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### The Drinking Game

by **Marshall Poe**

Ending America's fruitless battle with college boozing

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IT WAS 3:00 a.m. and someone was trying to kick down my door. I wasn't surprised. In my college town — and college towns across America — this sort of thing happens from time to time. Students get trashed, forget where they live, and try to break in someplace to sleep it off. I rolled out of bed, asked my wife to call the police, and then went downstairs. I opened the door and there he stood, just as expected: a very drunk student.

"Dude, who are you?"

"I'm Professor Poe and the police are on the way."

"But hey, where's John?"

"I don't know, but you should leave."

"Dude, can I sleep here?"

"Nope."

He stumbled off, the police came, and it was over. Well, not quite. When drunk students do really dumb things in my college town we all know exactly what to do. Everyone plays their part: I wrote angry letters to local papers decrying college drinking; the city council expressed outrage; the provost said a commission was studying the problem; the students proclaimed their "right to party." Then nothing happened. The students went on drinking as before and we all waited for the next incident.

Welcome to The College Drinking Game — the futile, half-hearted, endless American battle against undergraduate boozing. The rules are simple: If you are a student, you must drink excessively and proclaim your God-given "right" to do so; if you are a politician, college president, alcohol expert, or college-town resident, you must talk excessively about excessive college drinking. Peculiarly, you do not play this game to win; rather, your object is to keep the game going, round after round, until everyone has had too much drinking and talking to go on. At present, the game shows no sign of ending.

This is the story of The College Drinking Game — how it got started, how it has been played, and how we might end it by seeing college drinking in a different light. College drinking per se is not the problem. On the contrary, rowdy drinking serves an important identity-and community-building role in American higher education. The problem, rather, is the small minority of college drinkers who cannot drink safely. They should be the focus of treatment and, if necessary, punishment.

*A University of Iowa student lost fingers and toes to frostbite after passing out in an alley for six hours during his walk home from downtown Iowa City bars early Sunday [February 10, 2008] amidst subzero temperatures, police say. The man, whom police would not identify because there is not a criminal complaint, reportedly had to have some fingers and toes amputated, Iowa City Police Sgt. Troy Kelsay said.*



AMERICANS HAVE BEEN wrestling with college drinking for so long that they've

forgotten there was a time when they didn't. Prior to World War II there were a number of "crises" on American campuses — loutish behavior at football games, the introduction of the research-heavy "German Method," the corruption of coeds — but excessive college drinking was not among them. As one turn-of-the-century commentator put it, drinking was simply a "conventional college sin," an innocent excess afforded to a small class of youth from better families. The fact that collegians routinely got plastered just wasn't news. When it was, it was treated lightly. In 1894, the *New York Times* reported that Hugh Claibourne Adams, a Princetonian, was arrested for public intoxication after the Princeton-Yale game. A judge told Adams that he had "disgraced [his] college." Adams didn't think so: "No, no, Judge, not that. We college men will have our fling at times. It is expected of us." You can almost hear the laughter in Adams's eating club. Occasionally the colleges mounted half-hearted temperance campaigns: Princeton did in 1898, as did Stanford in 1908. They faded as rapidly as they appeared. The coming of Prohibition in 1919 changed nothing. Most agreed that the Volstead Act had, as one expert said in 1922, "brought about a material diminution of drinking among college students." But in truth no one knew because no one seriously studied the question. Thus it was just as easy to argue, as the *New York Times* did in 1923, that Prohibition had *increased* the level of drunkenness among college students. Rising or falling, it didn't matter because no one was worried about a few drunk undergrads "having a good time."

The story of how we began to worry about college drinking starts, oddly enough, in World War II. In the Anglo-American world, the traditional age of majority was 21. That's when a man (women were a different story) entered into his full rights and obligations. He could, *inter alia*, fight for his country, vote for his government, and — after minimum drinking ages were passed in the last quarter of the 19th century — take his measure of strong drink. In World War I American draftees, all of whom were 21, did all three. In World War II, however, the draft age was dropped to eighteen. Suddenly there were men who were old enough to fight and die, but not old enough to vote and drink. That notion did not rest easy in the American mind, though the response was schizophrenic. Many argued that that all draftees should, by virtue of their service, have the ballot. According to Senator Arthur Vandenberg, "If young men are to be drafted at eighteen years of age to fight for their government, they ought to be entitled to vote at eighteen years of age for the kind of government which they are best satisfied to fight." Vandenberg proposed that the voting age be reduced. This same logic, however, did not apply to drinking. No one argued that all draftees should, by virtue of their service, be allowed to drink. Far from it. According to Senator Joshua Lee, soldiers under 21 needed to be protected from drinking by their older brothers-in-arms. He proposed to "ban the sale or possession of beer, ale, wine or other alcoholic beverages in or near Army or Navy establishments." In the end, both Vandenberg's and Lee's measures failed. Congress said that only the states could change the voting and drinking ages. There was, interestingly, no rush to do either of these things. Georgia lowered its voting age to eighteen in 1943. Colorado, Louisiana, and Kansas set their drinking ages at eighteen in 1945, 1948, and 1949 respectively. The youthful soldiers were demobilized, no more were called up, and that was the end of it.

Until the Korean War, which saw the reintroduction of the draft. Suddenly there was political hay to be made out of the voting-age issue. Polls showed growing popular support for a reduction. Legislators responded by repeatedly introducing bills to that effect. In 1954, President Eisenhower called for a constitutional amendment to allow eighteen-, nineteen- and twenty-year-olds to vote. Senator William Langer brought a resolution to the floor, though it failed to move forward. Three states went ahead on their own: Kentucky in 1955 (to eighteen) and Alaska and Hawaii in 1959 (to nineteen and twenty, respectively). Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson backed an expansion of the franchise, though neither succeeded in expanding it. Not surprisingly, the Vietnam War turned the tide. By late 1960s, with hundreds of thousands of

disenfranchised American youth fighting in an unpopular war, Vandenberg's "old enough to fight, old enough to vote" argument was on everyone's lips. Now Washington was in a hurry. Congress had a bill ready for President Nixon to sign in June, 1970. Despite its dubious constitutionality, he put his name to it. Idaho and Arizona challenged the bill and the Supreme Court said that part of it was, in fact, unconstitutional. In early 1971 Congress fixed that. By March both chambers had passed a resolution to amend the Constitution. The needed three-fourths of the states approved the 26th Amendment in under five months, record time. Eighteen-year-olds could finally fight *and* vote.

They still could not, however, drink. After Prohibition ended in 1933, the majority of states set the drinking age at 21. Those that didn't generally put limits on when, where, and what minors (and others) could drink: weekdays and Saturdays were fine, but Sundays weren't; hard liquor could be enjoyed at home, but not at bars; 3.2 percent beer was permitted, but 6.0 percent beer wasn't. Through the late 1950s and most of the 1960s, the country seemed little concerned about the drinking age. The Northeast was an exception, and an important one. The drinking age was eighteen in New York; in neighboring states it was 21. Not surprisingly, teenagers from the latter stole into the former to drink legally and often died in car accidents on the way back. They had been doing so since 1933, but apparently no one noticed or cared until New Jersey Assemblywoman (and later Congresswoman) Florence "Flo" Dwyer discovered the issue in 1955. In February of that year she traveled to Albany to "plead the cause of all our children" and ask New York to raise its drinking age. What followed was a sort of rehearsal for The College Drinking Game. Every year for over a decade governors, representatives, and experts made a pilgrimage to Albany; every year a drinking-age-increase bill was introduced in New York (the *New York Times* called the legislation a "hardy perennial"); every year that bill was defeated after the issue had been "carefully studied" (in one case, Margaret Mead testified); and every year out-of-state, alcohol-impaired, though completely legal teen drinkers were killed driving out of New York.

Dwyer and her allies hoped to bring New York into conformity with other states. In an unexpected turn of events, however, the other states came into conformity with New York. The cause was a weird blip in modern American mores. Though Americans are not alone in their suspicion of intoxicants, they are far more suspicious than any of their Western peers. This was true before the mid-1960s (most Americans supported Prohibition) and it was true after the mid-1970s (when the "War on Drugs" was gearing up). But between about 1965 and 1975, Americans decided that drinking might just be okay, so long as everyone did it "like the Europeans." The American image of what it meant to "drink like a European" involved cozy pubs, sidewalk cafes, and teens sipping *vin de table* at dinner. It bore no resemblance to reality, but that didn't matter. As the 1960s progressed, voters made dry counties wet, repealed by-the-bottle liquor laws, and authorized new venues (e.g., restaurants) to serve alcohol. As Americans warmed to the idea that adults should be able to drink as they pleased, they began to accept that eighteen-year-olds were adults, particularly if they were doing adult things like going to college and fighting in Vietnam. After the passage of the 26th Amendment, eighteen-plus proponents had a ready and seemingly unbeatable argument: "If we're old enough to fight and vote, we're old enough to drink." Drinking was a civil rights issue. But justice wasn't the only consideration. Miraculously, Americans began to say — if not believe — that a lower drinking age might *reduce* teen troubles. If teens could drink legally, perhaps they wouldn't use drugs. If teens could drink legally, perhaps they'd imbibe in bars and not in cars. If teens could drink legally, perhaps they would learn to drink "like Europeans" at home. None of these arguments were new, but they now possessed unprecedented force. Between 1970 and 1973, two dozen 21-only states reduced their drinking ages; by 1975, only eleven 21-only states were left. Modern America was the wettest it had ever been, and so were college campuses. Students drank legally in dorms, opened campus pubs, and put on college-authorized, beer-

soaked festivals. They were, by all reports, good times.

But they did not and could not last. American tolerance for teen drinking — an astounding cultural anomaly — vanished as quickly as it appeared. The proximate cause for this reversion to the norm was the return of Flo Dwyer, or rather a whole army of Flo Dwyers armed with some very persuasive numbers. Dwyer argued that the ready availability of alcohol in New York increased traffic fatalities among the teenage sons and daughters of her New Jersey constituents. She was right, but she didn't have convincing data to prove her point. Her followers in the 1970s did. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), founded in 1967, collected mountains of data on accidents. A vastly expanded corps of social scientists, the fruit of two decades of university growth, was on hand to analyze it. So when two dozen states suddenly dropped their drinking age in the early 1970s, Dwyer's hypothesis could be tested. It was, and with shocking results: studies showed a 10 percent to 30 percent rise in teenage traffic accidents after a reduction in the drinking age. The press raised the hue and cry, not only about teen drunk driving ("Auto Accident Rate Soars for Drinkers Under 21 Years"), but about teen alcohol abuse in general ("School Study Calls 28% of Teen-Agers 'Problem' Drinkers"). Public support for eighteen-and-up laws began to erode and state legislatures started to reverse themselves: between 1976 and 1981 fourteen states raised their drinking ages; by 1985, another twelve had followed. In almost every case the reason given was the increase in teen traffic fatalities. The major news magazines — *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report* — announced the dawning of a new age of sobriety. Actually, the old age of sobriety had just returned after a brief, fitful rest.

*Mark A. Fleckenstein, 23, of 1809 Flanigan Court [in Iowa City] walked into an unlocked apartment on College Street at 6:24 a.m. Sunday [December 13, 2009]. Police said that once inside Fleckenstein threw up on the couch and himself. He then started to undress and make his way toward a bedroom before being discovered by the tenant . . . Police said Fleckenstein was unable to explain how he ended up in the apartment or where he had been drinking.*

**W**HEN THE DRINKING age was 21, college drinking was illegal and semi-clandestine: It was tolerated so long as it stayed clear of the law and undercover, at least most of the time. When the drinking age became eighteen, however, college drinking became legal and open. This had an important effect. For the first time, the public could see how much college students drank because they were doing it all over the place, often with frightening consequences. There was a growing feeling among politicians, college officials, and parents that something had to be done. After the drinking age had been returned to 21, they had the tool they needed, namely, the law. It was simply a matter of enforcing it.

That, however, was not going to be easy. The undergraduates wouldn't go quietly. For in the short period in which eighteen-and-up was the law, their attitudes toward drinking had changed. Open drinking had come to be both a "tradition" and a "right." I remember this well. When I arrived as a student at Grinnell College in 1980, the dorms were wet, the campus pub was open, and college-sponsored debauches ("Grinnell Relays") were much-anticipated annual events. As far as I was concerned, this is the way it had always been and always would be, not only at Grinnell but everywhere else. How did I know this? The 1978 smash hit *Animal House* told me so. The students at "Faber College" drank like fish in 1962, and so would we in 1980. Everyone I knew had seen the film, often multiple times. When we arrived on campus, we wanted to be like Bluto and the boys. And we were: "Toga parties" were all the rage that fall. "When you get to [the toga party]," one sophomore gushed, "you really feel as one. I see it lasting and growing. It's better than 1969 and the flower children." The fact that heavy drinking was "better" didn't make it right — Selective Service and the 26th Amendment did. When I

left Kansas in 1980, I could drink (3.2 percent beer) legally; when I crossed the border into Iowa that same year, I couldn't. That just wasn't right. I registered for the draft. I was legal to vote. So why couldn't I drink? It was a question a lot of students were asking. "We want to let people know," said one freshman in 1979, "that college students are not going to ignore losing their drinking rights." We didn't: We wrote angry letters, protested, and continued to drink.

What to do? The authorities had a number of options. First, they could have treated underage drinking as a law-enforcement matter and invited the police to stop it, aggressively if need be. Even though the 1960s ended definitively with the election of Reagan in 1980, this did not seem like a good idea. Colleges had fought hard to keep the police *off* campus in the Vietnam era; they were not going to let them back on to stop students from partying. Second, the authorities could have treated the problem as an academic matter and used the student code of conduct to suspend underage drinkers. Even though said codes certainly required students to obey the law, this did not seem like a good idea either, and for a similar reason. In the 1960s colleges had championed students' "right" to do as they pleased in their private lives, especially if it involved "free speech"; they were not going to revive *in loco parentis* to stop what seemed to most to be a private matter. Finally, they could treat illegal student drinking as a public health issue and aim for mitigation by soft measures. This seemed like an excellent idea. The colleges could keep the police at bay, avoid the repercussions of expelling students, and still appear to be working on an important problem. This is exactly what they did.

But there was a rub: It wasn't clear that college drinking was a public health crisis, at least to the public. In the 1970s Americans believed that underage drunk driving was a serious problem. As the drinking age fell and teen traffic deaths rose, thousands of people wrote their representatives, fired off letters to local papers, and (a bit later) joined national advocacy groups — "Mothers Against Drunk Driving" (MADD) the best known of them. In contrast, as the drinking age fell and college drinking became public, there was no public outcry. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the papers still printed puff pieces about all the innocent fun there was to be had boozing in college: "College-Wide Bash Makes a Rousing Comeback," "Toga Party, Popping Up on Campuses Across Country," "Tailgate Parties: Sometimes Interrupted by Football Game." In 1979, the popular humorist Art Buchwald told the graduating class at Georgetown that bars had "done more to get Georgetown students through school than the faculty." The comment received a standing ovation. In the American mind circa 1980, drunk driving killed teenagers; but college drinking was just a good time. So as long as the undergraduates didn't drive, they could drink whether it was legal or not. They "always" had and most believed they "always" would.

Those who said that they always shouldn't, therefore, needed to convince Americans that college drinking was an honest-to-god disaster. They did it in the same way the Flo Dwyers of the world had persuaded Americans that underage drunk driving was a crisis, namely, with the aid of social scientists. One of them is particularly important to our tale: Henry Wechsler.

**W**ECHSLER WAS BORN in Warsaw in 1932. His family fled the Nazis and ended up in New York in 1941. The American Dream by way of hard work and higher education followed: B.A. (Washington and Jefferson, 1952), Ph.D. (Harvard, 1957), senior researcher in public health (The Medical Foundation, 1965). In the late 1960s, Wechsler began to study youth drinking when almost everyone's attention was on youth drug-taking. In truth, college drinking had never been high on academic research agendas as it wasn't seen as a major problem. The first serious study in the field was not produced until 1952; two decades passed before it was "followed up." At the time Wechsler started his work, the conventional wisdom — the fruit of the 1952 survey — was that there really was no such thing as "college drinking":

College students drank at the same rate as their noncollege peers (about three-fourths of them imbibed) and they learned to do so at home, not in college. Later studies of the early and mid-1970s did little to change this impression, not because they didn't challenge it — some did — but because they were not widely reported. In 1978, however, Wechsler conducted a survey of New England undergraduates that suggested a significant increase in the percentage of drinking students: Researchers found that 74 percent drank in 1952; Wechsler found that 95 percent drank in 1978. He also claimed that students in his study were drinking harder: In 1952 two-thirds of men and one-third of women said they had been drunk at least once; in 1978 five-sixths of men and three-fourths of women said the same. This time the press sounded the alarm: "Study Finds Use of Alcohol At Colleges Is Up Sharply" (the *New York Times*), "Education: Going Back to the Booze" (*Time*), "Student Drinking a Growing Problem" (AP). By 1982 the venerable *Chronicle of Higher Education* could confidently pronounce that higher education had a "drinking problem." The College Drinking Game was on.

*Tyler Lundsgaard, 19, Ames, was charged Sunday with public intoxication.  
Cristal Moreland, 21, 307 E. College St., [Iowa City] was charged Dec. 5  
[2009] with public intoxication and urinating in public. Michael Movall, 22, 417  
S. Gilbert Apt. 4314, [Iowa City] was charged Sunday with public intoxication.  
Jordan Mullen, 19, N221 Hillcrest, [Iowa City] was charged Sunday with public  
intoxication.*

**W**ECHSLER'S STUDY AND the subsequent press campaign may or may not have convinced average Americans that college drinking was a public health crisis, but it was certainly enough to persuade the colleges that they had a mandate to go on the offensive. The first "Big Push" began across the nation in 1983 and 1984: "Campus Drinking Under Attack" (the *New York Times*), "Busting the Beer Bust" (*Newsweek*), "Colleges Put a Cork on Campus Drinking" (*U.S. News and World Report*). What did the colleges do? They watched: Clemson ordered dorm parties to be registered; Rutgers ordered frat parties to be registered; Maryland ordered *all* parties to be registered. They restricted: Connecticut banned "keggers" in dorms; Yale banned alcohol at university functions including freshmen; Wisconsin urged frats to have "dry rushes." They provided alternatives: Illinois sponsored "Fruit Juice Friday" at the bar in the student union.

More than anything else, however, the colleges pushed "responsible drinking." "We are trying to promote responsible use of alcohol rather than turning our backs on it as we did for so many years," said an official at Texas A&M. The "responsible drinking" approach rested on two untested though very convenient premises. First, that "moralistic and authoritarian approaches stressing abstinence do not work" as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* authoritatively put it. Of course the colleges didn't know if strict measures didn't work, because they had never been tried: nearly everyone agreed that, far from being brutally punished, undergraduate alcohol abuse had been "benignly neglected" for decades. But everyone — or at least everyone in the dean's office — also agreed that "authoritarian approaches" would be costly both in monetary and political terms. The second idea was this: that students could be taught to drink in a civilized manner. At the time the "responsible drinking" campaigns were launched there were virtually no data suggesting this was true. On the contrary, there was good anecdotal evidence suggesting that it wasn't: Professors had been "modeling" civilized drinking during sherry hour for ages and *still* the undergraduates got soused. Nonetheless, the colleges knew that educational campaigns were cheap and uncontroversial, so they proceeded with pamphlets, posters, and "Alcohol Awareness Week." The alcohol industry agreed heartily with the "responsible drinking" approach rather than the "no drinking approach." "The best way to prevent alcohol abuse," a Miller beer official said, "is not through restrictive measures but through education." The

brewery gave liberally to the cause, funding student groups such as BACCHUS (“Boost Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students”).

The “responsible drinking” campaign was good PR, but did it have any impact? In 1987 two senior researchers — Ruth Eng and David Hanson — reported that the rate and intensity of college drinking remained largely unchanged. Subsequent surveys over the next five years showed similar results. In 1992 Wechsler, now at the Harvard School of Public Health, dryly drew the obvious conclusion: “The stability over time of the prevalence of frequent heavy drinking among college students indicates an apparent failure of both social and institutional policies to alter this behavior.” In other words, none of it worked. Moreover, Wechsler said, the problem was actually getting worse: His most recent survey (a follow-up to the influential 1978 study) showed that more students were drinking simply to get drunk, and they were doing so more often. There was, according to Wechsler, a new college public health crisis to fight: “binge drinking.” The press caught wind of it: “Drunkenness Up Among College Students” (AP).

So did the Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation, a multi-billion-dollar philanthropy focusing on health care. The foundation gave Wechsler almost \$2 million to conduct the first “College Alcohol Survey,” a massive national study of alcohol use in higher education. In 1994 Wechsler announced his findings: binge drinking was way up. Moreover, Wechsler found that drunkenness was having all kinds of nasty “second-hand” effects. Soused students, it seemed, not only got bad grades, got beaten up, and broke their things; they also gave other people bad grades, beat other people up, and broke other people’s things. The RWJ Foundation liked what it read and spent another small fortune publicizing Wechsler’s worrisome news. The press got the memo: “44% of College Students are Binge Drinkers, Poll Says” (the *New York Times*), “The Endless Binge” (*Newsweek*), “Higher Education: Crooked on Campus” (*Time*). Wechsler appeared on *Nightline* and *Good Morning America* to warn the nation of the ongoing catastrophe.

*Daniel Fechner, 21, 14 N. Johnson St., [Iowa City] was charged April 7 [2009] with bootlegging and supplying alcohol to minors. According to Iowa City police, Fechner was the co-host of a large party at his residence. He purchased four kegs of beer and charged \$5 per cup for the beer. Many of the people he provided alcohol to were underage, including his co-host and roommate.*

**A** NEW CRISIS CALLED for a new “Big Push,” this one aimed squarely at binge drinking. But how would the new campaign be fought? Simply telling students to drink responsibly hadn’t done the trick, so what now? Researchers in the 1980s and 1990s developed two new tactics, the “environmental approach” and the “social norms approach.” They were neither entirely different nor mutually exclusive. They can, however, be easily distinguished. The environmental approach focuses on limiting supply. That means prohibiting alcohol on campus, drying out fraternities and sororities, raising alcohol prices, and even closing liquor stores and bars. Wechsler became the environmental approach’s primary advocate. The social norms approach concentrates on reducing demand by peer pressure. In the later 1980s researchers discovered that college students systematically overestimated how much their peers drank. They figured that some students were binge drinking because they thought — wrongly — that “everyone” was doing it. If colleges simply told students the *actual* rates of drinking, then the rate of binge drinking should decline. H. Wesley Perkins, one of the founders of this tack, became the social norm approach’s champion.

Over the course of the 1990s the two tactics were put to the test. The RWJ Foundation — Wechsler’s backer — funded multi-year environmental programs at ten large universities. Many other colleges implemented measures aimed at limiting access to alcohol. In a series of studies published in the early 2000s, Wechsler pronounced the

experiments a success: Making alcohol harder to get had a measurable impact on undergraduate drinking, binge and otherwise. Simultaneously, the Department of Education and the alcohol industry paid for a number of pilot social norms programs. Early results were promising. The national papers published many favorable reports and editorials (“Facts Change Student Drinking”). Colleges around the nation jumped on the social norm bandwagon. In 2002, Perkins said that social norms campaigns had proven their value: They increased the rate of abstinence, encouraged moderate drinking, and cut the rate of binge drinking.

Wechsler was being beaten at his own game. Perkins and his allies had captured the attention of the press, the public, and the colleges. This did not sit well with Wechsler. In late 2000 he fired off a testy letter to the *New York Times* complaining about its coverage of the “enthusiasm” for the social norms program. “Few studies,” he warned, “have evaluated this approach, and those that have are far from definitive.” Wechsler himself set about rectifying this problem. In 2002 he issued a blistering report saying that the social norms approach was bunk. It didn’t lower college alcohol consumption, but rather increased it. College presidents liked it because it was easy to implement and the alcohol companies would pay for it; the alcohol companies liked it because it kept the students drinking; the students liked it because they wanted to drink. The social norms approach was, he argued, clearly more harm than good in that it was taking resources away from what really worked: “tougher penalties for alcohol-associated violations of standards of conduct, limiting students’ access to alcohol, or controlling marketing practices of the alcohol industry,” that is, the environmental approach. Wechsler again had the floor. His attack on the social norms approach was widely reported: “Study on Colleges and Drinking Disputed; Critics Question ‘Feel Good’ Strategy for Curbing Abuse” (the *Boston Globe*). The many rebuttals by his livid opponents were not. Perkins, for example, said Wechsler’s report deserved an “F” for content but an “A-plus” for publicity. Others went much further, accusing Wechsler of willful deception, self-promotion, and offering his opinion for hire.

Whether these assertions had any merit or not was beside the point, for the damage was done: Wechsler had taken the bloom off the social norms rose. He had not, however, convinced the college presidents that the environmental approach was the way to go. It was a tough sell. Some of Wechsler’s own tests suggested that it might not be that effective. He defended the environmental approach by pointing out that where it was “closely implemented” it succeeded. That defense, however, raised another problem: the environmental approach was hard to “closely implement.” Wechsler himself admitted this in his own understated way: “These efforts do require considerable time and political resources.” The stakeholders — college presidents, deans, state and local politicians — were not really inclined to spend considerable political resources on the problem. It was one thing to make a few dorms alcohol-free — many colleges did this — but it was quite another to dry out tailgating, bridle fraternities and sororities, close liquor stores, shutter bars, and expel a goodly number of students. These things might “work,” but they would cause such an outcry that any college president that dared try them would probably soon be looking for work. It was far safer to simply continue muddling through with hard rhetoric and soft programs. And that, in fact, is what college presidents continued to do in the 2000s.

*[On March 27, 2009] 6 to 10 males allegedly assaulted a man near the Union Bar, 121 E. College St., at the intersection of Dubuque and College Streets around 2 a.m. According to Iowa City police, one alleged victim was knocked unconscious after running to the aid of a college-age male, who was being beaten up . . . The suspects allegedly involved were last seen running north on Dubuque Street, randomly punching other men as they ran by them, officers said.*



HERE WAS, OF course, another option: Halt The College Drinking Game by

returning the drinking age to eighteen. At the height of MADD's power in the late-1980s and 1990s, this was an even tougher sell than Wechsler's environmental approach. "Anyone who says that the twenty-one-year-old drinking law has been counterproductive," said one defender of the status quo in 1991, "is motivated by something other than saving lives." Still, some said the drinking age should be lowered. Beer industry executives did, but they would. Students who drank heavily did, but they would, too. College newspaper editors did, but no one listens to them. A few city papers did, but not many. A few college administrators did, but none very vocally. A few experts did, but most didn't. And a few state politicians did, but they were seen as out-of-touch. Meanwhile, the students themselves seemed to be trying to prove that they couldn't drink responsibly by launching a nationwide wave of "right to party" riots in 1998. They got drunk, started fires, overturned cars, attacked the police, and made lowering the drinking age look like lunacy.

Not, however, to everyone. John McCardell, president of Middlebury College, had been thinking about the drinking age for some time. In 1998 he ordered the construction of residential "commons" in order to discourage bad behavior, binge drinking at the top of the list. In 2001 he suggested that if Vermont lowered its drinking age to eighteen, Middlebury might be able to cover the costs in lost federal highway funds (it couldn't). In 2004, immediately after retiring as president, he published a widely discussed op-ed in the *New York Times* calling the 21-and-up drinking age "bad social policy and terrible law." In 2006 he published a white paper challenging the fundamental premise upon which the drinking age had been raised, that is, that it saved young lives. It was true that teen traffic fatalities had declined, he argued, but not because of the higher minimum drinking age. Twenty-one-plus contributed, but so did lots of other things like increased safety consciousness, safer cars, and enhanced law enforcement. Far from doing any good, he said, 21-plus had done harm insofar as it drove drinking underground, increased the rate of binge drinking, and encouraged disrespect for the law. The solution? Lower the drinking age, educate the youth, and issue revocable "drinking licenses." In 2007, with the support of the billion-dollar-strong Robertson Foundation, McCardell founded the organization "Choose Responsibility" to promote his idea. In 2008, he announced the "Amethyst Initiative," a petition signed by over a hundred college presidents calling on legislators to consider lowering the drinking age.

McCardell said his intention was to begin a debate. He did and promptly lost it. The editors of a few newspapers said it was "time to rethink 21," but most major papers came out strongly against the idea. More importantly, MADD launched a massive campaign against McCardell. The drinking-age issue, it said, was closed and any attempt to reopen it was tantamount to callous disregard for the lives of children. The political undertone of MADD's attack was heard loud and clear. State politicians lambasted the Amethyst Initiative's signatories; proposals to lower state drinking ages died. National politicians also listened. When presidential candidate Barack Obama was asked whether he would support lowering the drinking age he answered with one word: "No." With over three-fourths of Americans opposed to lowering the drinking age, there was no need to elaborate.

*Curtis Fry, 21, was arrested in February after he allegedly beat to death 75-year-old Jerome "Patrick" McEwen on Feb. 7 [2008], just hours after Fry celebrated his 21st birthday [in downtown Iowa City]. According to police, he allegedly got drunk and broke into McEwen's apartment before killing him. Fry is charged with second-degree murder and his trial is scheduled to begin March 9.*

**W**HATEVER YOU THINK of McCardell's proposal, he was right about one thing: Our long battle against college drinking has failed. Despite a considerable expenditure of time and money, drinking rates among college students have remained quite stable over the past 30 years: Roughly 80 percent of them drink and

about 45 percent binge drink. There has been variation: Some times — the early 1980s — and some places — “party schools” — have been worse than others. Certain programs have succeeded in reducing the percentage and intensity of drinking at particular schools (the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, is an excellent example). But the general trend nationwide is that there is no general trend nationwide. It is true, as Carla Main suggested in these pages last year (“Underage Drinking and the Drinking Age,” June & July 2009), that the campaign’s failure is primarily the result of a lack of political will. After all, we have a nationwide law on the books that, if rigorously enforced, would prevent a majority of college students from drinking anything at all. There is no sign, however, that even a large minority of the electorate wants to see 21-up rigorously enforced. Since Prohibition, prohibition has had a bad name in America. That’s not going to change.

For those who think college drinking is a public health crisis, this is sad news. But it is not at all clear that it is a public health crisis. The diagnosis of an illness rests on the definition of that illness, and it was only recently that we defined college drinking in such a way as to make it an illness. For most of the 20th century, Americans viewed college drinking as a nonevent, not a sort of sickness. This is understandable, for the number of college students was small. In 1900, two percent of eighteen- to 24-year-olds matriculated, so it was simple for “us” to ignore what “they” did. The fact that we changed our minds in the 1980s is equally understandable, for the number of college students had by then grown very large. In 1980, 40 percent of eighteen- to 24-year-olds went to college, so college drinking was harder to stomach because “they” had become “us.” Our children were drinking themselves out of school, out of careers, and out of life itself. No wonder we were ready to accept that college drinking — though it had not changed in any major way — had suddenly become a public health crisis.

Now, after 30 years of failed “treatment,” it’s time to put that notion to rest. There is good reason to do so. The archetypical “public health crises” are all bad and no good: malaria, polio, and HIV/AIDS are all excellent examples. They kill people; they do not help people. College drinking, however, is not all bad and no good. It entails definite costs, but it also makes a significant though rarely acknowledged contribution to the larger system of which it is a part. Consider this.

American higher education is the best in the world. There are many reasons for its success, but one is certainly the fact that its constituent parts, American colleges, have done something that few of their peers abroad have: created strong, lasting identity and community in the context of mass education. The University of Iowa, where I teach, has 30,000 students. It is hardly the largest campus in the United States, but it is large. Yet I can tell you from personal experience that our students suffer no anomie. On the contrary, they feel as if they are part of something much bigger than themselves. They are Hawkeyes. They don’t say “I’m at university,” but “I go to Iowa.” They don’t dress in any old way, but in the semi-official UI uniform: Hawkeye sweatshirt, jeans, running shoes, and a baseball cap (worn backwards) if you are male. Some of them are rather casual students, but they all show great enthusiasm for “the Hawks,” particularly during football season. They don’t think of their college friends as passing acquaintances, but rather as “brothers” and “sisters,” particularly if they are members of a fraternity or sorority. When they graduate they don’t really leave school, but rather become lifelong members of “Hawkeye Nation.” Every year for the rest of their lives they will “bleed black and gold,” root for the Hawks, and, occasionally, respond to solicitations from the development office for cash. They will encourage their children to go to Iowa, and their children will encourage their children to do the same.

For most students and alumni, rowdy drinking is considered essential to becoming a Hawkeye. The house parties, the downtown bars, the Greek socials, the pregame tailgating — it’s all part of the package. It may well constitute some of the glue that holds said package together. At Iowa and in American colleges throughout the nation,

getting tight and acting silly with your classmates is a rite of passage. It is self-imposed hazing writ large. Like any initiation ritual, it comes at a price. Sometimes that price is very high: arrest records, lost digits, and even lost lives. In the vast majority of cases, however, that price is low: hangovers, poor grades, and fines. If you make it through — and almost everyone does — then you will have become a different person and be welcomed into a vast, eternal community. You will have earned the right to reminisce about your eventful days in Iowa City, to warn your children with a wink not to do the things you did, and to bask in the glory of being a Hawkeye.

It bears mentioning that American colleges are hardly alone in using rowdy drinking as a method of building identities and communities. Families, neighborhoods, softball teams, civic organizations, small companies, large corporations, cities, and even entire nations very wisely allow their members to engage in raucous celebrations that inevitably involve some rowdy drinking. Of the many examples, the best perhaps is the U.S. military. Like American colleges, the four branches all have well-established traditions of rowdy drinking. Just consider what the expression “on liberty” has come to mean. But the brass strictly circumscribes the times and places boozing can go on. If service personnel break the rules, or if they fail to perform their duties as expected due to the aftereffects of drinking, then they will be punished. While it would be wrong to romanticize military drinking (it comes at a price, to be sure), it also must be recognized that rowdy drinking plays an important role in making soldiers and building military solidarity. As in American colleges, the identities and communities built in the military often extend over lifetimes: “Once a Marine, always a Marine.” And they are often reinvigorated through collective drinking, for example at the local VFW.

Identity and community are not public health problems. They are, if anything, public health solutions. Those who are clear about who they are and where they belong are generally happier and healthier than those who are confused and uprooted. This is especially true of young people who have to weather the physiological tempest of maturation and, if they attend a mega-college, do so in a very large sea. Adolescent students need to be anchored so they do not drift away. The American college does that anchoring for a larger and more diverse group of students than any institution of higher education in the world. Because it is an organic part of American history and culture, its complex workings defy understanding and replication. Anyone who claims to comprehend the American college completely is fooling themselves; any country that tries to recreate it completely is bound to fail. It is almost always a bad idea to tinker with the parts of mechanisms you don't fully understand, for in so doing you might well break those mechanisms. We should, therefore, be careful tinkering with that part of the American college which is rowdy college drinking, for in so doing we might damage the American college. This is not to say we should do nothing about the harm caused by excessive drinking. It is to say we must properly understand what that harm is and how we might mitigate it.

**R**OWDY DRINKING IS not the problem. It is an essential, ineradicable, and largely positive element of American college culture. The problem is students who cannot or will not engage in rowdy drinking safely, for they often harm themselves and others. Extensive research indicates that 10 percent to 15 percent of the population cannot or will not drink safely. Who are they? Unfortunately, we don't know until they “test” themselves by drinking. Once they do, however, their symptoms are quite clear. They include all the standard items that you find in an “Are you an alcoholic?” questionnaire, but they also include items that laypeople might not recognize as indicative of nascent unsafe drinking. Drunk driving convictions are an example. The penalties for DUI are extraordinarily harsh. In Iowa, the *first* conviction will get you from 48 hours to one year in jail, a \$625 to \$1,250 fine, a 180-day license suspension, and mandatory substance abuse counseling. If a person, knowing these consequences (and everyone does), gets a DUI, then it makes sense to say that they

probably can't or won't drink safely. If that person, knowing that even more draconian consequences will follow (and everyone does), gets a second DUI then it make sense to say that they certainly cannot or will not drink safely. The same logic applies to other legal infractions — public intoxication, assault, vandalism — when they are committed under the influence of alcohol. If a person gets caught doing one of these things when they drink, then they are dangerous when drinking.

The *Daily Iowan*, the University of Iowa's student paper, runs the Iowa City police blotter every day. On an average weekday there are five to ten listings, most of them identifying eighteen- to 25-year-olds who have been charged with one of the above-mentioned infractions while drinking. On Fridays and Saturdays the number routinely passes twenty. On Saturdays when the Hawkeyes play at home, that number can top 50. Not all of these law-breakers are drunk and not all of them are UI students. Many of them, however, are. By getting caught doing these things under the influence, they have identified themselves as a class of special concern to the university: students who cannot or will not safely engage in rowdy drinking. The course of action the university should take is clear. Since rowdy drinking is going to go on, and since these students have demonstrated they cannot or will not engage in it without harming themselves or others, they must be dismissed from the university and its environs. This measure should not be viewed as punishment any more than giving a student a bad grade for poor performance is a punishment. Rather, its intention is to protect the student and the community of which he or she is a part. The dismissal need not be permanent: Exiled students should be able to apply for re-admission once they have demonstrated to the university that they will not drink or will drink safely. This proof might be provided by written evidence of steady work, a clean record, and confirmation of regular attendance at a substance abuse treatment program. Once this proof is proffered, they should be welcomed back with open arms. Such a policy will not diminish the rate or intensity of college drinking. That is practically impossible. But it will teach some students that they cannot drink safely and it will shield the college community from further damage they might do. The former may well save their lives; the latter may save mine.

I do not want drunk students beating at my door at 3:00 in the morning. But I do not want to continue playing The College Drinking Game either. I cannot win, and I'm reasonably sure that I do not want to. What I do want is for the remarkable institution which is the American college to continue to prosper, and for those who are unable to enjoy its fruits due to an inability to drink safely to leave, mature, and return. This, I think, we can accomplish.

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