

Binge culture: It's not inevitable

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During the holiday season many high school seniors sort out their college preferences and work on their college applications. If in the midst of that anxiety-producing process, students and parents ask college officials to comment on the culture of drinking and alcohol abuse on campus, they are likely to be assured that the school upholds state laws that prohibit students under the age of 21 from purchasing alcoholic beverages.

Anyone remotely familiar with college life knows that this response amounts to a gigantic wink. Alcohol flows freely at college parties for students of all ages, and the patterns of use are hazardous to the entire campus. It's been estimated that nearly half of all college students and 80 percent of students who live in fraternity houses engage in binge drinking (consuming four or more drinks in a row). Students under 21 are actually more likely to be binge drinkers than are older students. The epidemic of binge drinking has serious consequences: students who engage in it are far more likely to miss classes, injure themselves and others, and engage in risky sexual behavior. Nondrinkers may suffer date rape and other violence, and interrupted study or sleep—not to mention property damage.

Earlier this year, over 120 college presidents declared that they were fed up with the way alcohol abuse shapes the college atmosphere, and they blamed current law for pushing alcohol consumption underground. Under the banner of the Amethyst Initiative, the presidents proposed lowering the drinking age to 18. This, they suggested, would take colleges out of the untenable position of pretending that students under 21 are not drinking, and it would turn drinking into a public activity. College officials could then have a better chance of monitoring the drinking and of making moderate drinking the norm.

That proposal faces some strong counterarguments. Many observers, including Mothers Against Drunk Driving, believe that the significant decline in drunk-driving deaths among youthful drivers is directly attributable to the 1984 federal law that withholds a portion of federal highway money from any state that lowers its drinking

age to under 21. Furthermore, lowering the drinking age to 18 would inevitably make alcohol more accessible to high school students. Those arguments are probably strong enough to preclude a change in the legal drinking age.

Nevertheless, the Amethyst Initiative has put its finger on the hypocrisies and failures of the current arrangements. At the very least its arguments should lead schools to a renewed discussion of how to change the drinking culture. “There is something about certain college environments that promote binge drinking,” says Toben Nelson of Harvard’s School of Public Health. Nelson reported this past summer on a study that found that rigorous anti-drinking laws and enforcement of those laws, along with help from local merchants in limiting marketing of alcohol, can diminish the culture of drinking on campus.

Above all, schools need to stop thinking that there is something inevitable about the culture of binge drinking. Many young lives are wasted and wounded in the college environment—and that is nothing to wink at.