

Campus Buzz

How Alcohol Impairs America's Judgment of Higher Education



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The single greatest threat to the public trust in higher education is alcohol. Specifically, it is high-risk drinking among college students and the lack of engagement by those who can help solve the problem.

The well-publicized riots in New England college towns after the Super Bowl, World Series and Final Four are only the most obvious symptoms of a chronic social disease—a pervasive alcohol culture that is undermining the productivity and threatening the future of a generation of American students. For too many students, college is no longer about preparing for leadership roles and productive service to society, business and science, but rather about taking a vacation from the real world. Legions of binge-drinking graduates are leaving college as ill-prepared citizens feeling no more responsible for their contributions to democracy than they do for their inappropriate, excessive use of alcohol.

Non-partying students report negative effects on their academic performance from alcohol-related behaviors ranging from vandalism and assault to significant loss of sleep and study time due to noisy, drunken roommates.

The problems caused by excessive drinking on America's college campuses are so well-documented that it is embarrassing that more is not being done to address the issue. A recent study by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has documented 1,400 student deaths, 600,000 physical assaults and 70,000 sexual assaults per year among college students due to alcohol. Just as important, a majority of non-partying students report negative effects on their academic performance from alcohol-related behaviors ranging from vandalism and assault to significant loss of sleep and study time due to noisy, drunken roommates. Yet despite all this, many adults in positions of authority have not bothered to act.

Higher education has come to accept the incidence of catastrophic problems as a tolerable byproduct of a culture that accepts and even welcomes alcohol. One out of 8,500 college students dies from alcohol-related causes each year, but that represents a low enough risk that universities can get insurance to cover such losses. The bigger problem is that far too many students will continue to experience alcohol's damaging effects on performance in their everyday lives and their work.

Think of the adage that giving a man a fish feeds him for a day, but teaching him to fish feeds him for the rest of his life. Alcohol works in exactly the opposite way. It gives students a temporary but illusory sense of competence and mastery at a time in their lives when social and academic insecurities run rampant. But the morning after, they find their experience has been hollow and diminished. Add up four years of "morning afters," and many students find their lives and future prospects have been greatly diminished as well.

Various studies show that alcohol impairs academic performance and that students who binge drink have lower grades than those who do not. Recent studies document the damaging effect on work performance of low-dose alcohol exposure (working while under the influence of just one drink) and no-dose alcohol exposure (working with a blood-alcohol-concentration level of zero, but experiencing the effects of a hangover).

Binge drinking costs students on average a third of a point in their grade point averages, according to a 2002 study by Bucknell University economist Amy Wolaver. The same study found that alcohol had a negative impact on earnings immediately after graduation, especially for women—amounting to a \$1,600 drop in annual earnings in their first year of work. Binge drinkers—not only alcoholics—miss more work, experience more work-related injuries and perform poorer on tasks.

More than 30 percent of binge drinkers reported attending a class with a hangover in the previous two weeks, according to a 2003 survey of more than 15,000 college freshmen by Outside The Classroom, a provider of online alcohol prevention programs. When you look at the effects of high-risk alcohol use across an entire college population, you start to understand the resulting

Warning Shot

There are actions that will bring immediate police attention to you:

- No violence of any kind. You cannot throw rocks and bottles, etc. at any other human—be they a fellow student or a police officer.
- You cannot light fires—these can and do cause great injuries and can burn woods and threaten houses. This includes all of our neighbors in Mansfield.
- You cannot attack private property, either homes, rooms or cars.

—From a letter to the editor written by University of Connecticut Police Chief Robert S. Hudd to the Daily Campus, UConn’s online student newspaper. The letter appeared on April 21, 2004, a few weeks after celebration of UConn’s NCAA men’s and women’s basketball championships turned rowdy, and a few days before UConn’s Spring Weekend, which went peacefully.

loss of productivity and decreased potential. It’s simple math: multiply all the so-called “minor” effects of alcohol on productivity and performance by the 43 percent of college students who binge drink and it equals a cost we can’t bear.

Alcohol decreases performance in the classroom and in the workplace. (The economic costs of *underage* drinking alone amount to more than \$53 billion a year in the United States, according to the National Academy of Sciences.)

As stewards of our nation’s highest form of human development, higher education should be working relentlessly to start providing the opposite outcomes. But research conducted over the course of the first semester among college freshmen indicates that the higher education experience actually *encourages* binge drinking. At the beginning of college, the typical freshman class is comprised of 50 percent abstainers and 30 percent binge drinkers. Three months later, by the end of their first semester, it looks drastically different, with 20 percent abstaining and 60 percent binge drinking.

The reasons for this are many. Many colleges are tight-knit residential communities divided between of-age and underage drinkers. At the same time, college represents a student’s first time enjoying freedom from parental control. This puts the college in the tough position of not being able to condone drinking, and yet

also being considered irresponsible for not teaching responsible drinking. It has not helped that class schedules have been lightened over the years, and that the alcohol industry’s marketing around colleges and college students has significantly increased. Alcohol advertising has been closely linked to college sporting events and competition, and these influences may be helping to fuel the already existing image of college as “Animal House.” In fact, binge drinking is most prevalent among the most competitive social networks on campus: athletes and members of Greek organizations, where members drink *against* one another instead of *with* one another.

There are far too many students who will continue to experience alcohol’s damaging effects on performance in everyday life and work.

Moreover, at the point of graduation from high school, students headed for college have lower binge drinking rates than their non-college-going peers. But five years later, having experienced college, the college graduates exhibit higher rates of binge drinking than their non-college peers. The “college effect,” therefore, is one that teaches high-risk drinking. And given our obligation to the public trust, that means we are failing miserably.

Fortunately, some institutions are taking positive steps to change things. Comprehensive prevention programs provide an array of support for students, ranging from alcohol-free dorms and social events to mandatory alcohol education for the entire freshman class to environmental strategies aimed at changing campus norms and keeping alcohol out of the hands of underage consumers in college communities. These programs are starting to have a significant impact on the drinking culture in college towns across the country.

Institutions that are taking a comprehensive approach to documenting and measuring their progress are having the most success. At Princeton University, for example, the trustees lead a major, campuswide initiative to reduce dangerous drinking. In addition to

Messaging

Unleash the Party

—Bacardi Rum slogan splashed across MBTA Green Line trains that run through the campuses of Boston University, Boston College, Northeastern University and other Hub colleges.

the important step of making the problem a trustee-level priority, the initiative requires regular progress reports. Such a move has galvanized the entire campus around finding new ways to tackle the issue, and many key indicators are going in the right direction.

All trustees need reminding of the old saying, “What we’re not measuring, we’re not improving.” We’ve documented the problem of alcohol plenty, but we’re only starting to document the actions, progress and outcomes on our respective campuses. Just as we track our yield rates in admissions, we should be charting key indicators related to our progress on the alcohol issue. And we should keep these measurements in front of senior leadership on a constant basis—at least twice a year at board meetings. The Association of Governing Boards, the organization serving college and university trustees, regularly publishes articles on drinking issues in its publications—and advises trustees that holding their institutions accountable is a critical first step in making progress. Accountability can be as simple as asking for a regular report on campus efforts to reduce dangerous drinking. Trustees won’t sit in more than two consecutive meetings where they witness the statistics going in the wrong direction before they work diligently to forge solutions to the problem.

High-risk alcohol use on campus is a social epidemic that was created through social forces and trends, and we can use those same forces to move in the opposite direction. We’ll find the answers when educators and administrators start holding themselves accountable to the measurement of progress on their own campuses.

College Daze

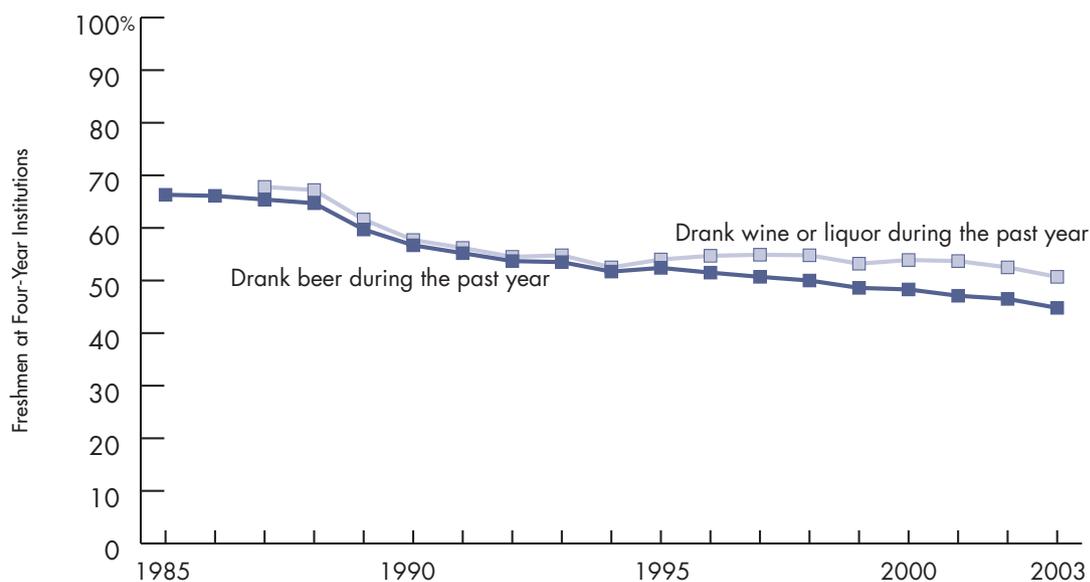
“You chugged 37 beers and half a bottle of vodka, took six shots of Jagermeister, blacked out on McCullough lawn and woke up naked? So what? Johnny drank an entire keg by himself (of Guinness), downed a bottle of Bacardi 151 and proceeded to slam bombers until his friends had to take him to Porter Hospital to get his stomach pumped—and he’s got a 15-pager due tomorrow—and he hasn’t slept since April 24.”

—From an article by Abbie Beane in *The Middlebury Campus* of May 6, 2004.

And we all need to be concerned about the performance-related effects of alcohol as we are about the fatal effects. Until then, we should brace ourselves for the legions of binge drinkers our colleges are training.

Brandon Busted is founder and CEO of *Outside The Classroom*, a Newton, Mass.-based national provider of online alcohol prevention programs.

ALCOHOL AND THE COLLEGE FRESHMAN, 1985-2003



Source: Astin, A.W., Oseguera, L., Sax, L.J., Korn, W.S., *The American Freshman: Thirty-Five Year Trends*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles, 2002. Note: unpublished data used for 2002-2003.