

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

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Concern about alcohol-related problems on American college campuses has persisted. Alcohol poisonings, alcohol related accidents, and alcohol-fueled assaults and riots appear in the news. There are many more incidents that are less publicized, including property damage in dorms, and poor school performance due to drinking or to drinking by roommates and dorm-mates.

Fortunately, research shows colleges, college communities, parents and students how to prevent problems related to drinking by college students. This paper summarizes the state of knowledge about the nature of the college drinking and some of the strategies that have been shown to work.

## ***Why should we care about college students drinking?***

Each year an estimated 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicle crashes (Hingson et al., 2009).

In addition, each year an estimated 599,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol while an estimated 696,000 students in that age group are assaulted by another student who has been drinking (Hingson et al., 2009).

Sexual behavior and sexual violence are also serious problems. Each year an estimated 97,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape (Hingson et al., 2002). An estimated 400,000 students in that age group have unprotected sex, and more than 100,000 students report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to having sex (Hingson et al., 2002)

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 (Wechsler et al., 2002a).

The effects of college drinking aren't limited to students. In one study, neighbors living near college campuses were more likely to report a lowered quality of neighborhood life through such secondhand effects of heavy alcohol use as noise and disturbances, vandalism, drunkenness, vomiting and urination (Wechsler et al., 2002b).

Fortunately, the rate of binge drinking has declined somewhat in the last decade among all young adults. College students still report more binge drinking than their peers who do not attend college. In 2002, the binge drinking rate among 18-24 year olds was 41.0 percent compared with 36.9 percent in 2011. Among full-time college students, the rate decreased from 44.4 to

39.1 percent. Among part-time college students and others not in college, the rate decreased from 38.9 to 35.4 percent during the same time period (SAMHSA, 2012).

### ***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 48 percent of adults report that they did not consume any alcohol in the past month (SAMHSA, 2012).

Binge drinking is always risky and is more common among college students than among others in the same age group. It is usually defined as five or more drinks at one time for males and four or more for females, but 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 (Gruenewald, et al., 2003a).

### ***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 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 (Gruenewald et al., 2003b).

### ***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

#### **Safer University Program Reduces Alcohol Problems**

The Safer California Universities study was designed to identify those areas of the campus environment in which heavy and dangerous drinking occurred and to implement strategies to change that environment in positive ways. The study involved 14 large public universities in the state, half of which were assigned randomly to the Safer intervention condition.

Interventions included 1) nuisance party enforcement operations that stepped up police response to disruptive parties, 2) minor decoy operations to prevent sales of alcohol to minors, 3) driving-under-the-influence checkpoints, and 4) social host ordinances that held party hosts or organizers responsible for nuisance parties. Campus and local media were used to maximize the visibility of environmental strategies.

The results showed that students were significantly less likely to become intoxicated at off-campus parties and bars/restaurants at the Safer intervention universities compared to the control campuses. Significantly fewer students at the Safer intervention schools also reported that they became intoxicated the last time they drank at an off-campus party; a bar or restaurant; or across all settings.

**There was *no increase* in intoxication in other settings.**

(Saltz et al., 2010)

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 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 (Weitzman et al., 2003).

Outlet density can have a negative effect on the whole community. Neighbors living near college campuses were more likely to report a lowered quality of neighborhood life, but neighborhood disruptions around colleges due to heavy alcohol use may be reduced by limiting the presence of alcohol outlets in those areas. Outlet density near college campuses can be controlled through the use of zoning and licensing regulations (Weitzman et al., 2003).

### **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 (Williams et al., 2002). 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 (Kuo et al., 2003). 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 (Knight et al., 2003).

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 (Wechsler et al., 2003a).

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

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 an evaluation of social norms campaigns on 37 campuses found no effects on heavy drinking or alcohol-related problems (Wechsler et al., 2003b). 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. 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. Basic awareness and education programs, although a major part of prevention work on most college campuses, have been found to be ineffective when implemented on their own. Typical among these efforts are orientation sessions for new students; alcohol awareness weeks and other special events; and curriculum infusion, wherein instructors introduce alcohol-related facts and issues into their regular academic courses. Whether they might make an important contribution as part of a more comprehensive prevention program had not yet been demonstrated (DeJong et al., 2009).

### ***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. These environmental strategies can have an effect on many students, the campus culture, and the entire community. Other strategies can be useful for individual students who have or may be developing alcohol problems. A study of brief interventions at student health centers to high-risk-drinking students found that the program resulted in significantly decreased alcohol consumption, high-risk drinking, and alcohol-related harms (Schaus et al., 2009). Such programs can be useful and an important complement to broader prevention strategies.

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