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Residential life

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Residential Life

The cover story of this month's *Atlantic* is entitled, "[The Dark Power of Fraternities.](#)" While author Caitlin Flanagan engages in the usual journalistic MO of argument by anecdote—taking a handful of incidents and generalizing too broadly—the article is on the one hand not terribly surprising, (schools have a financial stake in the happiness of their fraternity member alumni and the national offices of fraternities have an interest in limiting liability) yet is also worth reading for Flanagan's version of the history of fraternity life and for the interesting legal strategies that are pursued to limit fraternity financial liability.

Among the recent history of fraternity life, which gives a bit too much credit to John Belushi and *Animal House* for the revival of frat life in the 1980s, is an interesting and important observation, namely "legal changes in the 80s moved drinking off campus and into private homes and frats." While it does seem likely that the change in the drinking age across the country did play a role in the increased interest in fraternity living, the change had important implications for all undergraduate institutions, not just those with Greek houses. The incentives were for students to seek living situations that freed them from much oversight of their party habits and for colleges to gladly hasten the demise of *in loco parentis*, which was well underway by the early 1980s.

These social changes led college administrations to respond in two ways in the past few decades.

First, while gladly not having to act as parents to undergraduates, colleges did not completely abandon their students to their worst impulses. Every institution I know of attempts to address the problems with excessive alcohol consumption (binge drinking, sexual assaults, accidents, etc.) with educational programming. This typically starts with freshmen orientation where students are warned of the dangers associated with alcohol, as well as being encouraged to look out for one another, and continues with enforcement of university alcohol policies throughout the students' undergraduate years. While hardly a perfect solution to this vexing problem, institutions are taking it much more seriously than they did a couple decades ago when there was possibly less understanding of the challenges and certainly more of a "kids will be kids" attitude. (As an aside, this attempt to seriously engage the challenges of alcohol on campus has required more student development resources and more personnel, which contribute to rising costs and the dreaded "administrative bloat.")

Second, many non-Greek institutions began to re-consider their housing policies. Some schools, including Saint John's and Saint Benedict's, implemented residency requirements, requiring most students to live on campus for all four years.

Many students and parents misunderstand the intent of such policies, wrongly assuming it is all about filling college housing to make money. Generally, student housing is a break-even proposition, where institutions price housing to cover their costs. Furthermore, the housing that is being filled exists because of the residency requirement, not the other way around.

The goal of the residency requirement is to give the institution more control over the students' residential experience. Part of this is to protect students from the worst excesses of alcohol and its abuse, but at least on our campuses, there is a further goal of strengthening the community and encouraging healthier social interactions.

Among the goals of the college experience is to help 18-22 year olds grow and mature socially. Arguably, this process may be more likely to happen in an on-campus setting and may well be an under appreciated outcome of a truly residential college experience. Certainly young people who are exploring the undergraduate social world will often choose to consume alcohol and inevitably will sometimes make bad choices, but with a residency requirement colleges are at least making an attempt to influence and improve the residential environment and provide a modicum of oversight to undergraduate social experimentation.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 31st, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).