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## Student at Rider dies after binge drinking

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Rider University students mourned the death of freshman Gary DeVercelly at a memorial service Saturday. He died of alcohol poisoning Friday.

The ceremony in Gill Chapel on Rider's Lawrenceville campus — about seven miles from Nassau Hall — was not the only remembrance that occurred that day. DeVercelly's friends and fellow students also posted heartfelt comments on his [facebook.com](http://facebook.com) profile wall and created a Facebook group in his memory.

DeVercelly, an 18-year-old business administration student from Long Beach, Calif., was found passed out on a bed at Rider's Phi Kappa Tau fraternity house at 1:52 a.m. Thursday by Lawrenceville Township police officers, 50 minutes after he had fallen unconscious. He was in a state of cardiac arrest and was revived by emergency responders and rushed to Capital Health System's Fuld Campus in Trenton, where he died about 30 hours later.

The incident, which the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office is investigating as potential hazing, has led to wider concerns about the ease of access to and the safety of alcohol on college campuses.

DeVercelly is believed to have consumed three-quarters of a bottle of vodka within 15 minutes, a Rider News article said. A second Rider freshman, William Williams, was also transported to the hospital. He was discharged Thursday afternoon.

### Students' response to tragedy

Wall posts on DeVercelly's Facebook profile soon after he was transported to the hospital captured an outpouring of encouragement and support. Friends wrote messages ranging from "keep on fighting" to "I will be waiting for you when you come back."

Sometime around 2 p.m. Friday, the wall postings abruptly changed to heartfelt eulogies as friends learned of DeVercelly's death. "Heaven gained an angel," wrote one individual.

Students also created three Facebook groups dedicated to DeVercelly, the first two expressing support after his hospitalization and the third wishing him peaceful rest and lamenting the tragedy.

The groups and wall posts are visible to any Facebook user associated with Rider University or any user who is designated as DeVercelly's friend on the site.

Despite the semipublic nature of their comments, some Rider students were upset about media coverage of DeVercelly's death. "It frustrates us that we have to mourn in a spotlight," Rider sophomore Emmie Howell said. "[The media] need to leave everybody alone. I don't understand why they're making news out of something sad that happened to a great kid."

A story in The New York Times about DeVercelly's death also focused on the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office investigation into the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity and discussed alcohol

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on Princeton drops behind Harvard in U.S. News rankings (53 total)

availability on the Rider campus.

Other students declined to comment on the record, citing instructions from Rider administrators not to talk to news outlets.

### Is Princeton prepared?

Outdoor Action director Rick Curtis '79 had heard about the incident on the local news Thursday night and mentioned it at the alcohol first aid class he taught to eating club officers Friday. The class has been offered as a joint effort between University Health Services and Outdoor Action for about four years, Curtis said, and focuses on recognizing and treating alcohol poisoning.

"It's a little unclear," Curtis said of what caused DeVercelly's heart failure. "The cardiac arrest itself is not typically caused by the alcohol consumption. [Alcohol] depresses the respiratory system so much that you may stop breathing ... so it's most likely that the heart failure was due to respiratory arrest."

Curtis explained that situations like the one that caused DeVercelly's death could happen at Princeton. "That's one of the reasons we have this workshop," he said.

In fact, he added, "there have been various situations that have happened [on campus] in the recent past where people have come very close to what happened at Rider."

While University policy seeks to encourage safe drinking, it also mandates that members of the University community come to the aid of intoxicated individuals in distress. "It is the immediate obligation of those in the presence of a severely intoxicated person to contact appropriate University or local medical or safety personnel," according to "Rights, Rules, Responsibilities."

In addition to teaching eating club officers how to identify alcohol-related problems, Curtis explained, Friday's course included lessons on evaluating a person's level of consciousness and making correct decisions about the urgency of medical care the person should receive.

"Our big message was to monitor people closely," he said. "If you can't rouse somebody ... that person is in very bad shape. [They are] no different than somebody who fell out of a building or was in a massive car crash."

"Those are cases where you've got to call 911," Curtis added. "You've got to call an ambulance and get those people into the emergency room right away."

According to the Rider News, EMTs performed CPR on DeVercelly after determining his heart was no longer beating and succeeded in resuscitating him. Eating club officers are not required to receive CPR certification, but over 30 officers signed up for CPR courses taught through Outdoor Action over the weekend.

At Princeton, one student said he thinks the Rider incident could serve as a wakeup call to college students across the country. "I think this could of course happen at Princeton," Jeff Fardink '09 said. "I read a story once before about someone who had drunk a bottle of vodka and died from it, but when you're in the moment, that doesn't seem like quite as much as it really is."

— Princetonian senior writer Michael Juel-Larsen contributed reporting to this article.

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