

When They Drink: Deconstructing Collegiate Drinking

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That some college and university students choose to drink is not news. That some of these drinkers actually choose to, or unintentionally, become intoxicated when drinking alcohol and experience an array of possible untoward consequences is likewise no secret. What may be a revelation for some is learning that most publications regarding collegiate drinking focus exclusively on these untoward consequences and covertly, if not overtly, imply that they are proof that all collegiate drinking is problematic.

If "the problem" is all collegiate drinking, then there can be but one possible objective of prevention...abstinence. However, such a goal suggests two questions: First, just as there has never been a time when alcohol was not used by some college students, can there *ever* be a time when no collegians drink (although it is likely that current percentages of students reporting use can be lessened and the frequency of that use and quantity consumed can be reduced)? Second, has the focus of research and prevention programming been too a posteriori and should that focus be directed instead to a priori considerations of drinking? Put more succinctly, we have been more concerned about the untoward consequences after students drink than in pursuing a better understanding of the meaning students ascribe to alcohol and drinking before consumption that influence their decision to drink in the first place. One argument in this essay is that such a priori considerations of collegiate drinking are likely to shed light on factors that affect individual decisions to drink...not to mention influencing student decisions when to drink, how to drink, or determine what circumstances warrant drinking, etc.

To understand how students view alcohol as a substance and drinking as a behavior is tantamount to having an insider's perspective from which to consider factors affecting decisions made by students regarding collegiate drinking. This would permit a greater understanding of the means by which drinking has become an integral part of the social organization and culture of contemporary collegiate life...not to mention a fresh perspective from which to consider affecting change.

Efforts to "address" collegiate drinking have been historically focused on public policy approaches to control what has been described as a "social problem." But this is remarkably similar to what was done in the 19th and early 20th centuries to address a similar national social problem, "alcohol" as perceived by the temperance movement. What is interesting in both situations--American's concern about alcohol as a perceived social problem and higher education's similar concern about student use--is the perception of what constitutes a "social problem" is essentially a social construction. This means that what causes a problem in the eyes of those who hold the power in a group or social body is deemed a problem simply because it is perceived to cause a problem by those in a position of power. Because alcohol is involved in acts of violence or is correlated with poor academic performance by some students who drink, its consumption by any student is therefore perceived as a social problem, irrespective of the fact that untoward consequences are not experienced by the majority of drinkers especially on each occasion the decision is made to drink. As a social problem--and one that has increasingly been cited as "the" social problem in higher education--it demands attention and, therefore, must be solved by the most direct means available to accomplish such a solution, namely, via public policy.

This essay is not a plea to permit collegiate drinking or deny that the drinking done by some students is a significant issue in need of immediate attention. It is, however, an invitation to consider that the problem may not be what we think it is as regards alcohol and collegiate life. If, for example, the views of the majority in a particular social group are in agreement with what constitutes a social problem, public policy efforts to address that problem, i.e., "control it," are universally supported and the consequences associated with violating such policies are sanctioned. Examples of this can be seen when considering "driving while intoxicated," "child abuse," or "domestic violence." Because the majority of Americans recognize that operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated is dangerous, that physically or sexually abusing a child is reprehensible, or assaulting a domestic partner is predatory, there is little if any protest when designating these behaviors as "social problems." The majority of the populace is in agreement and these acts are deemed social problems because they cause problems for the society in which they occur.

But to suggest that issues such as abortion, smoking marijuana, or guns represent "social problems" is to all but instantly ignite a debate that is sure to generate more heat than light. These are issues for which there are significant advocates of at least two different points of view so there can be no clear consensus as to whether the issue is or is not a "social problem." In short, those who hold the power to affect public policy will eventually settle the decision as to what constitutes a problem, prohibition being a good example of this in 1920 and those opposed to prohibition affecting its repeal in 1933. As in recording history, it is the victor to who go the spoils, namely the opportunity to "record the truth."

As regards collegiate drinking, because most if not all students understand that many if not most students who choose to drink-even those who choose to or unintentionally become intoxicated-do not experience untoward consequences as the result of any given drinking occasion, they do not see collegiate drinking as a "social problem." Yet the issue of primacy for social scientists studying collegiate drinking and student affairs professionals addressing it on a daily basis are the untoward consequences associated with collegiate drinking.

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If what alcohol and drinking mean as icons of contemporary collegiate life are important, then such meanings likely impact the choices students make regarding drinking. And if we can understand the process by which these meanings are ascribed, then we will likely be able to move one step closer to impacting collegiate drinking.

I suspect that the importance of alcohol in collegiate life is such that it will never cease or be controlled to the extent that only those of legal age will consume and then only in accordance with medical guidelines recommended by experts-no more than 2 standard drinks per day for males, 1 for females. That said, I do believe that collegiate drinking can be influenced and in a way that sees the percentage of students that choose to drink reduced and the frequency and quantity of those who do imbibe reduced as well.

There will always be those who experience a problem with alcohol and find themselves drinking because they "cannot not drink," a.k.a. alcohol dependence, but such drinking by college students is limited-although some (many?) may progress to "alcoholism" propelled by their collegiate experience. The number of problems, however, associated with collegiate drinking-what I call, "untoward consequences"-can be reduced below the apparently intractable numbers that have been reported consistently for years. Ironically, this will not be because of more clever policies regarding alcohol, but the change in how alcohol and drinking are understood by collegians. Likewise, changes will not result from innovative programs alone or smart and witty publicity campaigns. Rather, change will come as students move through the process by which they re-ascribe meaning to alcohol and drinking that affects the choices they make regarding the use of the drug and the circumstances that warrant that use.

There is the old adage we are so familiar with as to have made it a trite cliché-"You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink." Although this may be true, you can salt the oats. If I shift my focus from trying to "make students" do the right thing and, instead, shift that focus to addressing the reasoning they employ that affects the decisions they make to "do the wrong thing," students may well move in the direction of change of their own volition. We know this will happen because it already has been documented in the "maturing out" process. And whether this process is learning the "cause and effect" relationship between high-risk behavior and untoward consequences or simply the result of a natural developmental process is all but irrelevant. What is pertinent is that students change and they do so of their own volition. As Sandra Anise Barnes, the poet, wrote, "It is so hard when I have to, and easy when I want to."

The challenge for those concerned about collegiate drinking is not to "reinvent the wheel" but to keep from reinventing the flat tire. We may already have the answer to reducing the unacceptable number of untoward consequences associated with drinking...we see this as students progress through the aging-out process. The challenge is to hasten this process so as to close the window of opportunity for those untoward consequences to occur.

If we study the process by which students change the meaning they ascribe to alcohol and drinking we can artificially hasten this process, and in so doing, reduce the untoward consequences. This will not necessarily reduce the number of students who choose to drink, but it is likely to affect the number who choose to drink on a given occasion and, more importantly, the way they drink on those occasions.

If we can resist the temptation to use public policy exclusively as the means by which we "solve the collegiate drinking problem" and instead focus on altering the meaning students place on the drug and its consumption, it is entirely likely that students will fix "the problem" themselves.

In conclusion, we have come a long way. Environmental management strategies and programs like social norms marketing, Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students (BASICS), Screening/Brief Intervention/Referral to Treatment (SBIRT), have done much to address high-risk and dangerous collegiate drinking. But such external programs and approaches that serve to "do something to" students are not enough to change a culture. For the culture of campus drinking to change, students must come to a point where the meaning they ascribe to alcohol and drinking change; then and only then will the culture on American college campuses change. As in psychotherapy, effective practitioners know that individual change is an "inside job."

To read more on this topic in some detail download either or both of my monographs on collegiate drinking: *When They Drink: Deconstructing Collegiate Drinking* (www.community.rowancas.org/node/21) and *When They Drink: Is Collegiate Drinking the Problem We Think It Is?* (www.rowan.edu/cas/resources/documents/CollegiateDrinking.doc.doc)

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