

The Student Perspective On College Drinking

PEGGY EASTMAN

April 2002

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Where There's A Party, There's Alcohol	3
Bars, Bars, Everywhere A Bar	5
Price Makes A Difference	5
Everybody Doesn't Get Drunk	6
The Perception Of Alcohol As A Problem	8
When Is Intervention Needed?.....	10
Alcohol, Judgment, And Responsibility.....	12
Solutions And Recommendations.....	13
Resources	15

“What we need to focus on is decision-making skills and maturity and responsibility in behavior when dealing with alcohol.”

College student in NIAAA discussion group

Introduction

On February 8, 2000, Panel 1 of the Task Force on College Drinking convened a discussion group of 11 students, three from high schools and the rest from colleges and universities. The students represent both genders and a wide diversity of institutions in terms of type and size. The purpose of the discussion group was to learn more about alcohol use and abuse from the student perspective, and to hear how students themselves would propose to solve some of the alcohol-related problems that plague many college campuses. The group was in no way meant to represent a scientific sample.

As a condition of participation in the discussion group, the students were granted anonymity. Accordingly, they are identified here by number only; students 2, 3 and 8 are high school students; the rest are college students. To further protect the students’ privacy, their institutions have not been mentioned by name. This report is based on the student discussion; appropriate resources related to the students’ points have been cited at the end of the report for those who want to learn more.

Where There’s A Party, There’s Alcohol

All of the students noted the strong connection between parties and alcohol. The college students at institutions with fraternities and sororities and at which athletics are a major part of campus life were especially vocal on the link between having fun and alcohol. “At my campus, it’s very Greek and athlete oriented,” said student 11. “Those are the two big groups on campus, so you have athletics and you have Greek functions that are big things to do on weekends, and a lot of that comes with parties. That’s very big on my campus.” Student 5 added, “Along with [sporting events] is the tailgating that goes on with it, which is also drinking, mostly. So there’s a lot of that.”

“At [my college] they’re either studying or drinking,” added student 9. “It’s a very academic environment where it’s very competitive, very cut-throat competition, but students will study like four to six nights a week and then go out that one night, but they’ll make that one night count,” said student 9. “So that’s why I said they’re either studying or drinking. They’re either studying a lot or drinking a lot.”

“Drinking is really pretty controlled in our residence halls, so there’s not a huge problem with that, but fraternities are a big thing on our campus,” said student 7. “Fraternities or athletic parties, house parties all over the place,” agreed student 11. “That’s big on my campus, and there isn’t any carding [checking identification] going on at ‘keggers’ [parties where liquor is consumed out of kegs],” continued student 11.

The students described a Greek system which tends to perpetuate the cycle of drinking and partying. “The Greek system at my school tends to cater to the incoming class, at least for non-members,” said student 4. “Upperclassmen who aren’t members of the Greek system don’t generally participate in that kind of thing [party drinking] unless they’re Greek members themselves. So it’s like [members] kind of bring in the first-years to the Greek system, you know, and introduce them to the rigors of college life, and later on either you join one of the Greek organizations or tend to move in other directions.” Student 4 added, “Now to get into a fraternity, you have to have a guest pass, and to get a

pass, you just have to know somebody who's either in it or who knows someone else who's in it. I mean it's not hard for first-year girls especially to get into fraternities, even if they don't have a pass. Basically, it's free alcohol once you get in. There's no charge to get in."

The partying and alcohol link is also strong for some high school students. "At my high school, it's somewhat similar," said student 3. "I mean, it's sort of trying to find a party to go to, and there's alcohol a lot of times. That's sort of to be expected, I guess." Student 2 agreed, adding, "Usually for us, if there's a party going on somewhere, that's where everybody goes, and usually, if the people aren't drinking, people are like...It's not fun."

Starting the partying/drinking weekend on Thursday nights was a common occurrence. Student 4 noted, "It depends on how cool you are, I suspect. The people who think they're really cool, they tend to start [drinking] on Thursday nights...They start on Thursday night, and then they end early on Sunday morning, and then they study Sunday, cramming it all in for the beginning of the next week...I know there's a big move to try to get classes on Fridays, more classes on Fridays, because of that, by the administration, but I don't know."

Student 9 added, "Thursday nights are big. See, we have a move to have no classes on Fridays. It's really weird. But like with some campuses going to no classes on Fridays, that way students aren't missing them. So it's like moving into their drinking [early]. Thursday night is a big college night everywhere, it seems for some reason. It's the start of the weekend. There are not that many classes on Friday at most universities, just from what I've seen, or if there are Friday classes, they don't seem to matter." Student 4 commented, "Your administrative policy is going to have students drinking."

In addition to Thursday nights, Tuesday nights are also major drinking nights for some college students. "On our campus, Tuesday became a big night," said student 9. Some students also described the practice of "pre-partying" or "pre-gaming"—drinking before going out. "A kind of buzzword is 'pre-partying,'" said student 4. "Pre-partying is where you drink before you go out, so that I guess you're all ready to go." Student 2 added, "Yes, pre-gaming...I see the boys doing it a lot." Pre-gaming takes place in private homes—especially among high school students when their parents aren't there. "With parties on weekends and stuff, it's because the parents aren't there," said student 2. "[But] sometimes the parents are there and they just don't really care about it." Student 8 said, "The big house parties, lots of people from different schools, most of them don't know each other, and you're there for alcohol. It often happens with freshmen and sophomores, at least at my school, which is scary. Their parents will go out of town and think, 'Oh, he'll be okay.' Not at all. Not true."

At high school parties where alcohol is available, the issue of drinking and driving is a grave concern, students said. "Most of the parties happen to be in the suburbs—I mean people drive everywhere," said student 8. "And when I go to these parties, I see way too many cars for anyone's good, and it really is frightening." Student 2 agreed. "Yes, I think when people are driving it makes a big difference about where you can go and what you can do," said student 2. "It's scary that they're drinking because they can drive," said student 7. "So what are they doing? Driving after they drink?" Student 3 said, "I always try and make sure if I'm going to a party that no one I see who is drinking is going to be driving, but my guess is that" Student 2 finished the sentence, "There's always those few who slip through the cracks." Student 2 added, "Guys kind of take pride in being able to get home because they're driving home drunk. A couple of my friends were like, 'I made it home and I was so trashed,' and I'm [saying], 'Yes, it's not good.'"

Students also described the “progressive” social drinking function, which is held in private residences or in bars. “That’s where you have the whole apartment complex, they get together and they open all their doors and they have different themes in each apartment,” said student 4. “‘Around the World,’ something like that,” said student 1. “It’s very in vogue,” added student 4. “You know, you say ‘I’m going to a progressive,’ and that’s cool or something.”

Bars, Bars, Everywhere A Bar

The proximity and number of bars influence college drinking patterns, the students said. “On our campus Tuesday became a big night [for drinking] because we have three bars within walking distance of campus,” said student 9. “So our social aspect, without endangering anyone by drinking and driving, is within those three blocks, those three bars. And so one of them started a ‘Two for Tuesday,’ where everything you buy, you get the second one free. So now everyone goes out on Tuesday nights because it’s fun and it’s cheaper...so our service sometimes gets limited to either Greek fraternity houses or those three bars that are in walking distance.”

Student 9 agreed, saying “We have three within walking distance.” Student 7 also agreed, but noted that the density of establishments that sell liquor near student 7’s institution is much greater. “That kind of struck something with me,” said student 7. “We have 114 alcohol licenses within a mile of our campus. We have what’s called O Street, which is just lined with bars up and down, and so different bars of course evolved, and got different specials. Different nights of different things are featured. That’s pretty popular.”

The students said bar owners differ on their willingness to sell alcohol to students under the legal drinking age of 21. “The good thing about the O Street bars is that they’re very strict about the 21 rule,” said student 7. “Some of our biggest binge drinkers are over 21.” Student 7 described the practice of one bar that would sell to anyone to make money, but had its own way of controlling underage drinking. “At one of the bars they would sell to anyone,” said student 7. “They weren’t carding in the bar, but then they had the ‘beer Nazi’ going around. He would shine the light on people’s I.D., take their beer, pour it into a pitcher and give them a peppermint. So basically, what was happening is they were making their money, they were selling the beer, students would buy it, have half a beer before it would get taken away, and then they’d go back and buy another one. So the place was making a ton of money that night, students were still drinking, but they were still enforcing the policy.”

Price Makes A Difference

In many college environments, drinking is cheaper than any other form of entertainment, which enhances its appeal as a social custom, students said. “I’ve noticed, especially in college, that it’s cheaper to drink than to go to a movie, especially if you buy cheap beer or you go to a party or a fraternity party or a bar with all the specials,” said student 9. “So that’s why so many people turn to that atmosphere to go out, because if you go to a fraternity party it’s free...because you’re not paying out of your own pocket. If it’s dollar night at the local bar, you can get five beers for \$5 and that can probably do you well for the night.”

Student 9 added, “It’s cheaper to drink than to do anything else, so if you go and you drink cheap beer or get a bottle of liquor and all share it, and you drink a lot before you go out, then you don’t have to buy anything at the bar. You don’t have to buy anything there, and you’ve got the perfect little ‘you’re-

the-life-of-the-party' social skills that you've kind of developed through alcohol." Student 10 said, "In many places it's cheaper to buy a beer than it is to buy a soda, even when there isn't a drink special going on—but we have drink specials going on every night of the week, except Sunday."

Students said now that kegs have been outlawed at many fraternity parties, party goers are drinking cheap six-packs of beer and malt liquor, even though few like the taste of malt liquor. "You can buy two or three of those and it'll cost you about eight bucks, and you're done," said student 11, adding, "The thing about malt 40s is you have to drink them fast or they're going to get warm." Student 1 agreed, saying, "Yes, they get warm. It's one of those things that you drink fast simply because then you get drunk and you don't taste it." Student 5 said, "It's like 'hold your medicine.'" Student 11 summed up, "People who drink it, it's not for their enjoyment. It's just to get to where you want to be fast."

Daiquiris are also cheap and taste much better than malt liquor, said student 5, who described establishments that sell "drive-through daiquiris." Student 5 said, "You can have one 21-year-old buy 10 daiquiris and distribute them to those in the parking lot. They're in huge, big cups. So at the beginning of the night, you can send one or two people to buy everybody a drink, and that's one thing that a lot of younger students will drink because it doesn't taste like alcohol. You know, students who don't drink a lot are just starting to drink and they'll drink that, and you can get like an enormous cup for \$5 and you're set for the night. So a lot of people drink daiquiris."

Student 9 noted that unlike the price of cigarettes, which has continued to escalate—thus discouraging smokers—the price of alcohol appears to have continued to drop. "They seem to lower the prices of alcohol to make it competitive," said Student 9. "And I think if the prices were raised in some ways you'd see less drinking because people couldn't afford it anymore. I've had friends who quit smoking because they couldn't afford to throw down the three bucks every time they wanted a pack, and if you started doing that with alcohol, I think you'd see a substantial decrease in the amount students were drinking because they couldn't afford it anymore. It would be cheaper to go to a movie than to have a six-pack of beer."

Cheap drink specials definitely influence consumption, students said. "They have like quarter shot nights and stuff, you know, and it's ridiculous," said student 5. Student 4 added, "At events like sporting events, the local establishments will always have like keg sales and special deals for whatever. Usually, it's football...It facilitates lots of drinking if you have a keg."

Everybody Doesn't Get Drunk

Although a great deal of media attention has been focused on the problem of alcohol abuse in college, students pointed out that it would be erroneous to suggest that all college students drink or that all drink to get drunk. "I think one important thing to distinguish, is that even at the big parties, just because you're there doesn't necessarily mean you're drinking," said student 1. "A lot of times I go to our fraternity parties and don't drink at all; I just go to hang out and I go to meet new people. You go to be social sometimes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to drink."

"It depends on the person," said student 9. "Some people feel that they have to have a beer in their hand and walk around. Some people go and never have anything in their hands and feel fine, because they [the party hosts] always provide bands, there's always some form of entertainment. There's more than just the keg in the corner or the bartender. So it can be really fun without it, too." Student 1 agreed, saying, "There's a lot of guys in our house who don't drink and have never touched alcohol, so it's not something that's really taboo or anything like that."

Student 6 said, "I saw the effect it had on my family. By the end of high school I was like 'I'm not going to do it,' and my two best friends don't drink either. We were involved in a program that was on substance abuse prevention. When I went to college, it was the easiest decision I've ever made in my whole life. It's not even an issue for me anymore. It's a way of life for me, and everybody knows that. If I ever took a drink of alcohol, people would have heart attacks. It's just a whole thing of being a role model to my brother because I don't want him to get involved in that, and he sees that I have fun, I go out all the time."

Schools differ on whether they have policies related to providing non-alcoholic beverages at parties, according to the students. "There's no requirement that I know of at my school that you have to provide alternative drinks for students who attend your parties," said student 4. "There is at our school," said student 1.

What about peer pressure to drink? Are students considered "square" if they don't? "If you hang out with the same group of people, usually at parties, they'll know your drinking habits, and after two or three parties, people know that when you say no, you mean no," said student 11. "My friends know that when I don't want to drink, I'm not drinking. I don't care what they say, so they just get off my back if I say no, but it might take two or three times after that before people understand that about you."

But student 7 said, "To be completely honest, I feel more pressure to at least have one or two drinks now that I'm so involved with our alcohol awareness [program], because I want students to look at me and realize that I'm not a prohibitionist. I feel like if I have one or two drinks and people see me with something in my hand, that they're more likely to listen to me whenever I tell them to be responsible, because they know that I'm not up on a pedestal saying, 'You do this, this, and this.'"

In reality, "A small number are not drinking, a small number are drinking a lot, and there's the in-between amount, which is the mass, I'd say," said student 11. But it is the drunk students who get the most attention and may make it appear that more students are getting drunk than actually are. "The drunk people are the ones who draw attention to themselves," confirmed student 1. Student 5 described going to a party with good friends at the apartment of a friend, and then others they did not know well came. "Those were the people who were drinking more," said Student 5. "Like I remember there was only one person that I saw, and he was sitting on the steps with his head between his hands—you know, just not moving—and he was feeling pretty sick, and that was the only person I saw all night who had had visibly too much to drink. Everybody else was probably drinking, but they weren't overdoing it."

Today there is a trend for fraternities and sororities to "go dry," said students. "Our fraternity was worried about incoming freshmen, the perception that we wouldn't get any new recruits because we're dry and [the one next door] is wet," said student 11. "We're right next door to each other, separated by about three feet. Interestingly enough, we actually had a really good class this year, so that is encouraging, but I know that the other one is the fraternity to go to now because they are the guys who can throw the parties, so they are the coolest fraternity on campus now." "All of our fraternities are going dry by 2000," said student 10. "And probably half of the 17 or 18 that we have are already dry, and the ones that have already gone dry have [taken in] some of the best recruiting classes of their whole entire years there...They were afraid they were going to get these kind of little crybaby people, mama's boys... [But] It turned out to be one of the best things they ever did, and all of our dry fraternities sit right at the top of the GPAs [grade point averages] for the Greek houses."

Student 9 said, “The National Panhellenic Conference, which oversees all the 26 national sororities, passed a resolution to endorse all the fraternities which are going substance-free, because they realized that without the support of the women it wouldn’t work, because other fraternities would be throwing parties and two fraternities on each campus would be dry. So by fall 2000 all sororities will no longer sponsor parties at a fraternity house unless the fraternity house is dry and it’s a substance-free event. It’s going to take awhile to have an effect, but they’re hoping to encourage more fraternities to go substance-free. And right now the sororities can’t have any alcohol in their houses.”

Being dry doesn’t mean a fraternity or sorority never has a party with alcohol, noted the students. “If you’re a dry fraternity, that means you can still throw parties, just not in your chapter house,” said student 9. “The chapter house is a place to live, to work, to study, to eat, and it’ll stay clean this way, but you just have to go to a third-party vendor, rent out a hall or a restaurant, and have it there. So they can still party [with alcohol], just not in their rooms and in their house.”

“Our Greek system isn’t considered to be on campus,” said student 10. “It’s considered a city thing, although it’s considered to be an area recognized by the campus and it’s university-recognized housing. Pretty much the mandate was you can choose to go dry or not, but your freshmen can’t live in-house if you don’t go dry, which is like an economic nightmare if your freshmen don’t live in-house.”

The Perception Of Alcohol As A Problem

The students in the discussion group said alcohol has the potential to become a problem, depending on whether it is consumed responsibly or irresponsibly. Student 2 described how her brother started drinking in high school and became an alcoholic. “I think it all started in high school because he was one of the big jocks, and he’d go out every weekend and see how drunk he could get,” said student 2. “It just continued into college, and he failed out of his freshman year in college. Then he came home and took a year off and went through AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], and now he’s [in another college], and he goes to parties and he drinks Cokes. I think the drinking has a big potential to lead to some big problems. I mean, I see my brother in the boys that I hang out with, in the people that I hang out with, and it scares me because no matter how much I say to them, nothing’s going to stop them from doing what they want.”

Student 6 said that alcohol can be a problem if it is abused, whether it leads to alcoholism or not. “To me it’s a problem, because if it’s changing your life—even like just a hangover the next morning—if you weren’t drinking, you wouldn’t have the hangover. Missing a class, failing an exam, stuff like that.” Student 6 added, “In my job right now, something I’m doing is data entry from students who get a first violation of alcohol, like their first offense in the dorms. They have to fill out this anonymous survey, and it’s really, really comprehensive. There’s like 200 questions on it. It goes through and it asks, in a typical week how many days you drink, what is the typical number [of drinks,] etc. Then it goes through and it says, ‘As a result of my drinking, I have:’ and it says, ‘participated in unintended sexual relations, driven under the influence,’ and there is a list of 20 things. A lot of students wouldn’t consider themselves to have a problem, and I don’t think they have a drinking problem, but I haven’t seen one survey out of 263 that had never listed a problem. They have at least two or three problems.”

“I was an extreme guy, I think, like at a lot of parties, and I have a 3.84 [grade point average] right now,” said student 11. “I started four years on the football team. I didn’t think alcohol was a problem until something happened and it changed the way I viewed things.” Student 11 added, “If I were drinking as much four years from now as I was in college, yes, I’d think there’s a problem. I’d think I

was an alcoholic, probably, but because I was in college and it was what everybody else was doing, it was like the social norm and I didn't view it as a problem. It totally relates to just your norm, your perception of what your age group is doing, and what the culture on campus is doing. If I were 25 and in the middle of my job drinking four nights a week, getting hammered two times a week or whatever, I'd think it was a definite problem. I think a lot of students' views are, 'It's not happening to me, I'm invincible, I'm young.' You know, 'I'll never get hurt.'"

Student 4 agreed that the perception of whether alcohol is a problem depends on the culture at a particular institution. "At [name of college] alcohol is just very cool in general. The coolest thing you can really be involved in to show that you're a part of [campus life] is in a lot of ways the alcohol culture. You know, 'I went out last night. I did this,' or 'Are you going to go to this party?' or 'Did you see what so and so did?' So much of the conversation revolves around activities while you're drinking that, though I do believe that there are fewer people drinking than they really think there are, they still propagate this kind of mythology that everybody does it, and it just creates problems because people won't be held accountable for their actions ultimately. I hear people say all the time, 'I was in a blackout,' but do they really know what a blackout is? I don't think they do."

Student 4 continued, "They're bragging, like that's kind of cool, or to be able to drink as much as someone two times your size is cool. Things like that, things that would kind of raise the eyebrows of a counselor or a medical practitioner if you're saying these things a lot. You know, like 'I can drink more than most of the football team, and I'm female and I'm half their weight,' or 'I can hold my liquor and I don't barf,' that's very cool. Those are all kind of alcoholic behaviors in my mind, but they're not alcoholics."

Student 9 said alcohol can become a problem when students come to college unprepared to deal with the culture of alcohol on campus. "Most of them haven't had that much experience with it, and they're handed a beer at college—I mean, colleges have cracked down, but it's still accessible, they can still easily get it. It's almost like being given a car without a driver's license. They're handed a beer and told to 'Drink this,' but they're never taught how to drink it. They don't know what they're putting in their system...people don't know what they're doing, and it becomes really cool to sit around the next day and talk about how you had a hangover or a blackout. It's a sign of status. It's really sad."

Drinking in high school can lay the foundation for problem drinking in college, agreed the students. Student 10 said, "When that big middle group was in high school and they laid the foundation and drank in high school, and then they get to college and the parents aren't there, that large middle group becomes the larger, loud extreme group." Student 2 said, "I definitely see what you're saying, that if you don't start drinking in high school, you're likely not to continue." Student 8 said, "It's really hitting the level of [high school] juniors and seniors now, which is scary. The first party I went to at the beginning of senior year, I got inside this house and there were about 15 freshmen, and this was really weird. I'm the leader of the Peer Leader program, and I'm supposed to be teaching these kids social mores, and they were saying 'Give me a beer.' I sat with them for awhile. But I didn't pick up a beer in front of them." Student 3 added, "I'm very surprised at all the [high school] freshmen and sophomores who are pretty heavily into it." Student 2 said, "I think that it's definitely a social group thing, like the popular group or the jock group is seen drinking a lot. I think it's more of a trend with the popular kids."

But student 2 noted that a bad personal experience with alcohol can radically alter a student's perception of drinking as "cool." Student 2 said, "I saw what it did to my brother and how it affected

the rest of my family, and I'm scared of what it will do to me. You know, I've seen the effects of it firsthand. I mean, it runs in my family, so I know that I'm prone to it, so I'm scared of what could happen." Student 1 agreed that bad personal experiences with alcohol can cause a change in behavior. "The outgoing president of our fraternity was one of those guys who partied really, really heavily in high school and got to college his freshman year and after the first few weeks, he was like, 'You know, it's just not worth it,' and he just flat gave up alcohol then and hasn't touched a drink since. It's kind of funny. He would walk around parties carrying around a bottle of root beer...we made all these 'mocktails' for him."

Student 5 said, "I'm a junior, and my freshman year was the year that [student name] died during rush week. People are very conscious of it, especially the older students. It's kind of a fear. People know it can happen...you still hear about it everywhere. It is still mentioned in every article that you read about campus drinking." Student 5 added, "Nobody wants it to happen again. Our fraternities especially are very careful. They've had some near accidents, but the measures that they've taken afterward [help], like instead of letting someone just sit there, they've taken them to the hospital. So people are very aware of it. There's been a lot of education on the campus about how to tell if someone has alcohol poisoning."

The students said that signs of an alcohol problem are relatively easy to spot. Student 10 described drinking as a problem when someone "chain sips":—"When somebody just continually drinks and then as soon as they finish their last sip they grab another one and take another sip, like chainsmoking." Student 9 added, "Or they have trouble walking and they grab another beer, just to have a beer in their hand, when they're already impaired." Student 1 added, "Or when their focus is more towards the drink in their hand than in anything that's going on around them. There is that category of people at a party where their goal is to get drunk. Their only goal is to get drunk and they can care less about what's going on around them."

When Is Intervention Needed?

Students in the discussion group agreed that there are signs when drinking behavior has developed into a pattern requiring professional help. One is repetitive heavy drinking. "I would say when it becomes repetitive behavior," said student 11. "Everyone is going to have the potential to have that one night, and that doesn't necessarily mean you have an ongoing problem with alcohol. You have a problem with alcohol that night, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you need some sort of continued attention for it. Getting at the issues that caused that problem that night might be a different story altogether, but in terms of getting help with alcohol per se, if it happens continually where they start developing sort of a dependency on alcohol either to relax, to make them feel better, whatever...One night, somebody might just have a bad night, but if you see this happening weekend after weekend, weekend after weekend..."

Student 9 said that even "one-nighters" of alcohol abuse can be trouble signs. "I think it's so important to discuss one-nighters...because there are so many factors—your mood, how much you had to eat, if you've been on medication, so many things that alcohol can influence—that you could have three drinks that night and end up really stuck," said Student 9. "So I think one-nighters are very important, but even people who are responsible drinkers probably can name episodes where they were not so responsible, and what's tough is differentiating whether you are a problem drinker because of that one night, or how many repeated nights do you need to have to be considered one? It's such a gray area."

Student 9 added that another sign of potential trouble is drinking alone. Drinking may be a problem, said Student 9, if “They’re the only one drinking at an event, like everyone else is sober and they’re drinking.”

The students said alcohol can become a problem needing intervention if it leads to aggression, including sexual assault. They noted that in general students don’t drink to become aggressive, but that alcohol can lead to aggression. “I think people don’t drink to become violent. People drink to become just more suave,” said Student 10. “Liquid courage,” added Student 1. “Yes,” said Student 10. “It’s really not ‘I want to beat someone up and I need to be drunk to do it.’ I think it’s more of ‘I want to be able to talk to a cute girl that I see.’”

Student 9 agreed, adding, “No one drinks that I’ve seen to go out and get into a fight or use it for those reasons. I think it’s just that they’re more easily provoked if a situation does arise. They may be at a party and their girlfriend’s being hit on. If they were sober, they’d walk up and say ‘Hey,’ but drunk, fearless, the testosterone is raging, somehow it triggers something and you see more of a response. But it’s weird. They never intend to do that, but that’s usually when people end up in fights or they end up hitting someone or getting violent with their girlfriend.”

Student 11 added, “Or fight the football team. There’s two instances that I can think of that always happen. Either the football player’s girlfriend is there and the guy starts hitting on the girlfriend, and the football player wants to beat up the guy and there’s a fight there, or the football player’s really drunk and some smart guy tries to look like a bigshot and wants to beat up a football player, and he starts talking smack to the football player, and the football player doesn’t want any little guy talking trash to him, so there it goes. It’s all related. My head coach has dealt with it. I’ve talked with him because I’m on our [alcohol awareness] panel at school. They are all different incidents through the history of the football team, but the one tie-in is alcohol.”

In women, alcohol abuse is accompanied by a loss of inhibitions that can lead to serious sexual trouble, said the students. “I think guys get more violent and girls just get less inhibited,” said Student 9. “I think girls lose their inhibitions really easily, more so than guys. It’s in our nature and the way we act. Guys maybe get more aggressive, but I rarely see girls get violent. It’s more that they do things they wouldn’t [if they weren’t drinking.]” Student 7 said, “But they’re still aggressive. They’re just aggressive in a different way.” Student 9 added, “Yes, they become more sexually aggressive than physically aggressive, so you see them dancing on a table, knowing that tomorrow, dressed in their conservative sweater going to class, they’d freak if they knew that, but at the time it seems like such a great idea.”

The students noted that they know that alcohol-related sexual assault occurs, but that it is still largely concealed under a cloak of shame and silence. “I think it’s still very hidden, because when I learned the most about it was when I was a [resident associate],” said Student 7. I would have girls come to me and talk to me about what happened to them last night, that kind of thing. I think a lot of it happens, but we just don’t hear about it because they only share it with certain people.” Student 11 agreed, adding, “I may hear it like twice on the campus. I hear stories, and I mean I’ve seen the statistics, and it’s a lot more prevalent than that. So it’s very hidden, I think.”

Student 4 described another student who had had several experiences of unintended sexual relations while drunk. “She would drink, and then she would drink too much and black out, and that was kind of startling to me, but what was even worse was that she had on two occasions woken up the next day in somebody else’s bed and was just totally stunned about the whole experience. On one hand she

wanted to hold the guy accountable, but he would be like ‘Well, you know, you were just all into this last night and that’s what you wanted to do. So here we are. I didn’t know that you were in a blackout or something. How can you really tell?’ So it gets kind of fuzzy, because he thought that he had consent and they were consenting at that time. I guess the issue is that people need to engage in more responsible drinking behaviors.”

Student 9 said incidents of misunderstood consent are common among drinking students. “I think that’s a very common situation, where they give consent and the other person thinks they have consent and finds out in the morning that the person didn’t remember it. If alcohol’s involved, according to our university policy, then it is sexual assault or rape. Maybe one of the people involved planned on getting together with the other person and not having sex, but then it gets taken too far. I think this happens a lot more than we hear about.”

Alcohol, Judgment, And Responsibility

The real, underlying problem with destructive behavior, said the students, is that alcohol impairs the ability of students to perceive and think rationally. “People’s ability to read signals when they’re drinking becomes so blurred,” said Student 1. “It just becomes blurred, and things that you might normally pick up on, you don’t pick on when you’re drunk, from both sides, and I things can progress more quickly than they would otherwise.”

Lacking inhibitions due to drinking, inexperienced in social and sexual situations, students find themselves in circumstances they can’t handle. “The difficult thing is that there are no hard and fast rules,” said Student 1. “It’s like dating and just hooking up with someone, there is no playbook to go by, so it’s just sort of that you’re out there.”

When an unintended consequence such as rape occurs, there is a desire to fix blame, said the students. But fixing blame is difficult when alcohol itself is perceived as an excuse for irresponsible behavior. “People are so used to blaming,” said Student 10. “You know, like if I go out and get drunk, I know I can at least blame everything I do on the fact that I have been drinking, and everybody will just pass it off. Being drunk is somehow not associated with the person who gets drunk. It’s like, ‘I was drunk, so therefore I was a different person,’ and the drunk Student 10 is a completely different person from the Student 10 who goes to class.”

“She’s got it right there,” agreed Student 9. “No one holds anyone accountable if they’re drunk, and that’s the major problem I see, is that they laugh about it the next morning at the breakfast table. It’s like who can tell the most stories. I think that’s the biggest problem, that you’re not held accountable.”

The students said that because incidences of irresponsible behavior while drunk are so common, they become part of an accepted norm. “It’s just a common occurrence,” said Student 11. “It’s the funhouse, it’s the circus, and everybody is the clown at different nights, you know.” Student 10 added, “It’s like watching a movie. I mean, it’s like watching you and your friends, and if everybody at this table was drunk, we would watch a video of us.” Student 9 agreed, adding, “You’d be a hypocrite if you got mad at someone.” Student 4 also agreed, saying, “It depends on the culture.”

The students also said they knew there were ways of reducing the chances that unintended harm could occur because of alcohol abuse. One of the best ways, they said, was to choose the company of responsible friends. “A lot of times, even if you do end up getting sloppy and doing all these stupid things, if you’re intelligent about who you are with, then the odds of your ending up with these really

extreme consequences that we've been talking about and these poor decisions made under that [inebriated] condition, those odds decrease," said Student 1.

In fact, the students emphasized that the social norm of the group they were with helped to determine what behavior was considered acceptable. "If you're going out with people who don't think that [inebriated] behavior is cool, you wouldn't be acting like that anymore either," said Student 11. "It's all what people think is funny and what people think is a good time, and if people stop thinking that acting like that is a good behavior, then you're not going to be acting like that, because they're not going to think you're very funny and they're not going to hang out with you."

Reverse peer pressure, Student 8 called it. "There's reverse peer pressure. There are plenty of people who don't drink and are very outspoken about not drinking, and if you're with those people, then the tendency is to say, 'Okay, well, I'm not going to do that tonight because I'm surrounded by people who will look down on me for it. And I think that this is something that is growing more and more. There's kind of becoming this anti drinking fashion, which is 'I don't want to be sick, I don't want to make a fool of myself,' and they're very outspoken about it."

Solutions And Recommendations

Asked to name ways of reducing problem drinking on campus, the students suggested a number of practical solutions. These follow.

- Student organizations (besides the Greek system) should have in their constitution that their members not drink if they are underage. "If you're in an organization you're representing the university in that capacity," said Student 5. "I think a lot of the organizations have that type of policy. I think that's one thing that is very helpful."
- Student newspapers should not run liquor advertisements. "We have a student newspaper that runs bars' advertisements, and we're a dry campus, but we advertise liquor specials like bladder busters, buck-fifty pitchers, this and that," said Student 11. "I'd really like to see a campus and community effort on just taking some responsibility on what that leads college students to do, because we already talked about prices and how they affect people's drinking habits." Student 5 noted, "The editors [of our campus newspaper] decided that they weren't going to accept advertisements for drink specials and things like that. Bars can still advertise music and food, but not drinks."
- Rush week for fraternities and sororities should be dry, and the Greek party scene should not be simply deferred to off-campus drinking parties held later. "This would allow you to actually choose where you go, if you go anywhere, based on the guys in the house or the girls in the house, not based on the quality of the parties they throw for a semester," said Student 1. "Secondly, it would remove a lot of the stigma that's associated with Greek life—that it revolves so heavily around alcohol—when in reality on our campus it isn't quite as much the 'animal house' stereotype that you often hear about with the Greek system. It could help to bring the freshmen in each year with a different mindset towards the way that college life is for them, whether they're Greek or not Greek, and I think that can go a long way toward changing the perceptions and the norms."

- Each college or university should have a clearly defined alcohol policy and enforce it regardless of criticism. “If you’re over 21, you can have a six-pack in your room, but other than that you can’t have alcohol,” said Student 6 of the policy at that institution. “Seven fraternities have been kicked off in the past two years by President [name] because they violated it...Students are always saying that because of our alcohol policy on campus—you get in so much trouble if you drink on campus—it forces students to go off campus.” Student 11 said, “The university has to be firm on a policy like that. It can’t back down just because the students are complaining about having to drink and drive to have fun. I mean, that’s crazy.” Student 10 agreed on the need for consistency. “You shouldn’t be able to drink in a residence hall parking lot on a Friday night and get sanctioned and arrested, and then the next weekend drink there with a tailgate party and be 17 and have the college president walk by and see you doing it [and not get arrested],” said Student 10.
- Students need to be given accurate, full information on alcohol and its effects on the body and brain. “My big thing right now is giving students all the information and then letting them make their own decisions,” said Student 7. “I think there’s a real problem with having a lack of information.” Student 9 agreed, stating, “I’m a big fan of education, and I would love to see the funding for a [mandated] course, whether it’s every incoming freshman or incoming Greek member has to take an Alcohol 101 class—name it whatever you want. We have one now that’s voluntary that you can apply for, where you learn all about alcohol, what it does, how to take care of someone in an emergency.” Such a course tends to have more appeal if it is student run, noted Student 9. “It’s a fun course the way it’s run. It’s student-run. You learn a lot; and that way, even if you never drink, you have the skills necessary to deal with situations.”
- Alcohol education should reinforce the positive effects of not drinking, rather than the negative effects of drinking. “I think that people are a lot more intelligent,” said Student 11. “Teenagers are getting smarter and smarter all the time. In the ‘90s health was pounded into their heads pretty much, and I think a lot more people are conscious about what the real effects of drugs will be on their bodies. We already said that telling people not to do this, not to do that, doesn’t work. Ninety percent of it, you know, you flush it down the toilet. It’s crap.” Student 11 added, “I know for athletes you’re going to perform better on the field, you’re going to perform better in the weight room [without drinking]. Everything is going to be better.” Student 9 agreed on the need for more emphasis on the positive rewards of not drinking: “I think students are more receptive to positive programming, to recognizing that not everyone is out boozing every night, that there are students who drink responsibly and never have any problems and get through college fine. I’d love to see more positive reinforcement for making the right choices, instead of always focusing on the people who make the wrong ones, because it will reward people and recognize their efforts. I think it brings the morale of the students up a lot more, just that positive programming.”
- High school alumni/ae who have recently gone to college should be sent back to their high schools to talk to the high school students about the realities of alcohol. “It should be somebody that everybody would know, somebody that they can relate to, not just some stranger who doesn’t know anything about the community,” said Student 11. The person should “not beat around the bush, tell them the real things that are going on, and not shirk on anything. Just tell them what [the situation] is and let them make their own decisions. I think if you do that, high school kids are going to make the right choices.”

- A task force of all interested parties should be established at each institution to focus on reducing alcohol abuse. “One of the best things that can happen is to get a task force together, people from the community, campus, everything, to sit down and evaluate your environment, and then talk about what you want the environment to be like, and then work together,” said Student 7. “The most effective thing that we’ve had happen on our campus is having the community involved. We’ve broken a lot of ground with the bar owners downtown. And I just cannot stress enough how every campus is unique, and that there’s not one program that’s going to work for everyone.”
- Alternative social events to those which are centered around alcohol should be offered to students. “Alcohol is one of the greatest substitutes for creativity,” said Student 1. “A lot of times what happens is that a party is focused on alcohol—or alcohol is a focus of the students’ night—because they don’t have any other ideas of what to do. So if you can provide other things to do, I think that will go into minimizing that risk [of alcohol abuse]. I think all of these things would go into sort of redefining what is the norm for the college society, and that the best way to go about changing behavior itself is to go about changing that norm.”

Resources

The American Medical Association program “We’ve Got a Drinking Problem: Youth and Alcohol.” This program’s goals are to reduce rates of high-risk drinking among college students; improve the quality of academic and social life for all students; enhance the relationship between the college and its local community; and reduce the consequences of high-risk drinking to students and others, including injuries, assaults, unplanned and unprotected sex, and automobile accidents. The program is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Contact:

American Medical Association
Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse
515 North State Street
Chicago, IL 60610
Phone: (312) 464-5687

The Century Council’s programs to reduce underage drinking. Launched in 1991, the Century Council is a national, not-for-profit organization funded by leading U.S. distillers. The Century Council’s programs include “Cops in Shops,” through which undercover police officers pose as store employees and step forward when an illegal purchase is attempted. In addition to a Cops in Shops manual, the Cops in Shops package includes a training video for law enforcement officers and retailers.

Contact:

The Century Council
550 S. Hope Street
Suite 1950
Los Angeles, CA 90071-2604
Phone: (213) 624-9898
Web site: <http://www.centurycouncil.org>

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). In 1999 MADD updated its mission statement to include the prevention of underage drinking. MADD has adopted a resolution establishing detailed alcohol policies for colleges and has created a rating system to assess efforts by colleges and universities to eliminate underage drinking. MADD also publishes posters dramatizing the harm that can be caused by alcohol abuse among college students. Example: "...beer then liquor, never sicker. 60% of all college students diagnosed with STDs were drunk at the time of infection."

Contact:

Mothers Against Drunk Driving
511 E. John Carpenter Freeway
Suite 700
Irving, TX 75062
Phone: (214) 744-MADD
Web site: <http://www.madd.org>

Promising Practices: Campus Alcohol Strategies, a program of George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Public Health. This program publishes a guide to establishing a task force on reducing alcohol abuse and a sourcebook which is a compilation of successful efforts to confront campus alcohol misuse.

Contacts:

David S. Anderson, Ph.D., and Gail Gleason Milgram, Ed.D.
Co-Directors
Promising Practices: Campus Alcohol Strategies
George Mason University
Center for the Advancement of Public Health
Mail Stop 1F5
Fairfax, VA 22030
Phone: (703) 993-3697
Web site: <http://www.promprac.gmu.edu>