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UMass Amherst to ban guests during Blarney Blowout weekend

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ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

Police detained a Blarney Blowout participant near UMass Amherst on March 8, 2014.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 19, 2015

The University of Massachusetts Amherst will ban students from hosting outside guests for an entire weekend next month when a set of annual off-campus parties blamed for violent, drunken disturbances in the past is expected to unfold.

The events, a series of St. Patrick's Day-themed celebrations held in Amherst and neighboring towns and collectively known as the Blarney Blowout, are expected to be held March 7.

Blarney Blowout gatherings, which are not sanctioned by the university or town, typically take place on a weekend before St.



Patrick's Day because the university's spring break usually overlaps with the March 17 holiday.

Students will be prohibited from hosting guests who are not UMass Amherst students from 8 p.m. March 5 through 11 p.m. March 8.

Visitors figured prominently in violence associated with last year's Blarney Blowout, an investigation showed.

Parties in 2014 held on the grounds of off-campus apartments turned unruly, resulting in dozens of arrests and violent clashes with police. Of 58 people arrested, 21 were UMass Amherst students.

The university hired former Boston police commissioner Edward F. Davis to review what went wrong.

Davis, who provides security consulting services for The Boston Globe and other corporate clients, issued a report in the fall saying that UMass, campus and town police, and students were all to blame for what unfolded.

University and town officials, including their police departments, have been preparing for this year's festivities. Officials have conducted outreach to students, owners of bars and liquor stores, and landlords about how they can help.

The school plans to host a series of on-campus events to lure students who might otherwise attend the off-campus celebrations.

"We can't ignore what has happened in the past," said Enku Gelaye, vice chancellor of student affairs and campus life at UMass Amherst. "The reality is some of these events have not gone well for us in the past, and we need to take preventative measures to keep the community safe."

Gelaye said she knows the policy changes for that weekend will inconvenience and upset some, but the university is asking students for their cooperation and support.

"We're asking for their help in keeping the community and all of its members safe," she said.

"I don't want the message to be 'don't engage with each other' or 'don't have fun,'" Gelaye said. "We want to create safe environments for students to socialize and have fun."

During the Super Bowl earlier this month, the university banned guests from campus dormitories in an effort to prevent rowdy behavior that erupted during previous championships featuring local teams.

That policy, coupled with other measures that included school-sanctioned viewing parties and an effort by police to take a gentler approach when interacting with students, seemed to pay off as UMass students peacefully celebrated the New England Patriots' dramatic victory over the Seattle Seahawks on Feb. 1.

Amherst Town Manager John Musante said he was encouraged by how students behaved during and after the Super Bowl.

He said it fits with a pattern he has noticed: Student-related 911 calls and noise complaints have declined over the past couple of years.

"We want to continue the positive momentum," he said.

UMass senior Zac Bears said he believes that restricting guests is unnecessary and had little effect on student behavior during the Super Bowl and will have little impact during the Blarney Blowout.

What matters more, he said, is that police not be overly aggressive toward students or wear riot gear.

"The students have a responsibility, but the university does, too, and the town and police need to show students respect," said Bears, the opinion editor at The Massachusetts Daily Collegian, who, before the Super Bowl, had criticized the university's plan to restrict dormitory guests.

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