JMU: It’s a Riot!
A Case Study

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Introduction

Underage drinking and heavy partying frequently contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes towards college students in association with alcohol abuse at universities. The reputation of James Madison University was vastly jeopardized after the off campus alcohol-related incident known as Springfest 2010 snowballed into riots and violence, ending with police officers using tear gas emissions to control the disorderly crowd of over 8,000 people. With immediate news coverage from regional and national publications, the event received heavy criticism from alumni, faculty, and the local community. The aftermath and repercussions of Springfest forced the university to consider serious changes in regards to its reputation and current alcohol enforcement policies. After conducting substantial research and personal interviews with key individuals, this case provides further insight into Springfest 2010, focusing specifically on the timeline of events, its aftermath, and how the university today still deals with its ramifications while working towards reparations.

Overview of James Madison University

James Madison University is a comprehensive university, which operates as a part of the statewide system of public higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Established on March 14, 1908, the university is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award degrees on the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. The university operates with its primary focus on the undergraduate student.

James Madison University is recognized nationally as a stand out institution for higher education. In 2010, JMU was recognized in U.S. News & World Report’s “America’s Best Colleges” guidebook and “Top Up-and-Coming Schools.” The Princeton Review recognizes James Madison University on their “Best Value Colleges” list, highlighting schools that provide high quality academics at a reasonable price. Additionally, JMU ranks no. 21 of 100 in Kiplinger’s Personal Finance’s list of best values in public education (James Madison University).

University President, Dr. Linwood H. Rose took office at the 5th president of James Madison University on September 9, 1998. During his term, the university has undergone dynamic change. The university has added 25 buildings, 20 academic programs, expanded 2.4 million square feet, increased enrollment by 37% and established a Phi Beta Kappa chapter (Haas, 2010).

James Madison University’s Office of Public Affairs is dedicated to highlighting all that JMU has to offer. The department acts as a liaison between the university leaders, the community and the students. The Director of Public Affairs is Don Egle, he is responsible for leading the organization’s efforts in media relations, crisis communication, community relations, issues management and advertising. Among their responsibilities, the department is accountable for communicating with students, faculty and staff in the event of an emergency. They have access to mass e-mails, the JMU website and text messages in order to reach the student body.
History of Springfest

Party School Reputation
In past years, JMU has acquired a ‘party school’ reputation. James Madison’s negative reputation has grown wildly from the excessive underage drinking. Playboy ranked JMU 22nd in their list of the Top Party Schools in 2009. Playboy describes the university as a "neat school with decent academics and pretty attractive girls. The ethos is less monogamy and more of a casual hook-up culture" (CITATION). These rankings have surfaced because of JMU’s unique house-party culture. Most hosts maintain an open-door policy and guests will never be asked to pay a cover charge, or if they are of legal drinking age. JMU’s friendly campus creates the perfect welcoming party ground for students and those visiting from other schools.

Springfest is an unofficial alcohol-related event held at James Madison University. Each spring, students, alumni, and visitors gather at off campus housing development for what quickly develops into a block party that is typically associated with heavy drinking and excessive crowds. This event is not sponsored by the university and often gathers much apprehension and criticism from administrative officials and the local police department.

Block Party 2000
In August of 2000, a riot broke out among 2,500 students at a back-to-school Block Party. About thirty-five law enforcement officers were called to Village Lane to break up partiers with tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets and a declaration of unlawful assembly. About 20 JMU students were arrested by the Harrisonburg Police Department on alcohol related charges. These events resulted in thousands of dollars in property damage.

Springfest 2010
Springfest 2010 was set to take place on April 10, 2010. Buzz for the event grew steadily over the preceding months, to the point that it was the party to be at for college students across the mid-Atlantic region. The event was supposed to take place behind the 1600 row of Fox Hills Townhomes, where the event has taken place in past years, however as the occasion drew close, landlords gave notice to student residents that having kegs was against their lease agreement. At the last minute the event was relocated to Forrest Hills Townhomes, another student housing development. By the day of the event, over 8,500 students had responded that they would be “attending” on Facebook. Students traveled most notably from Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey in order to be in attendance. There were even rumors of students being bussed up from southern schools such as the University of Florida.
College administrators had been aware of large-scale Facebook events in the past, however their concern grew when they saw the large number of non-JMU students who vocalized their planned attendance to Springfest. Facebook events are notorious for having inflated attendance numbers, which has occurred
in the past, however this year even a fraction of those who claimed to be “attending” would be over capacity for police to effectively manage.

The day of the event, people began making their way to the Forrest Hills area around (10) A.M. Over the course of the day, the crowds grew in number totaling nearly 8,000 partygoers. While police had a presence from the start in order to deter underage and excessive drinking in attempts, they realized that the crowds were growing to uncontrollable numbers. This coupled with students standing on electrical boxes willingly being pelted with beer bottles and other objects, led to a safety hazard. The police attempted to break up the event by declaring unlawful assembly and decided, in conjunction with JMU Office of Public Affairs, to send a mass text through the JMU emergency communication system warning students to disperse. After partygoers refused to leave, officers were sent into the mass of people. However, as the officers made their way through the crowd, they were met with angry rioters who began to throw beer bottles and rocks at them in protest. This was when the officers retreated, returning later with a much larger presence and wearing riot gear.

Once the police declared the party an unlawful assembly, backup officers were brought in from surrounding municipalities including 93 Virginia State Police officers, 72 additional Harrisonburg Police Department officers, 23 Rockingham County sheriff deputies, 11 Staunton police officers, and 15 Augusta County sheriff deputies. These additional officers reported to the original staff of Harrisonburg police officers at their command station, set up at The Days Inn, across the street from the Springfest activities.

Many students complained that they didn’t receive the text because the wireless networks were over capacity, but regardless, partygoers began to disperse. However, some students remained in the vicinity despite cars being damaged, windows broken and dumpsters lit on fire. It was around 6 p.m. that the police began to push the crowd towards the end of the cul-de-sac. The police began using rubber bullets and tear gas to control the crowd after receiving calls for help from students who lived in Forrest Hills housing.

The entire event was fully dispersed by approximately 9 p.m., although officers remained on patrol late into the night. Helicopters were even called in to monitor the area, flying around and shining their lights on anyone venturing out that evening.

Backlash: Media Coverage

The Daily News Record

The local newspaper, The Daily News Record, was quick to report on party developments, publishing 15 articles during the first week following the incident. The first article regarding Springfest was published on Saturday, April 10th, it gave information on the police presence that would be on the scene as well as information on how the city prepared prior to the event. Actual news coverage of the Springfest riot started the following Monday, continuing to give any updates throughout the coming weeks.
The Breeze

As expected, JMU’s student run twice weekly newspaper, The Breeze, was quick to publish an article covering Springfest events on Monday April 12, 2010. On the April 10th event, The Breeze had a reporter and photographer assigned to the location incase a story was to arise said then News Editor, Katie Thisdell. The Breeze staff covering the event requested additional reporters and photographers to report to the scene for additional coverage. The Breeze reporters had problems gathering material because they were not carrying press passes, but they were able to capture many images. In the Monday April 12th, edition of The Breeze, the full front page was devoted to coverage of Springfest events. Since, The Breeze has published 55 articles related to Springfest 2010.

National News Outlets

One of the main reasons why the riots at Springfest were observed with such a critical focus and close scrutiny is due to the national attention it received from national news corporations. This event was not just kept within the local confines of The Breeze and The Daily News Record. Instead, it spread well outside the Harrisonburg and Rockingham County areas when the Associated Press picked up the article, sending the story out over the wires for any national news corporation to pick up and report. This caused all eyes to be on JMU and Harrisonburg, waiting to watch and see how the repercussions of the riots will affect the university and the overall community.

The Washington Post first reported the Springfest riots on Tuesday, April 13, 2010 with a headline titled “Crowded off-campus party degenerates into violence – James Madison’s president calls Saturday’s melee an ‘embarrassment.’ ” The article gives a breakdown of Springfest and its escalation into violence, as well as photos, video clips, and quotes from students and the Harrisonburg police department to support the facts presented.

Comments played a large role in measuring public opinion towards Springfest and its aftermath. The majority expressed negative attitudes, most towards the university, Dr. Rose, the police, college students or underage drinking. Some attempted to defend the riot participants while others tried to find someone to blame for the incident. There were 50 comments left on The Washington Post article, but countless others were left on Facebook, YouTube, and the various articles that reported on Springfest.

NBC29 News reported the Springfest riots at 10:30 pm on Saturday, April 10, 2010, announcing that the police were now responding publicly about the riots and their decision on how to handle the crowds. This article featured a map of where the events took place and the letter from Dr. Rose that was sent out to students.

WHSV first broadcasted reports about Springfest on Saturday April 10, 2010. In the days following, they announced Dr. Rose’s statement to students, as well as interviewed Harrisonburg residents for their opinions on the riots. WHSV also featured “One on One” interviews with Dr. Mark Warner, Vice President of Student Affairs on April 19, 2010 and Mary Hope Vass, Public Information Officer of Harrisonburg Police Department on April 20, 2010.
Social Media

YouTube has a number of user-generated videos and clips taken by Springfest attendees on their smart phones and digital recording devices. Most of these videos show partygoers throwing beer bottles into the crowd and then the police and SWAT teams releasing tear gas into the crowd. Like with previous articles, many of these videos on YouTube feature hundreds of comments, mostly from JMU students and alumni. The highest number of views a YouTube Springfest video received was 192,769.

By Saturday night, #JMU was one of the top trending topics on Twitter. Searches using terms “JMU” and “riot” were among Google’s most searched keywords.
Community Response

Dr. Rose sent a mass email expressing his disappointment to the student body the following day addressing Springfest events. The content of this email can be found in Appendix A.

New Policies

In August, prior to the start of the following semester, students received another email from Dr. Rose addressing changes the university would put into affect as a result of Springfest. Three environment management strategies were: (1) four additional officers for the public safety office, (2) new parental notification policies (alerting parents after students’ first alcohol offense compared to previously second) and (3) joint patrol between the JMU Campus Police and Harrisonburg Police Department officers to better expand JMU Campus Police patrol off-campus. The email addressing these policy changes can be found in Appendix B.

Alumni Office

After the events of Springfest reached a national audience, the JMU alumni office did not do anything to proactively contact alumni. Instead, they handled individual concerns directed at their office as they appeared. About 10 concerned alumni contacted the office, but most alumni voiced their opinions through their local news outlets which ran the AP story. To their knowledge, no alumni distanced themselves from the university as a result of Springfest.

Substance Abuse Prevention

Paige Hawkins, Assistant Director of the Substance Abuse Prevention Office (SAP) at JMU feels that her office is extremely proactive when it comes to dealing with alcohol use in the university community. The SAP office has been in place at JMU since January 2009, but saw much success in the first year alone. In February 2010, their public service campaign “Your Call” was awarded two silver and two gold ADDY awards by the American Advertising Federation of Hampton Roads. “Your Call” examined the impact of hazardous drinking on and off campus by creatively highlighting risks and encouraging the use of protective strategies.

As was the case with many university offices, the SAP office knew of the coming Springfest festivities through Facebook. Hawkins said, in a personal interview, that she sent three messages to the administrators of the Facebook event. The substance of these messages included the associated risks of substance abuse that she hoped administrators would share with members of the event. In addition to her proactive efforts with Facebook, Hawkins’ office placed health strategies in the University Table Tents in all the dining halls the week prior to Springfest. After the Student Government Association was denied the request for a water tent under Executive Order 53, the office asked for an exemption that was not approved. Outside of the university, the SAP office spoke with the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) and was able
to have a regional representative visit with local merchants. The SAP office also worked with Harrisonburg Police Department’s Crime Prevention Coordinator to heighten resources for the weekend and spoke to officials from Harrisonburg Department of Public Transportation.

Hawkins believes that the programs and initiatives currently in place at the university are extremely effective in dealing with substance abuse, but explains there needs to be a larger emphasis on reinforcing what’s already in place.

**Office of Orientation**

JMU prides itself in operating and maintaining an award winning first year orientation program. First year students move into their dorms 5-7 days prior to the start of classes to participate in “1787 August Orientation.” During 1787 August Orientation, first year students attend a variety of programming intended to instill the morals and values of the university, acclimate students to the campus and facilitate bonding and build framework for relationships with classmates. Each day of 1787 August Orientation is designed for a full day of programming from morning to evening.

Still living in the aftermath of Springfest 2010, 1787 August Orientation Co-Coordinator, Morgan Nichols said in a personal interview, “the Orientation Office has definitely buckled down and is working very closely with other offices to make sure the alcohol culture changes.” The Orientation Office packed evenings of 1787 August Orientation with programming designed to rival off campus events. Additionally, new programming was either revamped or introduced to 1787 August Orientation including JMAfDisOn!, an interactive session designed to promote healthy lifestyle choices during the transition into college life; Club GILTY, an on-campus “night club” where alcoholic consumption is not tolerated; Madison at Midnight, a dance party hosted on the basketball courtyard of on-campus student housing and Late Night Breakfast, among others to promote on-campus activities.

**Student Government Association**

Student Body President, Candace Avalos, did not respond to Springfest events until the Sunday morning after the event. The first thing she did was send Dr. Rose an email at 10 a.m. requesting that he keep her informed on all of the decisions and actions that were taking place in response to the event in order to handle the situation more effectively. They began communicating with students via the Student Government fan page on Facebook expressing that they were prepared to take comments and concerns about the event and that they were actively working to determine a solution.

On the Tuesday following Springfest, President Avalos went to the Harrisonburg city council meeting and spoke in front of Mayor Kai Degner, other city officials and the local media issuing an official apology on behalf of JMU’s student body. At the meeting, Degner, a 2003 JMU alum, called for Dr. Rose to expel any students who were involved in the Springfest events. The local newspaper, *The Daily News Record*, quoted Degner’s request for expulsion further expressing support for his disciplinary action.
The student body immediately began voicing their opinions on the issue, making suggestions on how the Student Senate should respond and voicing their personal reactions to the event. For the most part, students expressed appreciation for the SGA’s efforts to correct the issue. Some students did contact President Avalos directly with specific complaints, to which she responded that action was on its way and that they would be included in those conversations. Avalos also received emails from parents and JMU alumni. Most of the requests were vague, such as "something needs to be done" but without any specific requests as to how to help assuage the situation. Community service was continually suggested as a way for students to give back to Harrisonburg and begin mending relationships.

Dukes Helping Harrisonburg was an organization formed in the days following the event by non-SGA student, Andy Eblin. The organization was created to form a dialogue between JMU and the city of Harrisonburg. The organization was subsequently recruited to work along side with the SGA to help sponsor the annual day of service known as The Big Event. Unfortunately, The Big Event did not occur due to lack of time and planning.

The larger concern behind Springfest was James Madison University’s mounting alcohol problems. Springfest was certainly not the first of the alcohol related issues facing the university but rather, the “final straw”. SGA participated in several discussions that were more so focused on alcohol awareness and education than the actual event. As a response to these discussions, the small student group, Respect Madison, was created to raise awareness on alcohol policy, encourage students to take responsibility for their actions and demonstrate respect for the university.

SGA conducted research on events similar to Springfest at other universities, specifically at the University of Connecticut, who have faced similar concerns in the past. A lot of thought was given towards creating a university sponsored Springfest in order to ensure a safer environment, however this remains a point of contention with many hoping to eliminate the festivities altogether.

**City of Harrisonburg**

Harrisonburg Police Department made 17 arrests on 38 charges directly related to Springfest. Charges included profane swearing or intoxication, failing to leave from an unlawful assembly, assault on a law enforcement officer, participation in a riot with a dangerous weapon, conspiring to incite a riot, attempted malicious wounding on a law enforcement officer and destruction of property. Dozens of citations were issued by the HPD for violating open alcohol container and public intoxication laws. Total personnel salary costs for the HPD overtime totaled $14,325.89. The total cost of the gas munitions used were $8,931.00.

According to Mary Hope Vass, Harrisonburg Police Department spokeswoman, and Miriam Dickler, Public Information Officer of the City of Harrisonburg, they don’t want to stop Springfest from happening in the future. In a personal interview with Dickler, she said "It's unreasonable to think that we can
stop a block party from happening, it happened without a major incident for years and could easily continue without consequence in the future. Our hope is that we reach JMU students to increase alcohol education and awareness.” The Harrisonburg Police Department is currently working with JMU SGA, Off Campus Living, Community Service Learning and other offices within the university to collaborate on ways to reach students using their peers to convey messages of responsible decisions and a changed alcohol culture within the community.

Conclusion

After much review and examination, the violence and riots that escalated at Springfest proved to be the final push James Madison University needed in order to take the proper steps for improving its image and changing the present alcohol culture. The event and the relentless aftermath it brought to the university can serve as a model for all involved and affected to learn, rebuild, and move on. JMU is taking this opportunity as a chance to rise above the stereotypical college drinking culture by focusing on academic achievement and community advancements to better its overall reputation as an admirable educational institution.
Appendix A

Dear Students:

Let me first acknowledge that many of you did not attend springfest on Saturday. To those of you who were involved, your collective behavior was an embarrassment to your university and a discredit to our reputation. No one is opposed to some fun on a beautiful spring weekend, but public drunkenness, destruction of property, and threats to personal safety are unacceptable outcomes. Yesterday's events reflect poorly on your character and were demonstrable evidence of less than sound judgment.

As a university community, we care about our neighbors. Unfortunately, the events of this weekend do not demonstrate that concern.

To mitigate the negative consequences of these types of situations in the future, we will be conferring with students, property owners, law enforcement, including the Virginia State Police, government officials and others.

Linwood H. Rose  
President
Appendix B

August 18, 2010

Dear new and returning students,

I hope your summer has been both relaxing and meaningful. We look forward to welcoming you to JMU and to the new academic year!

While our mission is to prepare you to be educated and enlightened citizens, our primary concern is always your personal health and safety. Last spring semester ended with some lingering issues surrounding negative alcohol-related events off campus. As your President and on behalf of the university community, I remain very concerned about the abuse and underage use of alcohol by some of our students. Such behavior results in negative consequences for the individual and it also threatens the personal health, safety and community respect of the entire student body. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of actions that we will be taking to change the negative alcohol culture that has been associated with James Madison University specifically, and higher education generally.

Regularly, we survey students through our continuing student survey to learn about alcohol-related experiences and attitudes. Three of the recent responses are particularly symbolic of the problem with alcohol that we face. In commenting on Consequences of Using Alcohol, 44 percent of JMU students reported that alcohol caused them to behave in ways they later regretted. Twenty-eight percent said their alcohol-induced behavior left them feeling guilty. Further, 48 percent of students reported that their alcohol consumption resulted in them not remembering a period of time. During orientation for new students this summer, approximately 70 percent of the incoming freshmen indicated that they had used alcohol in the past month. These facts are clear evidence of the challenge before us and we want to reverse these trends. It is time to change our culture.

In recent years we have increased our efforts to address the alcohol issue, including the creation of an Office of Substance Abuse Prevention, which has been proactive and innovative in its approach. You may go to [http://www.jmu.edu/yourcall](http://www.jmu.edu/yourcall) to see the comprehensive strategies that are being used.

Unfortunately, our efforts have not been enough. All one has to do is to look at the Springfest videos or travel through off-campus apartment complexes on a "party" weekend to see the negative results. We also have an unseen problem. We have a number of students who seek help from the Counseling Center or Health Center because of alcohol abuse-related issues. Finally, we are attracting uninvited and unwelcome visitors to the University and Harrisonburg.
We are going to change this culture. JMU will not be defined by a negative alcohol culture, nor will we allow it to be perpetuated. However, we cannot turn things around without your help.

The changes listed below will be implemented this Fall to begin to transform the JMU alcohol culture. This list is the result of numerous conversations with students, faculty, staff, parents and community members. While our goal is to improve the culture of our entire community, change begins with the daily decisions that you will make as an individual. The positive impact that Madison makes in communities across the country starts here in the Harrisonburg community. Therefore, I ask you to lead a life that reflects our institutional values: Integrity, Mutual Respect and Excellence.

Sincerely,

Linwood H. Rose
President
Works Cited


<http://www.playboy.com/articles/top-party-schools-2009-the-works/>

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<http://www.jmu.edu/news/Staff.shtml>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA7Q6JdiSc8>
Teaching Note

Discussion Questions
1. Identify the key publics involved in Springfest.
2. What would be an effective way for JMU to mend their reputation after Springfest?
3. Discuss the community relations problems that JMU faces.
4. Knowing this event would take place, should JMU have taken additional steps to control the situation? Please explain.
5. If the annual Springfest is reinstated by the students in the future, how should JMU prepare?