

# Gauntlet Features - Think before you drink

## Why it's important to drown the myths behind the student bender

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Story date: Thursday, November 06, 2008

### Redefining the binge

The concept of binge drinking used to have a radically different meaning. It conjured up images of severely intoxicated hooligans roving around drunk for two or three days at a time, people who could hardly stand up, who couldn't stop drinking, who appeared nearly dead. This was the image associated with falling off the wagon and with going on a bender.

But these multi-day drinking bouts are no longer the clinical understanding of binge drinking. Dr. Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York state, suggests that the historical connotation still brings its debauched image with it into present-day discourse. It is for this reason that it produces controversy.

"Historically and traditionally and in most clinicians minds, as well as in some research journal minds, the word binge has referred to somebody going on a day and night drinking sprawl," says Perkins. "That got changed, in some people's minds and in the media, when there was an initiative that came out by a researcher named Henry Wexler, out of the Harvard school of public health, who began doing research on college populations, survey research and defined a binge as four drinks at a sitting for women and five drinks at a sitting for men."

As Perkins points out, Wexler's standard leads to some difficulty. While it certainly is valuable as a measure, it can be misleading. The general rule is that individuals can metabolize about one drink per hour. If you were to have five drinks in five hours you would be simultaneously drinking safely and binge drinking.

Perkins notes that when the study came out it garnered a lot of attention in the media, which was commendable, but suggests that because the new findings still conjured up the traditional understanding of binge drinking, leading many to believe that students considered binge drinkers in the new model were behaving as if they were on benders, it became controversial.

"[Concluding that] 40 per cent of students across the nation in this study were binge drinkers, it brought these images that I was talking about initially of people just being, you know, drop-dead intoxicated," Perkins says.

The confusion of what binge drinking actually is parallels the main concerns to do with alcohol on campus: misconceptions among students.

Very real threats

Entering university, students often find themselves with far more freedom than they have possessed at any other point in their lives. This freedom to act, coupled with the beliefs and accepted behaviours of the peer group they associate with, may lead to a dramatic increase in drinking.

"Peer pressure actually plays a huge role in what to do and what appears normal to them," says Frances Wdowczyk, the executive director of the Student Life Education Company. "It is important to encourage students to have a lot of options . . . so they don't get pigeon-holed into one [type of person] who they don't want to be."

There are great dangers to the abuse of alcohol. University of Calgary clinical psychologist Dr. David Hodgins identified that binge drinking-- in the sense that an individual is actually engaging in risky drinking-- can lead to a number of concerns: accidents, violence, poor grades and bad decisions around sex.

"Most students would be in the light-drinking category, but a significant per cent would be in this infrequent, heavy-drinking category," says Hodgins.

AADAC addictions counsellor Meghan McDonald agrees the majority of the student population won't encounter trouble with substances. She noted there are key signs that an individual's use has gotten out of hand.

"Usually what we'll see is that it will start affecting different parts of their lives: their school, their financial, their family relationships, other relationships [and] their emotional well-being and physical health."

She says students with a problem may notice they have low-energy levels or that they are suffering from extreme hangovers. These physical problems then may start to affect their activity level, which will contribute to a further degradation of physical well-being. Alcoholic students may also have emotional problems, experiencing a range of undesirable feelings, from disappointment to guilt.

Beyond these obvious and immediate issues arising from the abuse of alcohol, there is also the concern that individuals who are problem drinkers in university may not be able to break the habit once they finish school. Hodgins estimates 10-15 per cent of the general population misuse alcohol, noting some may begin to develop those tendencies while in university, possibly resulting in them failing to complete their degrees.

### Responsible drinkers and the perpetual problem

It is certainly possible to drink responsibly. As Campus Security director Lanny Fritz suggests, one can choose to go out with friends and be safe by sticking together, alternating alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones, ensuring to eat while drinking and having a plan to get home after the bar or party that won't risk lives. Students can get a Park and Party pass from Campus Security, Safewalk or the bartenders at the Den, which will allow them to leave their car on campus until nine o'clock the next morning. And, if they have serious concerns about their drinking habits, students can find services on campus to help them deal with those problems.

"AADAC is there at the counselling services the first Thursday of every month to do assessments and intakes. If some students are concerned about their use and have questions about it, they can meet with

an AADAC counsellor and that support can be ongoing," says McDonald, noting they can also connect students to other programs and services. Despite such simple and seemingly self-evident solutions being available, alcohol remains one of the largest problems on campuses.

"If you talk to administrators, if you look at research data, if you talk to even students themselves, I mean, alcohol is usually identified as the, one of the, or usually the number one problem on most college campuses," says Perkins.

### The cyclical myth

Perhaps the biggest reason that alcohol retains its position as a destructive aspect of campus life is that most students believe all their peers drink heavily and that it is acceptable-- even expected-- for them to do so. This, though, is not an accurate understanding of the reality of alcohol use on campus.

"I think one of the most critical things in this is the point that this is not something, the problem is not something that is exhibited by the majority of students," says Perkins. "Even though I say it's a big problem, typically the biggest problem on college campuses, university campuses, the problem drinking that goes on is done by a minority of students."

Much of Perkins work focuses on the misconception that "everyone's doing it" and how it's one of the main reasons alcoholism perpetuates on campuses year-in, year-out.

As students believe that the majority of their peers are engaged in heavy drinking, they are more likely to pursue those paths themselves and the stereotype reinforces itself. Perkins points out this also impairs many of the efforts put in place to deal with alcohol.

"Often rules will not work, or will not work as well as they could, because frequently college students think, 'Oh nobody else believes in the rules, nobody else is going to follow it,' which is not always the case. There are many rules and regulations with regards to alcohol that students support, but they're not aware that most of their peers support them. Consequently, the rules don't work as well as they could and the people trying to enforce them can't enforce them as well as they could, or should, because of this general malaise with people thinking that 'nobody else supports the rules, so why bother?'"

Yet, the truth is that most students are supportive of measures to reduce problem drinking and most students do drink within reasonable limits. Indeed, many of those who drink heavily during campus life will reduce their drinking of their own accord once they leave that environment.

"We have what is known as maturing out," said Hodgins. "[During their] university days people are drinking more frequently. Then they join the work force, get married or, if they don't get married, join a long-term relationship and naturally cut back."

The recent change in the meaning of binge drinking illuminates the problematic misconceptions about alcohol use on campus. Many students' enter this environment thinking that drinking heavily is as much a part of student life as attending classes. While a minority of students do track a difficult path through university in this way, it is not the norm and far more of their peers support responsible alcohol use than they may think.

Even if a student suspects that their conduct may be adhering to binge drinking in the classical sense, they have the opportunity to seek the help that they need.

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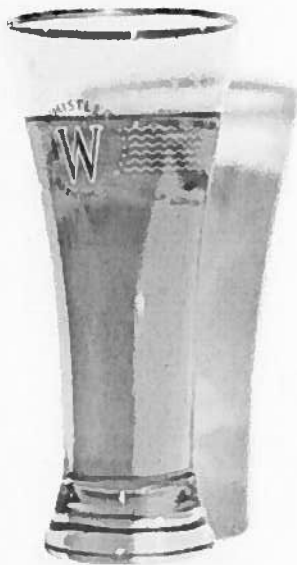


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