Party's over: 9 OLs resign, SGA e-board members may face sanctions

By Stephanie Vosk and Michael Naughton

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The highest ranking student leader may be forced out of office after university officials caught wind of an alleged off campus party that was held at his apartment. At the party, allegedly nine orientation leaders, all under 21 years old, allegedly consumed alcohol, ultimately causing them to resign from their posts.

The Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution (OSCCR) is investigating an alleged party held at Student Government President (SGA) Andres Vargas' Mission Hill apartment, where the underage drinking allegedly took place.

A report of the party surfaced after an orientation supervisor, who attended the gathering, came forward admitting his presence. The supervisor submitted a list of others in attendance to the New Student Orientation Office. The report submitted was then handed over to OSCR where hearings to decide possible sanctions will take place in coming weeks.

Vice President for Student Affairs Ed Klotzbier said because he is not 100 percent certain of all the specific details he would not comment specifically on any of the individuals implicated. He did say allegations similar to those alleged would not be taken lightly.

"If some of these allegations prove to be true I would be extremely dissapointed ... it's something we are not going to tolerate," he said.

If found responsible for housing the party where alcohol was present, Vargas as well as other SGA executive board members, could be forced to resign.

"I will not ever resign my position as president," Vargas said.

A gathering of friends

After an Aug. 14 get together at Vargas' Mission Hill residence, nine Orientation Leaders were given a choice: resign or face termination. At a meeting the following Tuesday, the OLs were told a report had been filed alleging the underage bunch had consumed alcohol that Saturday night.

They were told after the meeting they had until 8 a.m. the next day to decide. By the deadline, all nine stepped down.

"I feel like if I had been given even 24 or 48 hours to think about it, I would not have resigned my position," said Joanna Simon, a sophomore undecided major and former OL. "I don't feel like I was proven guilty of anything."

But Caro Mercado, director of new student orientation and parent programs who supervises the OL program, said the students she hires as employees of the university have a contract to uphold.

"They're employees of the university and that's how we treat them," she said.

Simon said the OLs were told a report had been filed by one of their student supervisors, Marc Lo. He had also breached his contract while at the party, and as a result has stepped down, Simon said.

Lo refused comment.
While Mercado could not speak about specific cases, she said "a report that may be filed by a supervisor will be taken as legitimate and credible." She said any student or employee who acts as a supervisor is expected to be a "model supervisor."

Simon said Lo was not invited to the gathering, but came with other friends. She said his report was not credible, based on the fact that he himself was "extremely intoxicated that night."

Lo refused comment.

"I feel really betrayed. I feel that it wasn't a very respectable thing for him to do," Simon said. "I think integrity is sticking up for those who you care about, people that trusted you."

Nina Baltierra, another former OL, said Lo violated his contract as an orientation supervisor by fraternizing with one of the leaders he directly supervised. That OL also resigned.

"What he did was very personal and specific to him, so I don’t think he really needed to bring everyone else into it," Baltierra said.

Baltierra confirmed Rob Hinkel, Alex Johnson, Tom Kelly, Olivia Kim, Debbie Marsh, Samantha Sang and Nicole Uhlig also resigned, in addition to herself and Simon.

In addition to the group of OLs gathered at Vargas' apartment, three members of the SGA executive board also attended. The three e-board members, Vice President for Student Affairs Erin McFazden, Vice President for Academic Affairs Bill Durkin and Vice President for Financial Affairs Alison Barlow, all confirmed their presence at the party.

Durkin and McFazden are 20, while Barlow is 21 years old. Barlow said there was alcohol at the party, but none of the e-board members have admitted to drinking.

"I made the decision to visit the off-campus party and stayed for a short while. I was not engaged in anything but friendly conversation while I was there," Durkin said.

A former member of SGA, who wished to remain anonymous, attended the party and said he watched as Vargas played beer pong - a drinking game - in the basement. The SGA member said he drank from the beer keg that was present and also noticed a punch bowl in the house.

The former SGA member also saw Marc Lo involved with the OL.

"He was worried as soon as he did it. He was like, 'what did I just do?'" the former SGA member said.

He said Lo did not appear to be intoxicated at the party.

"For one incident that nobody really knows what happened ... I just feel that this situation is getting blown out of proportion and people are being reprimanded," said Olivia Kim, a sophomore finance and human resource management major and former OL. "We were sitting around talking and having a good time."

Police were not called to the Mission Hill address.

The repercussions

Vargas will go before a panel of his peers within the month to face the most severe sanction in the Student Code of Conduct. Vargas plans to tell the judicial board the gathering at his house the night of Aug. 14 was not a party. He said he will deny the charge that he provided alcohol to minors.
But the students on the panel may not believe him, and if found responsible, Vargas faces a minimum sanction of deferred suspension. He will be forced to relinquish his position as president, a position he has worked towards since he was first introduced to SGA at the President’s Convocation in September 2002, when then-SGA President Richard Schwabacher gave a speech.

Amidst a flood of controversy, Vargas delivered his convocation speech Tuesday, shortly over two months after taking office in his year-long position.

"I think that the reality of it is that they are going to try and make examples of us," Vargas said. "They need some kind of justification to show the world they are cracking down on alcohol and keeping students in tact and in line. I hope it’s not the case this time and I am worried about it ... I am not going to lie, I am worried."

The students that attended the gathering face the lesser charge of underage drinking, a second level offense. If a student is found responsible for drinking underage, probation, a fine and an online alcohol education course are imminent, OSCCR Director Bill Fischer said.

At their meetings with OSCCR administrators Thursday and Friday, the nine former Orientation Leaders will again make a choice: they will either admit responsibility for their actions or fight the charges against them. According to the Student Code of Conduct, "students on probation may not hold any office or position, either by election or appointment, in any recognized student organization or group."

SGA e-board members Durkin and McFazden may also face sanctions from OSCCR on alcohol-related charges. And while summer may have ended for the Orientation Leaders, the year is just beginning for the Student Government Association.

As SGA vice presidents, Durkin and McFazden receive full tuition compensation from the university. In their respective positions, they have a direct impact on what happens to the other students on campus. If they receive probation, they will no longer be able to serve in the organization.

Durkin currently holds the office of vice president for academic affairs, a position once held by Tina Penman and by Vargas. Vargas took over for Penman in December 2002 after she was caught drinking underage in a campus residence hall. Penman resigned from her position after being put on probation by the student conduct office.

Penman said she hopes her incident will serve as an example for other student leaders.

"Ever since I got the boot I’ve been drilling it in everyone’s head," Penman said. "If you’re gonna drink, do it somewhere where you’re not gonna be caught by everyone."

Two years later, Penman said she is happy she made the decison to come forward.

"I am so glad I resigned ... because now I can look back on it and it was two years ago, it was two years ago and I made a mistake and I paid the price for making a mistake," Penman said. "I am just so glad that I didn't stay in office. It was the best decision that I’ve ever made."

Where they go from here

Before Penman lost her position in 2002, she said she was bombarded with numerous scenarios, making it increasingly difficult to completely understand the ramifications of her situation.

Ultimately, Penman’s associate vice president at the time, Vargas, filled her position until a special election could be held. Vargas then won the election.
For the current SGA e-board, the switch may not be as simple. Facing the prospect of losing their president and at least two e-board members, the remaining members of the organization may have to function with a new staff and attempt to continue their plans for the year.

As fourth in a chain of command, John Guilfoil, vice president for administration and public relations, would be the interim president if Vargas, Durkin and McFazden resigned. He would hold the position until a joint senate could be called and a special election held. Guilfoil said he would consider running for president if the opportunity arose.

Other names that have entered the realm of possibility for the president’s role include former SGA President Michael Romano, former Vice President for Financial Affairs Michael Benson and failed-presidential candidate Daniel Quintal. Benson, who went on co-op after he left office in July, said he has no intention of running for president this semester, but would consider it if the position were still available in the spring.

SGA Parlimentarian Quintal said assuming the student body did not have a president who was willing or able to fill his or her role, he would do whatever he could to help out the organization.

"Running [for office] is something students have not allowed me to stop thinking about," he said.

Senator Chad Cooper said he would consider running for McFazden's position as vice president for student affairs if the position opened up. Cooper, who holds leadership positions in various organizations on campus including NU&Improv’d and NUTV, said if the allegations about McFazden and the other e-board members prove to be true, they should resign.

"SGA is the student body governing council," Cooper said, "and if the cabinet broke the Student Code of Conduct, they shouldn't be given special treatment."

Penman said she is ready to take her old job back. If Durkin is forced out, she said she would run for vice president for academic affairs.

Resident Student Association President Margaret Horton, who has worked closely with Vargas and the student government throughout the summer, said she believes Vargas will do what is best for his organization.

The OLs involved in the situation have also voiced their support for Vargas. They said he did not provide them with alcohol at the party.

Still, Horton said she knows the situation will reflect on all student leaders and, in extention, the student body.

"When people do take on student leadership roles, they have to know that they are setting an example for other students," Horton said.

John Silveria, director of the emerging leaders program at Northeastern, spends several sessions a year training students to be leaders and looks for specific qualities in the people he chooses.

"I expect somebody that’s going to run their organization effectively. Somebody that’s going to manage conflict and chaos. Somebody that’s going to be a positive role model for their organization, for the community as a whole," Silveria said. "That’s what I expect out of student leaders."

Vargas still plans to take on those responsibilities - until OSCCR tells him otherwise.