On Campus

Smoking Rules

By
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Kiran Giribaldi, a student in the School of General Studies, sat cross-legged on a stone bench in front of Butler Library. She busily texted with one hand while the other held a burning Marlboro Ultra Light. Every so often, she took a drag on the cigarette. On this chilly afternoon during the fall term, Giribaldi had nothing to worry about.

But that could change.

“I feel bad about this proposed total ban,” Giribaldi said, referring to the possibility that the University could completely forbid smoking on campus. She puffed on her Marlboro. “It becomes really stressful when you’re in class for an hour and fifteen minutes or in the library for a long stretch without smoking. I have a few smoking friends, and we all complain about the same thing: smoking has become so demonized that we feel embarrassed when we do it. It’s really hard.”

If you want to light up within the 116th Street gates, you’re free to do so — for now. But in the new calendar year, the University Senate could banish the evil weed from the quads. Such an action would, supporters say, save many smokers. Yet it would likely infuriate others. One thing is certain: the notion that Low Library is somehow responsible for keeping tobacco out of the lungs of students, faculty, and administrators has led to a defining and fractious moment in the evolving definition of in loco parentis.

For decades, a smoking culture flourished on college campuses, including Columbia’s. A hundred years ago, members of the Philolexian Society would follow their meetings by dressing in gowns, singing, and drawing on long-stemmed churchwarden pipes on the steps of Earl Hall. Students and professors alike regularly lit up in class; it was rare to see literary critic Lionel Trilling ’25CC, ’38GSAS without a cigarette, or musicologist Paul Henry Lang ’79HON without a cigar, or sociologist Robert Merton ’85HON without his pipe. Faculty “smokers” — informal discussions devoted to minor matters of shared concern held in fogs of burning Pall Malls and Lucky Strikes — were a fixture of academic lounges. As recently as the late 1990s, the Columbia University Cigar Society had 350 members.

But for some time now, as restaurants, office buildings, trains, and other common spaces became smoke-free by force of law, butts have been disappearing from campuses as well. Today, the Berkeley-based American Nonsmokers’ Rights Foundation estimates that some 530 US universities and colleges prohibit smoking in any form.

Columbia may become part of the trend. In 2008, New York State banned smoking in all public- and private-college dorms. Around that time, the New York City Health Commissioner’s office began asking about the University’s tobacco policy. So vice president for campus services Scott Wright convened a Tobacco Work Group. After two years of research and polling, the group recommended that Columbia ban smoking within fifty feet of all campus buildings. When, by a vote of 31 to 13 in

December 2010, the University Senate approved the measure, the distance was reduced to twenty feet on the grounds of feasibility.

Almost from the moment the resolution passed, other parties began arguing that the twenty-foot rule did not go far enough. Teachers College, Barnard, and the medical school have all recently banned smoking entirely. One of the leading proponents of prohibition on the Morningside campus is University senator Mark A. Cohen ’69SEAS, ’71BUS, a professor of marketing at the business school.

“Exposure to secondhand smoke is increasingly viewed as deadly,” he said. “It is more dangerous than one might think intuitively. I am not, as I have been described, a crusader. I believe in the sanctity of individual rights, but I have a problem with walking through a cloud of smoke as I traverse the campus. And I hate the sight of butts.”

Cohen’s advocacy is born of experience. “I started to smoke at Columbia,” he recalled. “I was good and addicted for twelve years, up to three packs a day. And I was here when a lot of interesting things were being smoked. But I quit over thirty years ago.”

So, prompted largely by Cohen, the senate began revisiting the issue this fall. The lines were drawn at a town-hall meeting on October 10. There was little defense of smoking per se. But many wondered whether smoking on campus was anyone’s business.

“This is a bad idea, quite simply,” said senator and current law student Ron Mazor ’09CC. “It cuts against the idea of the openness and tolerance that we ask Columbia University to truly embrace and value. We’re talking about an undue hardship on people who smoke on campus. Smoking is legal. It’s not a banned habit. It’s not a criminal habit. It’s perfectly within people’s rights.” He noted, too, that the Law School Student Senate had already passed a resolution that opposed a total smoking ban.

On the other side were health-conscious figures like Samuel C. Silverstein, the John C. Dalton Professor of Physiology and Cellular Biophysics and a member of the senate’s executive committee. “I don’t accept the libertarian view that to accept smoking on this campus is a reasonable proposal,” he said, and invoked the Hippocratic Oath.

“I would ask you to think about which values you hold most dear. Is it how much you spend for health insurance? Is it how much you value the freedom to kill yourself? I hope not. I hope what you really care about is life, extending life.”

So far, the executive committee has not endorsed the ban. A plenary session held on November 18 failed to act on the question. Instead, the University will study the implications of such a ban. For instance, contracts for unionized workers would probably have to be renegotiated to allow them extra time to leave campus if they wish to smoke during their breaks.

For the moment, the twenty-foot rule remains in effect. “It has not been an issue,” said associate vice president for public safety James McShane, “because people are either complying with it or not complaining.” But stroll through campus on any given day and you will likely see smokers here and there who are well within the twenty-foot smoke-free zone.

“I feel this total ban will never pass,” said engineering student John Soyha of Turkey as he lit up a few steps from Lerner Hall. “And if it does, people won’t obey it. I don’t think a ban would change anything. I would probably keep on smoking.”

Cohen understands the opposition’s point of view. “I relate to the behavior of smokers,” he said. “I empathize with them. But I think the default position of a university should be to do the right thing.”

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