



Facts and Myths about College Drinking: A Serious Problem with Serious Solutions

Each year—especially at the beginning of each school year—news stories about alcohol-related mayhem and tragedies on American college campuses appear. Alcohol poisonings, alcohol related accidents, and alcohol-fueled assaults and riots are all too common. And for every tragedy or event that makes the news, there are hundreds of thousands of other alcohol-related problems on campuses that nobody hears about, from property damage in dorms to assaults by inebriated students.

Often, there is a sense of resignation that accompanies these events. One Associated Press Article quotes the president of Washington and Lee University as saying, "No college president I know of says what he or she is doing is solving the problem." The article goes on to say, "Dangerous drinking has been a feature of campus life since medieval Europe. Experts say it's simply inevitable that alcohol will be one way college students choose to push the boundaries of their newfound independence."¹

Such a pessimistic—and passive—view of college drinking does not take into account the many effective strategies that are available to combat drinking and alcohol-related problems among college students. This paper provides more accurate information about the nature of the college drinking problem and some of the strategies that have been shown to work.

Why should we care about college students drinking?

Before students enter college, they drink less and binge drink less than young people the same age who do not enter college. But once

in school, their rate of drinking increases dramatically—while their non-college peers actually start drinking less as they grow older.

In 1998, it was estimated that more than 1,400 college students died in alcohol-related accidents (both traffic crashes and other types of accidents).² Each year, half a million students suffer injuries under the influence of alcohol.³ At least 600,000 alcohol involved assaults and 70,000 sexual assaults or date rapes occur.

Drinking interferes with academic performance too. About 25 percent of college students report academic consequences from their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.⁴⁻⁷

Alcohol consumption poses problems not only for the drinking students themselves but also for their friends and fellow students and for a campus in general. At schools with high levels of drinking, students report higher levels of secondary effects of others' drinking, including being insulted or humiliated; being pushed, hit or assaulted; having sleep or studies interrupted; and experiencing unwanted sexual advances.⁸ Drinking levels and problems among college students have not changed significantly over the years, indicating that better approaches are needed to deal with college drinking.

Isn't college drinking just a normal part of college life?

Many aspects of popular culture—including movies, alcohol advertising, and popular music—convey the impression that drinking (and often heavy drinking) is a normal part of

life, especially for young people in college. In fact, a large majority of Americans either do not drink or drink infrequently. According to the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, about 51 percent of adults report that they did not consume any alcohol in the past month and an additional 25⁹ percent report drinking once a week or less.

Most college drinkers report having only one or two drinks whenever they use alcohol; they report drinking about six to eight times a month. College drinkers also report binge drinking (five or more drinks) about 30-40 percent of the times that they use alcohol. However, sometimes binge drinking can be even more extreme.

- 10 percent of all college drinkers may have 12 or more drinks at least one time in a month (20 percent of males).
- 1 percent of all college drinkers may have 24 or more drinks at least one time in a month (5 percent of males).

These extremely heavy drinking events may seem rare, but on a campus with 10,000 male college drinkers, there will be 500 or more occasions on which more than 24 drinks may be consumed. These are levels of drinking at which most people will have passed out or become comatose. With these very heavy drinking incidents, it is not surprising that alcohol poisonings occur or that students are injured or killed in accidents as simple as falling out of a dormitory window.¹⁰

Why should we be concerned about "normal" drinking?

Even drinking typical amounts of alcohol—far less than the heavy drinking described above—can increase the chance of serious problems. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to all college drinking. And, of course, it is important to remember that most students are under 21 and therefore any alcohol consumption is illegal.

As discussed above, in a small proportion of cases, college students drink such large amounts of alcohol that the students are at great risk of immediate and severe consequences. These tend to be the cases that make the headlines when one of these students dies. The majority of students drink much smaller amounts—but even these smaller amounts result in many problems. In fact, the great majority of alcohol related problems occur as a result of drinking smaller amounts—simply because so many more students put themselves at risk in this way.

One student survey asked about instances of alcohol related negative events such as unprotected or unplanned sex and sexual assaults, physical fights, driving under the influence, and missing class or falling behind in school work. Many more of these events occurred among students who were not binge drinkers than among students who were. The reason is simply that so many more students drink at lower levels that even when an event is rare for a particular student, it is all too common when considered campus-wide.¹¹

In what settings does drinking occur?

The patterns of drinking vary from campus to campus, but common drinking settings include:

- Fraternity parties
- Drinking in conjunction with athletic events
- Drinking in residence halls
- Drinking in off-campus housing areas with a high proportion of students
- Drinking in bars adjacent to campus

The kinds of problems associated with different drinking settings vary. For example, drinking in bars off campus might be associated with more impaired driving as students leave to go home. Drinking in residence halls might lead to disruption of other students' study or sleep.

What strategies can be used to reduce drinking among college students?

Many promising strategies for reducing drinking among college students are designed to change the environments on and around college campuses with regard to the availability of alcohol. It's easy to see how more drinking and more alcohol-related problems would occur at campuses that are surrounded by rowdy bars, that allow keg parties in dorms, where alcohol flows freely at fraternity parties and where football games and other events are traditionally celebrated by drinking. Each of these campus characteristics provides opportunities for drinking and each conveys a norm in which drinking is an accepted and expected part of college life.

Research indicates that the overall drinking environment of a community affects the nature of alcohol-related problems in that community—whether it's a neighborhood, college campus or a larger area. Aspects of the drinking environment that are important include how easy and cheap alcohol is to obtain, how much it is advertised and promoted, and how strictly laws and policies controlling alcohol are enforced. Clearly, changing the drinking environment can affect how students drink and how many problems occur when they drink.

Some of the environmental strategies with research support are listed below:

Outlet Density

Considerable research has shown that having many bars, restaurants and stores that sell alcohol in a small area increases alcohol related problems. Recent research has shown that when a large number of drinking establishments are located near college campuses, more drinking, underage drinking, heavy drinking and drinking-related problems occurred.¹² Outlet density near college campuses can be controlled through the use of zoning and licensing regulations.

Alcohol Price

Raising the price of alcohol has been consistently shown to reduce drinking and

alcohol-related problems in the general population. A recent study also indicates that price increases could be an effective strategy for college students. One key finding is that students faced with a \$1 increase above the \$2.17 average price for a drink will be 33 percent less likely to make the transition from being an abstainer to a moderate drinker, or from being a moderate drinker to a heavy drinker.¹³ An increase in the price of alcohol could be achieved by eliminating price specials and promotions offered by bars and other alcohol-serving establishments near schools, raising excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, and eliminating the feature of some parties where students pay a fixed fee to enter and then can drink as much as they like.

Alcohol specials, promotions and advertisements were found in another study to be prevalent in the alcohol outlets around college campuses.¹⁴ Almost three quarters of bars offered specials on weekends, and more than 60 percent of liquor stores provided at least one type of beer promotion. The availability of large volumes of alcohol (24- and 30-can cases of beer, kegs, party balls), low sale prices, and frequent promotions were associated with higher binge-drinking rates on the college campuses. The conclusion of the study is that regulation of marketing practices such as sale prices, promotions, and advertisements may be important strategies to reduce binge drinking and its accompanying problems.

Enforcement of Alcohol Policies

Colleges and universities have a variety of policies regarding alcohol use by students. One study found that in one state system, stricter enforcement by campus security officers of policies that limit underage drinking was associated with lower rates of heavy drinking by students.¹⁵

In a similar study, students who attend colleges in states that have more restrictions on underage drinking and sales of alcoholic beverages, and devote more resources to enforcing drunk driving laws, report less drinking and driving.¹⁶

How can strategies be tailored to different college drinking patterns?

Changing the campus environment can change both norms and behaviors. Each type of drinking environment presents different

possibilities for reducing underage and heavy drinking. The following table provides some examples of the strategies that can be effective. Some of these strategies have research support; others are based on logical extensions of promising theories and strategies.

Prevention Strategies for College Drinking

Heavy Drinking Situation	Possible Strategies
Fraternity parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Train fraternity leadership in responsible hosting techniques - Enforce maximum occupancy rules at parties - Require ID checking; enforce underage drinking laws
Athletic events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish and enforce rules about tailgate parties - Establish and enforce rules about alcohol served at or brought into games - Increase impaired driving enforcement around games
Residence Halls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish and enforce rules about alcohol in dorms - Control delivery of beer kegs to campus addresses - Train resident advisors in identifying and dealing with drinking in halls - Establish alcohol-free residence halls
Off-campus housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work with landlords of student housing complexes and community law enforcement agencies
Bars near campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Control the number and location of bars and other sales outlets - Encourage or require responsible beverage service training and policies - Work with law enforcement agencies to increase enforcement of laws against sales to minors - Develop safe alternative transportation programs to reduce impaired driving

Some of these strategies are challenging to implement and require coordination of different agencies and organizations both on and off campus. Research and experience in a variety of campus and community settings indicate, however, that they can be effective in reducing drinking, reducing alcohol-related problems and preventing tragedies.

How can social norms campaigns be used to support environmental strategies?

Social norms campaigns have recently become well known and more widely used. These campaigns use marketing techniques like posters and bumper stickers to provide more accurate information about how much

or how little students drink—emphasizing that heavy drinking is *not* the norm for students on the particular campus. Research on social norms campaigns is decidedly mixed. Some success has been claimed, but a recent evaluation of social norms campaigns on 37 campuses found no effects on heavy drinking or alcohol-related problems.¹⁷ Social norms campaigns may be best suited for generating public for changing the overall drinking environment around campuses. Students, college administrators and business owners may resist policy changes that reduce availability of alcohol. However, broader recognition that most students don't drink or only drink moderately, and that heavy drinking is causing serious campus problems, can help bring about support for needed policy changes.

What about programs that educate students and raise their awareness of alcohol problems?

One of the most common strategies used to combat high-risk college drinking are education and awareness programs for students.¹⁸ These strategies assume that students aren't aware of the health risks of alcohol abuse, and that when they learn more, they will use less. However, several evaluations of such programs found no effect on either alcohol use or alcohol-related problems. A recent analysis of years of studies concluded that typical education- and awareness-based programs produce little effect on behavior.¹⁹ These findings strongly suggest that using education and awareness programs as the primary effort to combat college drinking is ineffective and a poor use of campus resources.

What about strategies that help individual students with drinking problems?

Most of the strategies described above emphasize changing campus and community environments rather than intervening in the problem behaviors of individual students. It might be useful to think about environmental changes to prevent problem drinking as analogous to strategies prevent fires. To prevent fires, we would emphasize creating an environment in which fires are less likely to occur or, if they do occur, less likely to cause serious damage. This approach does not emphasize identifying individuals who are most likely to cause fires or counseling them to reduce their propensity to start fires.

Using this kind of environmental approach is not meant to diminish the importance of other strategies that might be used to address the problem of student drinking. Many campuses have programs designed to intervene (through counseling, etc.) with individual students who have shown signs of having drinking problems. Such programs can be useful and an important complement to broader prevention strategies.

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