NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Division of Student Affairs  

Parental Notification Study – SUMMARY  
Fall 2009  

PREPARED BY: Erika Beseler Thompson, M.S. Educational Leadership  

Purpose/Rationale:  
Despite wide-spread use of parental notification policies by institutions of higher education, little research has been conducted on the policies or the impact of their implementation. The available research has primarily focused on the methods of implementation and the perceptions of institutional administrators regarding the effectiveness of the policies. At the time this research was conducted, only one other study had examined the opinions and reactions of parents who had actually been notified of their student’s violation involving alcohol or other drugs.  
The purpose of this study was to assess parent responses to the current practice of parental notification of alcohol or drug-related violations involving North Dakota State University students under the age of 21 in order to begin to determine the impact of the policy. This study sought to answer the following questions:  
1. What are parents’ perceptions of the notification process?  
2. What actions did parents take as a result of the notification?  

Additional questions provided a framework for answering the research questions. These questions sought information about parents’ opinions regarding the appropriateness of being notified, the method of notification, the information provided in the notification letter, and whether or not they felt their student would make changes in their consumption of alcohol or other drugs as a result of the parental notification. Additionally, questions were asked about whether or not parents took any action, such as having a conversation with their student or taking disciplinary action as a result of the notification.  
The information gathered in this study was intended to provide insight into the perceptions and reactions of parents regarding the practice of parental notification. This information may then be used to evaluate and improve parental notification policies currently in place.  

Methods:  
The population of the study consisted of the parents and legal guardians of North Dakota State University undergraduate students who received a parental notification letter between August 1, 2007 and August 1, 2009 informing them of their student’s violation of university policy regarding underage use of alcohol or other drugs. The total size of this group was 697.  
The study employed a researcher-constructed survey using both open and closed-ended questions. The instrument was pre-tested by several student affairs administrators, graduate students, and faculty. Following approval by the NDSU Institutional Review Board, a paper-and-pencil survey was mailed to the population in September 2009. Participants also had the option of completing an identical online version of the survey facilitated through Student Voice. The link to this survey was included in the cover letter/informed consent document. A reminder postcard with the link to the online survey was sent to all participants after three weeks.  
This study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the collected data. The quantitative data collected was analyzed primarily using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data obtained was analyzed using theme-coding by multiple reviewers. When applicable, participant responses to open-ended questions were used to explain or support conclusions. A chi-square test was used to determine if a significant correlation existed between parents who indicated they had a conversation with their student as a result of the parental notification and parents who felt their student would make changes in their consumption of alcohol or other drugs as a result of the parental notification.  

Major Findings:  
• 95.7% of parent respondents believe they have a right to be notified of their underage student’s alcohol or other drug violations and 94.9% feel it was appropriate that university officials chose to notify them of their student’s violation in this case. Parents generally expressed that they feel the policy in place at NDSU is beneficial, and they are appreciative of receiving the parental notification letter.
• 95.7% of parents feel it is appropriate to use a letter as the means of notifying them of their student’s violation, though some respondents expressed confusion regarding the ability of the university to communicate violation information without the student’s permission while academic and financial records cannot be released without prior authorization.

• Though the vast majority of parents feel the use of the letter was appropriate, 20.3% feel that insufficient detail was provided in the letter, and 15.7% feel the instructions as to how they could find additional information regarding their student’s violation were unclear. Survey responses revealed that parents would like additional details about the circumstances of their student’s violation, clarification of what specific substance was involved in the violation, and details of the actions the university took in response to be included in the letters.

• Open-ended responses revealed that some parents felt the amount of time between the incident and receipt of the notification letter was too long. They indicated that they would have preferred receiving the letter closer to the date of the violation in order to address the incident in a timely manner. Additionally, some parents would have liked a secondary form of notification or a follow-up contact, such as an email or phone call.

• The primary action that parents took in response to notification was having a conversation with their student. 82.4% of parent respondents indicated they had a conversation with their student after receiving the notification. These conversations were typically about the details of their student’s violation and the risks and consequences of alcohol or other drug use. As a whole, parent respondents typically did not take disciplinary action with their student following notification.

• The results of the chi-square test were significant and showed that parents who chose to have a conversation with their student were more likely to feel their student will make changes in their consumption of alcohol or other drugs as a result of the parental notification than those parents who did not have a conversation with their student.

Implications for the Program:

Based on study findings, university officials should continue the practice of notifying parents of their underage student’s violations of alcohol or other drug policies. The data shows that parents appreciate being notified and are using the notification as a means to have a conversation with their student about the violation, as well as about the consequences of their decisions.

Parental feedback indicates that parents would like to be notified promptly following their student’s violation in order to address the incident with their student in a timely manner. University officials should make every effort to send parental notification letters in a timely fashion following student disciplinary hearings. In cases where a letter may be delayed, a secondary form of notification, such as an email or phone call, may be appropriate.

Regarding the content of the letter, university officials may wish to include additional details in the parental notification letter, such as the specific violation, the substance involved and the university sanction the student will face, in order to assist parents in tailoring their conversation to the specific needs of their student. Alternately, should the university be unable to provide this information due to time or resource constraints or based on the philosophical stance of the departments involved, university officials may wish to provide additional information as to why the violation details have not been provided and further emphasize how parents can obtain the additional information.

Finally, to alleviate parental confusion regarding student privacy rights, university officials may wish to include a thorough explanation of why the violation information is being released without the prior approval of the student and how release of this information differs from the release of student academic and financial records.