

Risky Business

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The majority of UNC-Chapel Hill's undergraduate student body population falls under the illustrious age of 21. Yet this obstacle does not deter countless students from wiggling their way past well-trained bouncers and into the Thursday night bar scene of downtown Chapel Hill.

A student willing to violate North Carolina's alcohol laws runs the risk of incurring quite a laundry list of legal consequences. Their bark is worse than their bite, however, for the implementation of these ramifications proves extremely rare. In fact, ask a handful of downtown Chapel Hill bartenders about what these consequences entail, and the collection of responses will vary drastically.

While a bartender's explanation of a person's legal risk in underage drinking is ambiguous at best, they know their personal liability in the matter like the back of their hand. As the use of false identification remains a prominent trend in Chapel Hill, bar owners and employees work diligently to protect the credibility of their businesses from the manipulation of potential customers they aim to serve. Unfortunately, the discrepancies between bar personnel and law enforcement officers' comprehension and execution of policies revolving around fake ID use further threaten the security of their businesses.

Despite efforts to minimize dangers to their popular downtown Chapel Hill venues, many bar bouncers and bartenders elect to return fake IDs rather than confiscate them altogether. Sgt. Joshua Mecimore from the Town of Chapel Hill Police Department says that

bar employees turn in collections of confiscated IDs to an Alcohol Law Enforcement Response Team officer on a regular basis. Local bartender Nate Lonnen said, "It gets a little fuzzy when you aren't sure if the ID is a fake. In those cases, we just turn them away and let them keep it." Beloved venues such as Top of the Hill Restaurant & Brewery consistently return IDs to the people attempting to use them. "We just don't bother collecting them," head bouncer Justin Watts said. James Noyes, a bar manager who works alongside Watts, explained, "I believe we are not legally allowed to confiscate IDs. We can only make the judgment of whether or not we want the people in the building."

A lack of mutual understanding between Chapel Hill bar personnel and alcohol law enforcement officers does not begin and end with ID confiscation policies. Lt. Jabe Hunter, an ALERT squad supervisor for the Town of Chapel Hill Police Department, considers an underage drinker lucky to face only participation in a court deferral program and a fine ranging from \$200 to \$300 as punishment for the use of a fake ID. The unlucky ones receive a citation for underage drinking, a citation for the use of the fake ID, a report to the dean's office and university honor court, and a trial in criminal court. Conversely, Lonnen said, "It's basically a slap on the wrist when an underage person gets caught with a fake ID. They get a small fine at most. The worst part is having the ID taken away and going home heartbroken." A local bar owner admitted, "Honestly, I don't know what the consequences are."

While bar employees appear unaware of the consequences underage drinkers face in utilizing fake IDs, they understand the severe risks they run as alcohol-serving venues in a popular college town.

“A bartender can get arrested if they get caught serving alcohol to an underage person, and they are immediately banned from working in any alcohol-serving establishment for at least two years,” Noyes said. Regarding the bar venue specifically, Lonnen said, “If caught with underage people in our bar, we can incur serious fines, have our liquor license suspended and basically shut down.” Mecimore noted that a bar’s fines for such actions can range from \$1,000 to \$3,000.

While the punishment of the bar owner and employees remains much stricter than that of the underage person using their fake ID, the ALERT squad proves empathetic in certain circumstances. “We don’t go after the business if the fake ID looks really close to the real thing,” Hunter said. “They are the ones being tricked.”

While a typical profile of a fake ID user does not exist, both bar personnel and alcohol law enforcement officers confirm that the majority of people attempt to use a an older friend or sibling’s driver’s license, coincidentally the easiest fake ID to identify. They also target specific behavioral patterns of underage drinkers. Hunter identified the lack of eye contact, a nervous disposition, and an awkward rehearsal of basic ID information as key indicators that the person is underage. Watts agreed, elaborating how often times they stare at the ground and try to get past the door relatively quickly. Joking with a sense of truthfulness, Lonnen said, “People that aren’t of age are just usually a little standoffish. Also, big black ‘X’s on their hands from other venues give them away pretty quickly.”

Despite the ability of bouncers and officers to pick an underage person out of the bar line, the prominence of fake ID use in Chapel Hill is worsening. The transient nature of the Chapel Hill population signals a need for constant education and enforcement efforts.

“Just by looking at the crowd at the door, I can see that more and more students are trying to get into bars at younger ages,” Watts said.

Additionally, technological innovations both help and hurt the alcohol enforcement system. State departments increase the sophistication of driver’s license security features as fake ID manufacturers work to meet these higher standards. “They are getting harder and harder for us to pull out of the crowd,” Watts said.

The ALERT squad coordinates with the Alcohol Law Enforcement state agency to provide educational training for bar personnel aiming to prevent underage drinking in their venues. Each bar receives a book with driver’s licenses from all 50 states to serve as an educational and reference tool.

“Fake ID use is always going to be an issue. The best thing we can do is educate the people at the door and continue our enforcement efforts,” Hunter said.

The lack of mutual understanding of underage drinking policies and repercussions between bar employees and alcohol law enforcement officers can be attributed to their distinct yet critical concerns on the subject. Both Mecimore and Hunter highlighted the public health implications of underage drinking as the central issue.

“Personal safety involves being aware of your surroundings, and the consumption of alcohol impairs your ability to do so, ultimately putting you in danger,” Mecimore said. Hunter said, “Public health concerns are at the crux of all this enforcement. It’s why we’re out there.”

Alternatively, bar personnel take a less empathetic approach to the underage people trying to use their fake IDs. Watts maintains that if a person is willing to break the law, then

they are ultimately willing to deal with the consequences. Noyes said, "We aren't here to make moral judgments. We just want to protect our business."