said, but regulations that punish problem drinkers and bars can unfairly punish responsible ones as well, she said. Other local alcohol interests and the politically powerful Florida Restaurant Association say they were glad to have the energetic Busch family member take the lead in raising such objections.

At public meetings, the partnership's Messrs. Skiles and Meisburg hammered on drink specials, accusing bar owners of pushing students—especially women—to drink more. In February 2000, Mr. Skiles brandished a Valentine's Day bar ad that read, "No Date, Come Get Drunk!" Ms. Busch-Transou fired back that her side didn't condone drunkenness.

Mr. Skiles, a tall man with a soft voice who likes a cold Bud with Mexican food, says he followed advice from the American Medical Association, which was assisting the Johnson Foundation's effort. One piece of advice posted on the AMA's Web site: "If you're being effective, sooner or later the alcohol beverage industry is going to come down on you."

Still, Mr. Skiles says he hoped public pressure and financial self-interest would lure bar owners to the partnership's cause. The group's activities generated plenty of media attention. In the first six months of 2000 alone, Tallahassee TV stations and newspapers ran more than 30 stories about

drinking at FSU, some pegged to partnership events.

Bars bear the financial burden of alcohol specials, while distributors make the same profit whether a bar sells drinks for \$5 each or a nickel. Mr. Skiles says some proprietors told him they would gladly do away with specials—as long as everyone else did, too.

Charles Jaquet, 29, served 479,000 drinks last year in his four Tallahassee bars—about 1,300 a day—and says he could make more money if he and his rivals didn't offer discounts. But he won't risk losing customers: "I've got to compete."

With fissures deepening, the industry in early 2000 formed its own group to rival the partnership. The Responsible Hospitality Council opposed new laws or rules in favor of enforcing existing ones. It encouraged bars to tone down drink specials and train servers to reject underage customers.

Then, that October, came a pivotal moment. Ms. Busch-Transou arranged for a top Anheuser-Busch official to meet with Mr. D'Alemberte, Mr. Skiles and other FSU officials. Sitting in Mr. D'Alemberte's conference room, the Anheuser executive made a proposal titled, "What Is Anheuser-Busch Prepared To Do?" The answer: fund a "social norms" program. This approach is based on the idea that bans don't work. Instead, social-norms programs distribute posters and other materials that publicize surveys showing that most students drink in moderation, if at all.

Today, scores of colleges employ such programs with funding from Anheuser and state and federal agencies. While some schools attribute reduced drinking to social-norms programs, skeptics cite

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research finding that heavy drinking has continued at schools using the approach.

In the fall of 2000, FSU already had a federally funded \$225,000 social-norms program, which the partnership supported. But Mr. Skiles says he told Mr. D'Alemberte that Anheuser's offer to supplement it would inevitably become an obstacle to the partnership. Mr. D'Alemberte disagreed and eventually accepted a \$457,000 grant from Anheuser. One poster financed by the company says that 91% of FSU students "keep themselves safe by either eating beforehand, keeping track of the number of drinks consumed or avoiding drinking games."

At the same meeting with the Anheuser executive, Mr. D'Alemberte surprised Mr. Skiles with another key decision: The university wouldn't support any new state laws to limit youth drinking. His stance seemed to contradict FSU's application for the Johnson Foundation money, in which the school specifically embraced the goal of pushing legislative changes. The apparent shift hobbled the partnership's plans to lobby for bills in the Florida legislature, including one idea to prohibit underage people from even entering bars, Mr. Skiles says.

Mr. D'Alemberte says he thought the partnership could accomplish plenty without pushing contentious legislation. An ace fund-raiser who had been FSU president since 1994, Mr. D'Alemberte says he didn't want to squander political capital at the statehouse while lobbying for funding of other FSU projects, including a new medical school. "I certainly know the power of the beverage industry in the legislature," the former state lawmaker says. He also notes that FSU already had banned

alcohol ads on campus, expanded no-alcohol student activities and begun notifying parents when underage students received two citations for drinking from police.

Three weeks after the Anheuser meeting, Mr. Skiles was quoted in a Wall Street Journal article about social-norms programs saying that FSU shouldn't accept Anheuser's money because "you end up working for Budweiser and giving them publicity." Infuriated, Mr. D'Alemberte shot an e-mail to Mr. Skiles's boss saying, "Dan Skiles should understand that he cannot speak for FSU." A few days later, Ms. Busch-Transou sent Mr. D'Alemberte a handwritten note saying she also was "very disturbed" by Mr. Skiles's comments. From then on, Mr. Skiles says, Mr. D'Alemberte began to distance himself from the partnership.

The group limped ahead. By the spring of 2001, members of its executive committee had nearly finished a strategic plan, following through on the goals FSU had set from the beginning: ending underage access to bars, increasing penalties for serving underage drinkers, restricting alcohol marketing and eliminating drink specials.

The industry moved swiftly to lambaste the plan. In a 10-page letter dated May 15, 2001, and signed by the heads of five statewide groups representing restaurants, bar owners and alcohol distributors, it questioned the definition of binge drinking and asserted that the partnership's plan would raise alcohol prices. Higher prices would punish all bars, restaurants and drinkers, not just the troublemakers, said the letter, which Ms. Busch-Transou helped draft. Restrictions could drive more drinking into unsupervised apartments, dorms and

fraternities, the industry said. "Problems cannot be legislated out of existence," it asserted. "That was tried over 80 years ago with Prohibition."

In Tallahassee, the industry enjoyed the outspoken support of John Paul Bailey, a city commissioner. "Preaching abstinence has done little to halt the ever-rising statistic of teenager pregnancy," he said in his own letter on May 21 to fellow Commissioner Meisburg, the partnership chairman. "Similarly, temperance will not work with underage drinking."

"Tallahassee is a football town," Mr. Bailey says in an interview. "We drink a beer before the game, one in the first quarter, one in the second quarter—by the third quarter, we were 'binge' drinkers."

Mr. Bailey has received financial support from alcohol interests, including \$500 from Ms. Busch-Transou and \$500 from Anheuser-Busch in 2002. That year, Tri-Eagle co-hosted a \$12,000 fundraiser for his unsuccessful mayoral run. Mr. Bailey says money from alcohol interests was minimal and didn't influence his views.

Back on campus, there was growing unease among some FSU officials about Mr. Skiles. He says senior administrators were particularly upset over an MSNBC segment on campus drinking that ran nationally in the summer of 2001. It was called "Partying 101" and focused on FSU. "They did not like it appearing as if there was a drinking problem" at the school, Mr. Skiles recalls.

One of those particularly distressed by such media coverage was FSU Provost Lawrence Abele, a top aide to President D'Alemberte. He blames Mr. Skiles for generating "inappropriate publicity"

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and says that the partnership's agenda was "vaguely prohibitionist." Mr. D'Alemberte says in retrospect that he wishes he had fired Mr. Skiles, who the president believes had frequently misrepresented himself as a spokesman for the entire university. Mr. D'Alemberte also says the strategic plan set goals without any realistic plans for achieving them.

Rather than fire Mr. Skiles, FSU told him in June 2001 that he could no longer serve as spokesman for the partnership.

By 2002, media advocacy was nearly all that was left of the partnership's efforts. Mr. McDonough, the Florida drug czar, resigned from the partnership. He praises Mr. Skiles's efforts but says he was frustrated by all of the bickering.

City Commissioner Meisburg, the partnership's chairman, drafted an ordinance to shorten the hours of bars that tolerated underage drinking. But without FSU backing, the measure never came to a vote. Mr. Meisburg later stepped down as the partnership's chairman.

The partnership's last splash was an ad campaign in the spring of 2002: newspaper, billboard and TV ads showing pictures of young people drinking or in handcuffs. The ads criticized bars for gender-based drink specials and lax ID checking. They encouraged citizens to contact the partnership and "get involved."

One citizen who responded was Guy Spearman III, a Florida lobbyist whose clients include Anheuser. He called Mr. D'Alemberte, an old friend. Mr. Spearman, an FSU alumnus who religiously attends Seminole games and has contributed hundreds of

thousands of dollars to the school, pointed out that the newspaper and billboard ads listed Mr. Skiles's FSU e-mail address. "I didn't want FSU's name on the ad," he says.

Mr. D'Alemberte says he thought some of the partnership ads inaccurately depicted FSU as a huge drink-fest, contradicting the Anheuser-funded social-norms campaign, which sought to convince students that moderation prevailed on campus. He decided that the FSU reference should be removed from the ads, and it was.

That summer, Mr. Skiles told FSU he planned to resign. He now works on substance-abuse prevention at the nonprofit Institute for Public Strategies in San Diego. Mr. D'Alemberte also announced plans to step down in January 2003, a move that was unconnected to the drinking issue. Mr. D'Alemberte says FSU fulfilled its obligations to the Johnson Foundation, while allowing for other approaches to the drinking problem. "We were determined to pursue the ideas that offered the best chances for improving the situation," he says. "I regret not making a change in the staffing much earlier so that we could move from empty rhetoric to an effective plan."

Anheuser spokeswoman Francine Katz says the episode brought about "the clashing of two philosophies: One advocated targeting the problem without penalizing responsible adults; the other advocated addressing the problem by passing laws that would restrict all drinking. In the end, the Tallahassee community chose the first approach."

FSU officials say the school is making slow progress against drinking. State regulators say area bars are checking

IDs more carefully and catching more fakers. The partnership, with a new director and new chairman, is rewriting its strategic plan and providing police with electronic ID scanners. Some bars have agreed to stop giving away 21st-birthday drinks. For the first time in 12 years, FSU failed to make this year's Princeton Review list of the top-20 party schools.

The latest survey by Harvard's public-health school said this year that FSU's binge-drinking rate is 55%, a sliver higher than when the partnership started in 1999. FSU's own, less stringent survey—it used a standard of five beers for women, rather than four—showed the overall binge rate dropped to 46% this year, down from 51% in 2002. Harvard and FSU agree that the incidence of several types of alcohol-related harm, including missed classes and hangovers, has declined.

But some students here say drinking habits haven't changed much. On a cool Thursday night in September, five FSU students sat around a table on the veranda at Potbelly's. Behind them, a neon Budweiser sign glowed with the words, "We ID." Three of the students were underage, but all were drinking, thanks to fake IDs. Even kids without phony IDs can "get in, and people will feed you drinks," explained Michael Graybeal, 22, a senior sociology major sipping rum and ginger ale. "Everybody here realizes this is a party school."

The next night, Tallahassee police raided numerous off-campus parties, part of a stepped-up enforcement effort that FSU, industry and the partnership all support. Two underage students waited in handcuffs on a patio strewn with abandoned Bud and Bud Light cups. "I'm so stupid," one said.

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“Everyone drinks. Not everyone gets caught. You got caught,” Tallahassee police officer Evan Alwine told him.

The next day, the campus rocked as the Seminole football team prepared to play the University of Maryland. At a fraternity house on College Avenue, parents watched as their sons played “beer pong,” tossing Ping-Pong balls into cups of beer to force opponents to chug. Nursing an Anheuser-Busch Natural Light beer nearby was the underage student who had declared himself “stupid” the night before. “Having a great time,” he said. ❖

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