

College presidents ask public to rethink drinking age: The Amethyst Initiative

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

Alarmed at undergraduate binge drinking and other illegal activities they say are related to a nationwide ban on under-21 alcoholic beverage consumption, more than 100 college presidents have signed a petition pleading for a dispassionate public debate on the issue.

The petition signers include presidents of Duke, Syracuse, Ohio State and Johns Hopkins universities as well as those at many small liberal arts colleges, some with Catholic and Protestant heritage.

Opposition arose quickly after the late-August announcement of the Amethyst Initiative, named after the purple gemstone that Greek mythology considered an antidote to the negative effects of intoxication. The petition does not explicitly advocate lowering the drinking age, though some backers think it should drop to 18, the minimum age for voting and serving in the military.

Politicians, health and safety experts, and newspaper editorial writers pointed to studies showing that traffic crashes and fatalities increased when the drinking age was lowered in the 1970s and decreased after states raised the minimum age to 21.

The stimulus for change came in 1984 when Congress passed the Minimum Drinking Age Act, which imposed a 10 percent reduction in federal highway appropriations on any state with a drinking age lower than 21.

“A culture of dangerous, clandestine binge drinking—often conducted off-campus—has developed,” says the Amethyst Initiative, launched by John McCardell, president emeritus of Middlebury College in Vermont.

A comprehensive study on heavy drinking (at least five drinks in a row) among college students showed that the trend peaked in 1984 but remained steady, with

about 44 percent doing it, from 1993 to 2001. Henry Weschler, a retired professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, who popularized the term *binge drinking*, has been quoted as saying that lowering the drinking age would be “pouring gasoline to put the fire out.”

But Richard H. Brodhead, president of Duke University, said current laws have not prevented widespread drinking at U.S. colleges or by younger teens. The laws exacerbate the problem on college campuses, said Brodhead in a statement on the Amethyst Web site.

“It pushes drinking into hiding, heightening its risks, including risks from drunken driving,” he said, “and it prevents us from addressing drinking with students as an issue of responsible choice.”

Jesuit priest Jeffrey von Arx, president of Fairfield University in Connecticut, said that it is worth “taking another look at” the national Minimum Drinking Age Act when it comes up for renewal in 2009. Arx signed the appeal, which “invites us all to reexamine how we are helping our young people learn to handle the consumption of alcohol responsibly.”

Another signer, President Jack R. Ohle of Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, said that while engaging in civil, informed debate, we must “consider all policy alternatives no matter how controversial.”

Mothers Against Drunk Driving issued a statement August 19 saying that MADD and other members of the Support 21 Coalition, such as the American Medical Association, the National Transportation Safety Board and the Governors Highway Safety Association, were calling upon college and university presidents to remove their names from the list.

“Parents should think twice before sending their teens to these colleges or any others that have waved the white flag on underage and binge-drinking policies,” said MADD national president Laura Dean-Mooney.

Presidents of two schools, Morehouse College in Atlanta and Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus, did pull their names. One was Robert M. Franklin, who became president of Morehouse last year after teaching at Candler School of Theology and previously heading the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta.

While welcoming a “spirited public debate about appropriate standards of behavior,” Franklin said in a statement, “we do not support policies that would have the effect of encouraging or making it more likely that younger citizens would use alcohol or drugs.”

By contrast, Donald R. Eastman III of Eckerd College, a Presbyterian-related school in St. Petersburg, Florida, citing his 30 years as the parent of three sons, said the current law is “hypocritical, ineffective, guilt-inducing and counterproductive. It is a form of mini-prohibition, and needs to be replaced with education and a focus on the value of moderation, not intolerance.”

Added David Oxtoby, president of Pomona College in California: “At present we are constrained only to talk about abstinence, since anything else is against the law. Treating college students as adults will help them to make more responsible decisions.”

Drew University, which has a United Methodist-related seminary on its Madison, New Jersey, campus, has an alcohol education program that goes from new student orientation to graduation day, said president Robert Weisbuch. “We employ an alcohol and substance abuse coordinator on staff, have clear rules for conduct and well-defined consequences for violations,” Weisbuch said.

Both Weisbuch and Loren Anderson, president of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, emphasized in statements posted on their campus Web sites that they were not seeking to change the law, but rather to alter the national tendency to ignore underage drinking.

“It is a part of society,” said Anderson, “and by pushing it underground . . . we do not do our students a service.”