

Stubborn high-risk drinking rates:
The "Groundhog Day" explanation
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High-risk drinking is a phenomenon that has been the focus of attention in higher education for 10 years since the first Harvard School of Public Health "College Alcohol Survey" results were published in 1994. Yet prior to 1994, this phenomenon was frequently observed and if not empirically understood, at least anecdotally documented by anyone that has attended a college, worked in higher ed or owned property contiguous to a collegiate campus.

Students view collegiate drinking as a phenomenon so ubiquitous as to be considered a developmental "rite of passage." "Older" adults remember their experiences with alcohol in college fondly and find it difficult to find fault with the consumption of alcohol by any aged collegian of today, all the time voicing increasing concern for student consumption of "other drugs." It would seem that in the U.S. we have settled into something of a "co-dependent" relationship with collegiate drinking—we disapprove of its impact on student behavior but all but celebrate its contribution to a meaningful college experience. This is a love-hate relationship and we have gone to great lengths in recent years to address the "problem of binge drinking" while defending a collegian's right to "drink responsibly."

There have been fluctuations in the numbers of students engaging in dangerous drinking thanks in part to innovative programming like social norms campaigns and brief motivational interviews with high-risk drinkers as well as an increasing awareness of the role that environmental and ecological strategies can play in shaping a campus culture. Yet the rates of student drinking persist—81% of collegians nationally drink according to the most recent Harvard CAS studies, and this is as high as 90+% in some areas of the country—whereas about 66% of adults nationally report drinking. The rates of high-risk or dangerous drinking—terms much more suited to this phenomenon than "binge-drinking"—show no signs of yielding with about 44% of contemporary collegians reporting that they drank in a high-risk fashion (5+ drinks in an outing) in the 2 weeks prior to being surveyed in these same Harvard CAS samples.

Although this could lead one to hypothesize that contemporary collegians are, "Going to Hell in a booze soaked hand basket," there may be more to this story than is apparent at first glance. The "rest of the story," as the famed newscaster Paul Harvey says in his well-known radio broadcasts, may hold something of significance for us Student Affairs professionals as we consider how to "better" address this stubborn, if not recalcitrant problem of high-risk collegiate drinking.

Let's take another look at those Harvard CAS samples that suggest so many contemporary collegians drink and that a sizeable minority of them do so in a high-risk fashion. There is no doubt that these numbers are alarming, but it is incumbent upon the Student Affairs professional to look at these data a little closer and note "which" collegians are doing the drinking. Of the high-risk drinkers on a given campus, what proportion of them are first or second-year students? We know that the majority—some estimates run as high as 75%—of entering first-year students bring their high school drinking habits and preferences with them. With the newly acquired freedom that accompanies collegiate life, these high school preferences and practices flourish if not expand. The result is that first and second year students are among the highest-risk drinkers in college. As they realize the correlation, however, between drinking a belly fully of beer on a Friday night and their grades at the end of the semester—not to mention the preponderance of “drunk calls” made on the omnipresent cell phone with speed dial to former significant others at 2 AM or apologies that have to be extended for vomit deposited on the desk in a friend's dorm room—students begin to moderate their behavior in general and drinking specifically. This is so widely recognized as to have been named the "maturing out phenomenon" and we see it with virtually every student that enters college. Whether this results from experience or is a part of a natural maturational process is irrelevant to this essay's intent. Suffice it to say that students change their attitudes, values and belief—and consequently their behaviors—as they progress through the semesters in their collegiate experience. To review the results of unpublished qualitative research I have conducted regarding this, visit <http://www.robertchapman.net/pposter.htm>

If a sizeable portion of the high-risk drinkers in a sample drawn from a collegiate population come from 1st and 2nd-year students, this is important for Student Affairs professionals to recognize, and many do. Special programming that targets these students has been successful in hastening the maturing out phenomenon. But the point remains that each year these more mature students graduate and are replaced by entering 1st-year students who bring their high-school attitudes, values and beliefs with them to the newfound freedom of collegiate life, and there in lies the rub. Like St. Augustine trying to empty the sea with a shell, Student Affairs professionals as well as senior collegiate administrators are left each year with a cohort of new students whose movement through the maturing out process must once again begin in earnest, shepherded by Student Affairs professionals, other staff and faculty. Each year a new wave of students unfamiliar with college and its demands arrives on campus already habituated to a high-risk pattern of socializing, and thus the process begins anew...just like Bill Murray's experience in “Groundhog Day.”

Although unaware of any research that tests my “Groundhog Day” hypothesis, its logic alone suggests that its consideration may shed some light on why the alcohol-related numbers on collegiate drinking surveys remain so static. And if

this hypothesis is born out, it suggests that until and unless colleges and universities begin to partner more effectively with high schools in general and their "feeder schools" specifically, little is going to change.

The good news is that efforts to partner with high schools—and even earlier—have already begun. Wesley Perkins and David Craig at Hobart-William Smith College in N.Y. are conducting groundbreaking work in the area of addressing high school student misperceptions about the social norms in their peer group - see <http://alcohol.hws.edu> and click on "secondary education initiatives." In addition, other schools like La Salle University in Philadelphia have established consortia to open the lines of communication with their feeder schools and begin the process of effective prevention programming BEFORE its future students ever arrive on campus.

We have come a long way in recent years regarding the quest to address high-risk collegiate drinking. The issue is appropriately on the "short list" of every college senior administrator across the country. Innovative programs steeped in awareness of how environmental management strategies (see <http://www.edc.org/hec/framework/>) and the use of the social ecology model (see <http://www.edc.org/hec/drughied/1997.html>) are changing the way colleges and universities address these problems "as we speak."

As Dickens wrote in his opening paragraph to A Tale of Two Cities, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times," we have new tools to use but much work to do. However, as another, more contemporary sage, Art Buchwald, mused, "Whether it's the best of times or the worst of times, it's the only time we've got."

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