

**alcohol use, sexual behavior,
and perceived stigma among
william smith students**



by samantha miller

Wasted, smashed, tanked—call it what you will. While the term differs from student to student, drinking and the negative consequences associated with alcohol remain serious issues on college campuses. Recent studies estimate that over 80% of college students have consumed alcohol within the past year (Core Institute, 2005). Granted, the majority of students who engage in heavy episodic drinking will graduate without experiencing any serious physical or social injuries (Jerslid, 2001). But for some young women, risky drinking behaviors lead to diminished academic performance, health issues, unintended sexual activity, and a number of other consequences.

I set out to study the effects of alcohol on college women—more specifically, I wanted to determine whether or not college women use alcohol as a means to excuse their sexual behaviors or alter traditional sex roles. One of the most pervasive power relationships woven throughout any society is the one between men and women. But there is a fundamental contradiction between the gender stereotypes we are expected to comply with and the reality of things. A sexual double standard continues to guide heterosexual interactions—being sexually promiscuous remains acceptable behavior for men, but not for women (White et al., 1997; Jerslid, 2001). Just look at the terminology used to describe sexually promiscuous men versus women. Men are called “players” while women are called “sluts”—the former term carries positive connotations while the latter is far more negative. Put simply, the “Madonna-whore” dichotomy is still very much a part of American culture.

But when we bring alcohol into the mixture, everything changes. Often times, peers excuse one another’s actions if the person in question consumed alcohol before the transgression. “Oh, I was drunk” quickly becomes an excuse for the previous night’s behaviors.



“I was finally confident I could heat up my sex life because I was a sex columnist, I was resourceful, and I was drunkity-drunk-drunk.”

— Carrie from *Sex and the City*

.....

To uncover the gender dynamics that guide young women’s alcohol consumption and sexual behavior, I designed the following study. It is my hope that the information provided in this zine clears up any misperceptions regarding William Smith women or the effects of alcohol. More importantly, I hope the following pages resonate with William Smith women of all ages, experiences, and backgrounds.

I thank everyone that participated in and helped create the 2009 Alcohol and Sexual Behavior Study. This zine is dedicated to you.

Samantha Miller
William Smith Class of 2009

alcohol and the female body

what is heavy episodic
or **binge drinking**?



5 alcoholic drinks for men



4 alcoholic drinks for women

Alcohol absorption occurs at different rates in men and women which is why the Dietary Guidelines of America suggests that women consume no more than one drink per day while men can consume two (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2005). However, heavy episodic drinking is defined as consuming “five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks in a row for women” (Maggs, 2005).

“ Over many years, more than one drink a day for women and more than two drinks a day for men may be enough to lead to cirrhosis. ”

according to the Mayo Clinic

Women become intoxicated more quickly than men for two main reasons:

1

After alcohol has been ingested, it becomes dispersed throughout the water in the body. Men tend to weigh more than women, and **women have a greater fat-to-water ratio than men—this means that women on average have less water to dilute the alcohol**. So, less water translates into higher alcohol concentration and a quicker rate of intoxication. (Perkins, 2000; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2005).

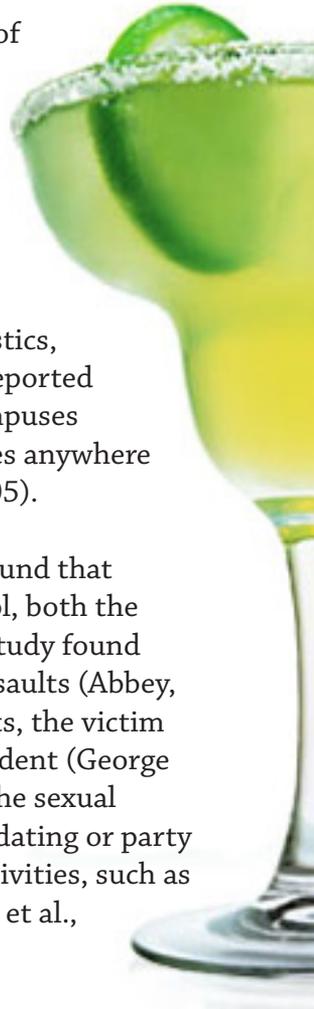
2

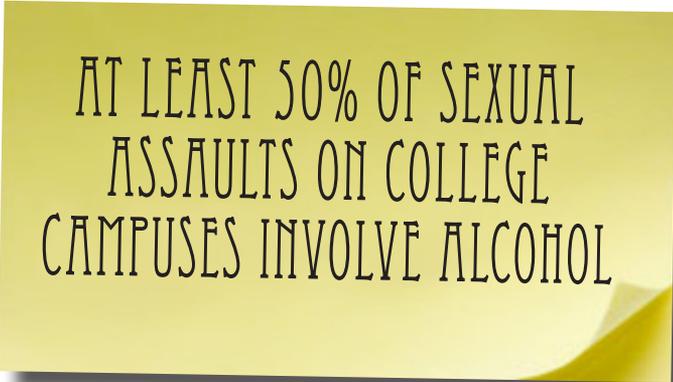
Women produce lower levels of the stomach enzyme that facilitates the breakdown of alcohol, which means they “metabolize alcohol less efficiently than men do” (Perkins, 2000). For these reasons, women usually become intoxicated at a much quicker rate and after consuming the same amounts of alcohol as their male drinking buddies.

negative consequences associated with heavy episodic drinking

Alcohol-related sexual assault and incidents of rape remain common occurrences on college campuses, and studies have consistently shown that drinking, even in small quantities, increases a woman's risk of being sexually assaulted (Parks et al., 2008; Abbey, 2002). Sexual assault generally refers to a wide range of unwanted sexual contact, whereas rape refers to forced sexual intercourse (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005; Abbey, 2002). Sociologist Antonia Abbey reported that at least 50% of sexual assaults on college campuses involve alcohol, while other studies place estimates anywhere from 30% to 79% (Abbey, 2002; George et al., 2005).

Studies with college students have consistently found that in the majority of sexual assaults involving alcohol, both the victim and perpetrator had been drinking—one study found this to be true in 97% of alcohol-related sexual assaults (Abbey, 2002). Additionally, in over 80% of sexual assaults, the victim and perpetrator knew one another before the incident (George et al., 2005). In fact, Abbey found that “most of the sexual assaults experienced by college students occur in dating or party situations, often after some consensual sexual activities, such as kissing or sexual touching, have occurred” (Abbey et al., 2003).





AT LEAST 50% OF SEXUAL
ASSAULTS ON COLLEGE
CAMPUSES INVOLVE ALCOHOL



Alcohol Poisoning

**Unintended sexual activity
or sexual victimization**

Increased risk of liver disease

Diminished academic performance

Cardiovascular complications

**Physical impairments including
hangovers and blackouts**

**Increased risk of contracting
sexually transmitted diseases and H.I.V.**

2009

alcohol and sexual behavior survey results

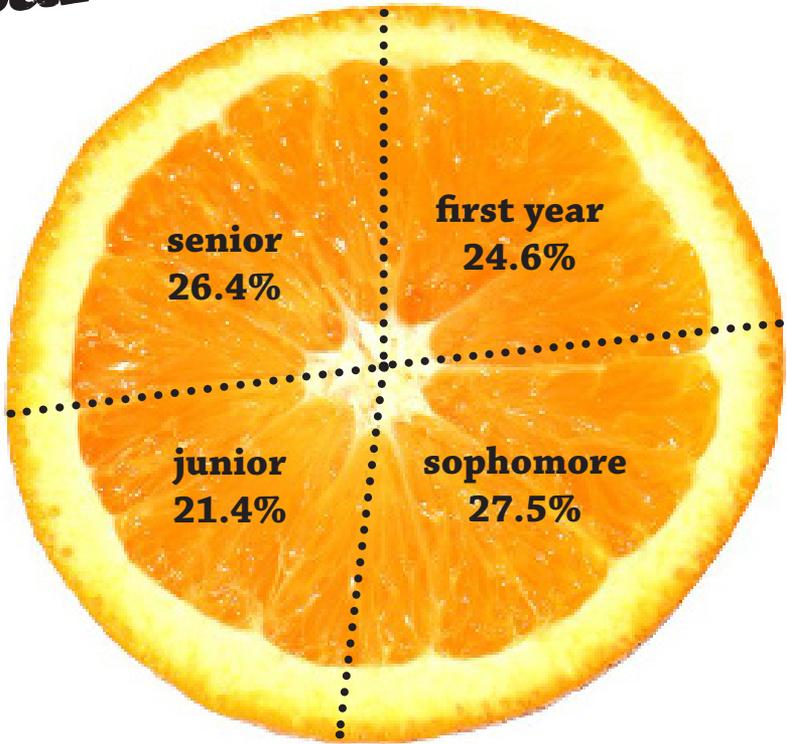
The entire William Smith population was invited to participate in this survey. **565 students** responded representing a 52% response rate (the “gold standard” for web-based surveys).

The following study was designed to address the limitations of previous sociological studies—few studies actually address the possibility that women use alcohol as a means to excuse their sexual behaviors. In order to determine whether or not this is actually the case, I had to first uncover if college women are stigmatized for their sexual behaviors. I also wanted to determine if a double standard exists for female intoxication and sexual promiscuity. Based on the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles in western culture and the assumption that women *are* negatively stereotyped for being promiscuous, I examined these primary hypotheses:

- (a) William Smith students use alcohol as a means to excuse sexual behavior.
- (b) William Smith students are stigmatized for becoming intoxicated.
- (c) William Smith students are stigmatized for becoming intoxicated and then having casual sex.

Anyone under the age of 18 was asked not to participate. Participants received an e-mail with a link to the survey website along with a personal password that allowed them access to the survey. Each participant was provided with a unique password that could only be used once. This procedure ensured that everyone invited to take the survey could only submit the survey one time. It was stated in the survey directions that data would be anonymous.

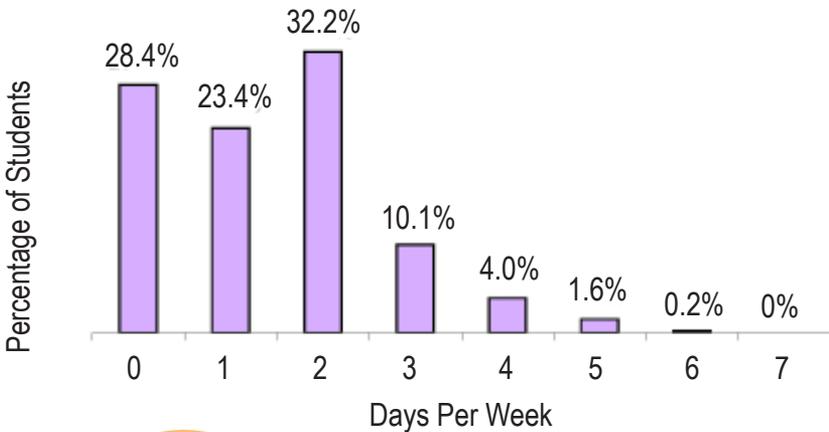
participants:



how much do william smith students really drink?

The majority (51.8%) of female students typically consume alcohol one day or less per week. An additional 32.2% of respondents consume alcohol two days per week. The majority of respondents (51.4%) typically consume three or fewer drinks each occasion. Less than one third of students (27.4%) consume between 4-5 drinks each occasion.

NUMBER OF **DAYS** ALCOHOLIC DRINKS
ARE TYPICALLY CONSUMED EACH WEEK

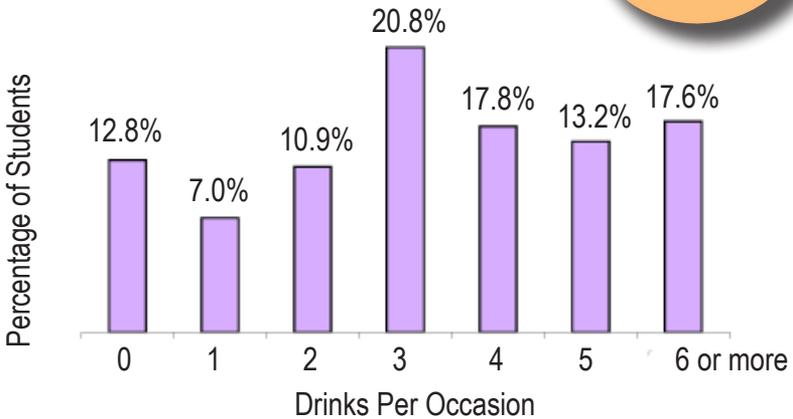


**0-1 days
each week**

The majority of William Smith students typically consume three or fewer drinks each occasion.

NUMBER OF ALCOHOLIC DRINKS TYPICALLY CONSUMED PER OCCASION

0-3 drinks each time



why do william smith students become intoxicated?

motivations:

	Percent*
To have fun/have a good time	36.5
To lower inhibitions/feel more relaxed in social situations	29.0
Pressure to “fit in” in the college culture/seem cool among peers	27.3
To unwind and relax after a stressful week of school/feel less stressed	15.9
To use alcohol as an excuse for their behavior/act in ways they normally would not	6.9
They are bored/feel there is nothing better to do on campus	5.5
To draw attention to themselves—especially from men	5.5
To feel more sexually appealing to men	5.0
They do not know their tolerance for alcohol	3.9
To make having sex or “hooking up” easier	3.4
Other	3.4

*Percentages do not equal 100.0% because respondents could provide multiple definitions.



Gaby: Cocktails, nobody called me?

Susan: It was spur of the moment.

We're numbing the pain of our miserable lives.

Gaby: I'm just gonna say it. Tequila makes me happy!

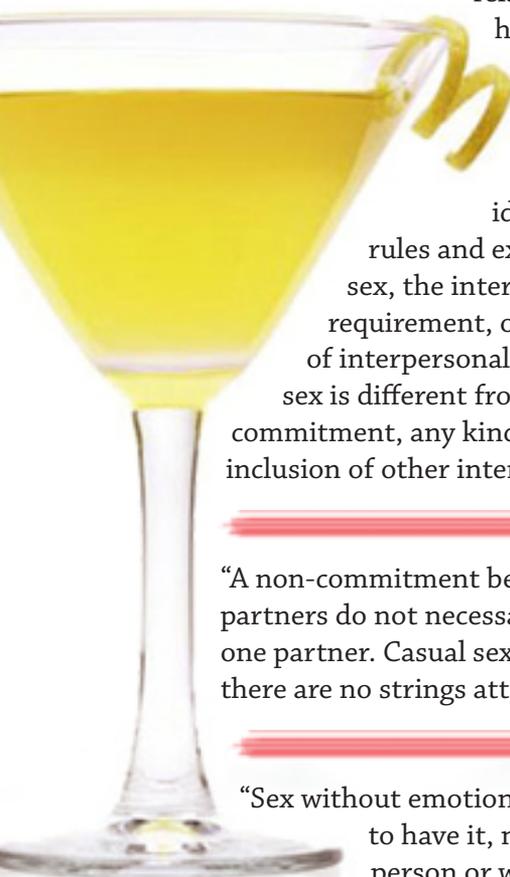
— *Desperate Housewives*

Although college women drink for a number of different reasons, certain motives tend to emerge more often than others. A total of 36.5% of respondents believed that alcohol could be used to have fun, 29.0% thought it could be used to lower inhibitions or feel more relaxed in social situations, and 27.3% believed women become intoxicated to “fit in” or seem cool among peers. With regards to using alcohol as a means to excuse sexual behaviors, 3.4% of respondents *explicitly* stated that their peers use alcohol to make having sex or making “hooking up” easier. Additionally, 15.7% implicitly believed women drink to facilitate sexual encounters (these respondents indicated that WS students drink to draw attention to themselves—especially from men, to feel more sexually appealing to men, to make having sex or “casual sex” easier, or to use alcohol as an excuse for their behavior).

Before I could determine whether or not William Smith students use alcohol as a means to excuse their sexual behaviors, I had to first uncover students' definition of "casual sex."

here's what students had to say...

"Having sex with someone you don't know well, don't have a relationship with and will probably not have a relationship with that person in the future."



"Well, the word casual brings up ideas and images of the opposite of rules and expectations; when you have casual sex, the intercourse happens without the need, requirement, or expectation of any other kind of interpersonal interaction or behavior. Casual sex is different from other types of sex as it lacks commitment, any kind of planned longevity, or the inclusion of other interactions typical of a 'couple.'"

"A non-commitment between any two people. The two partners do not necessarily commit themselves solely to one partner. Casual sex is with whoever, whenever, and there are no strings attached to that person."

"Sex without emotional involvement; you have sex just to have it, not to because you care about the person or want to have a relationship."

sexual behaviors among students

definitions of casual sex:

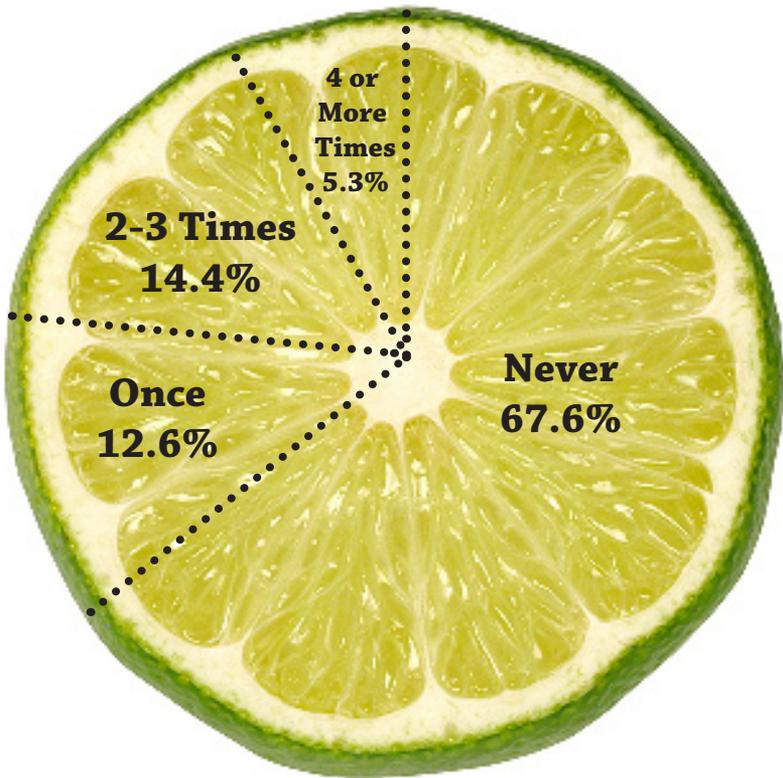
Percent*

Sex outside of a relationship	36.5
Having no emotional or romantic attachment to a partner	24.8
Having no expectations of a future relationship	18.4
Having no sense of commitment/“no strings attached”	18.2
Having sex just for fun/because it feels good	14.5
Having sex with a friend or acquaintance	11.0
Having a “one time fling”	8.8
Having sex with someone more than one time	7.3
Having multiple partners	5.3
Having sex as a result of drinking	4.4
Having sex irresponsibly/without protection (ex: condoms or birth control)	0.9
Having sex before marriage	0.4
Other	4.2

*Percentages do not equal 100.0% because respondents could provide multiple definitions.

One-third of William Smith students have become intoxicated and then had casual sex... Over half of them intended to do so.

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE **BECOME INTOXICATED AND THEN ENGAGED IN CASUAL SEX** SINCE FIRST COMING TO COLLEGE (N=562)



PERCEPTIONS OF THE
PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE
STUDENTS WHO BECOME
INTOXICATED TO MAKE
HAVING CASUAL SEX MORE
COMFORTABLE (N=558)

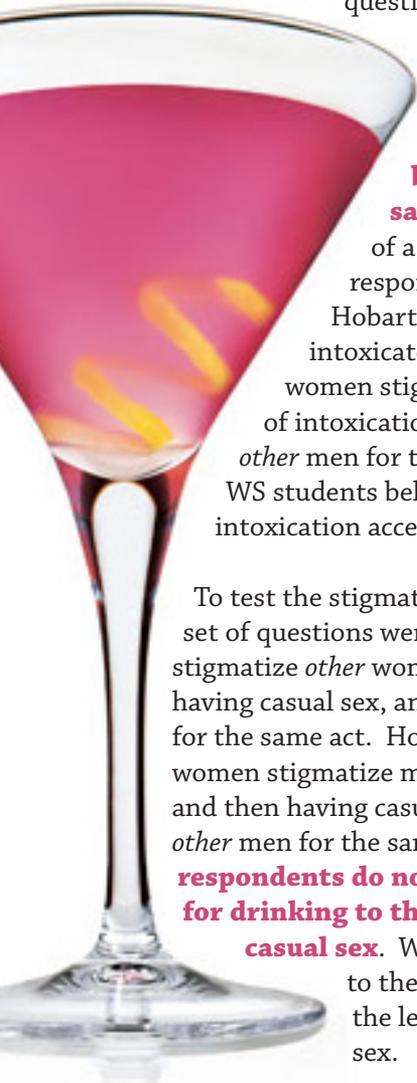
Estimation Range	Percent of Respondents
0-20% of students	21.9
21-40%	34.8
41-60%	26.7
61-80%	13.8
81-100%	2.9

RESPONDENTS WHO
INTENTIONALLY BECAME
INTOXICATED AND THEN
ENGAGED IN CASUAL SEX:

17.1%

Respondents were asked to recall the number of occasions they had become intoxicated and then had casual sex since first coming to college. A total of 67.3% had never done so—this means that 32.4% (approximately 1/3) of respondents have had casual sex after becoming intoxicated. After closer analysis, however, 52.7% of respondents who have become intoxicated and then engaged in casual sex clearly indicated that they intended to do so. Therefore, **17.1% of college women have intentionally become intoxicated and then engaged in casual sex.** Here's the interesting part: when asked to estimate the percentage of WS students who drink to the level of intoxication to make having casual sex more comfortable, only 21.9% of had accurate perceptions of the true percentage (0-20% estimation range). This means that **78.1% of students overestimate the norm.** In other words, the actual norm is *not* drinking to the level of intoxication and then engaging in casual sex. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of students misperceive this sort of behavior as being far more prevalent than it actually is.

stigmatization of female intoxication and promiscuity



To test the stigmatization of female intoxication, a series of close-ended questions were asked regarding respondents' perceptions of other students' drinking habits. **A total of 81.2% believed women stigmatize other women for becoming intoxicated, and 76.4% believed men stigmatize women for the same act.** To uncover the possible existence of a double-sexual standard for drinking habits, respondents were also asked if they believed Hobart students are stigmatized for becoming intoxicated. While 69.0% of respondents believed women stigmatize men for drinking to the level of intoxication, only 36.9% believed men stigmatize other men for the same act. These results indicate that WS students believe men find drinking to the level of intoxication acceptable behavior for men, but not for women.

To test the stigmatization of female promiscuity, a similar set of questions were asked. A total of 94.5% believed women stigmatize other women for becoming intoxicated and then having casual sex, and 92.9% believed men stigmatize women for the same act. However, while 80.9% of respondents believed women stigmatize men for drinking to the level of intoxication and then having casual sex, only 36.3% believed men stigmatize other men for the same act. Put simply, **the majority of respondents do not believe men stigmatize other men for drinking to the level of intoxication and then having casual sex.** Women are therefore stigmatized for drinking to the level of intoxication, along with drinking to the level of intoxication and then having casual sex.

**PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE STIGMATIZATION
OF DRINKING TO THE LEVEL OF INTOXICATION
(N=563)**

		Yes, definitely	Yes, somewhat	No, not at all	
Believe female students are stigmatized:	By <i>other</i> female students	21.5	59.7	18.8	100.0%
	By male students	20.0	56.4	23.6	100.0%
Believe male students are stigmatized:	By female students	19.3	49.7	31.0	100.0%
	By <i>other</i> male students	9.2	27.7	63.1	100.0%

**PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE STIGMATIZATION OF
DRINKING TO THE LEVEL OF INTOXICATION AND THEN
ENGAGING IN CASUAL SEX (N=565)**

		Yes, definitely	Yes, somewhat	No, not at all	
Believe female students are stigmatized:	By <i>other</i> female students	52.9	41.6	5.5	100.0%
	By male students	51.8	41.1	7.1	100.0%
Believe male students are stigmatized:	By female students	26.4	54.3	19.1	100.0%
	By <i>other</i> male students	9.2	26.7	63.7	100.0%

summary and additional findings

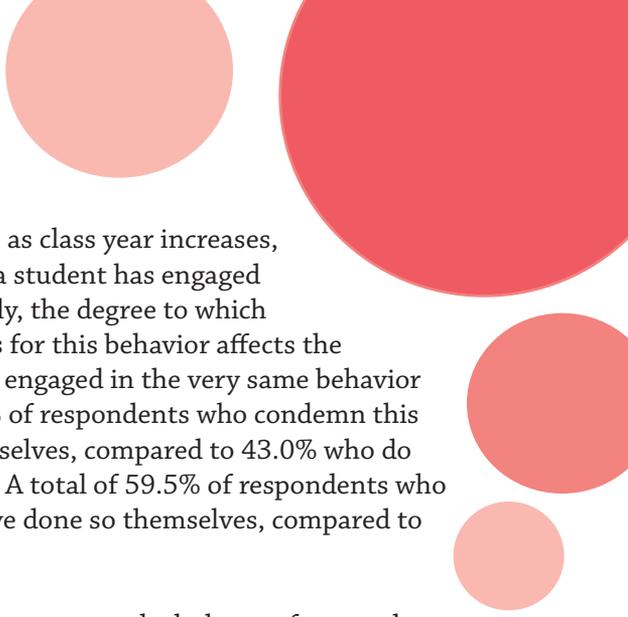
Achieving a 52% response rate, along with the fact that participants were nearly evenly distributed among class years, suggests this data set is likely to be representative of the larger William Smith population.

The current study found that college women are stigmatized for becoming intoxicated. College women are also stigmatized for becoming intoxicated and then engaging in casual sex. Perhaps most interesting, the majority of respondents misperceive the percentage of students who drink to the level of intoxication and then engage in casual sex. Results show that several factors are related to the likelihood that WS students have become intoxicated and then engaged in casual sex including: class year, impressions and misperceptions of other students who engage in this behavior, and typical patterns of alcohol consumption.

In accordance with previous campus-wide studies conducted by Professor H. Wesley Perkins and Professor David Craig, the majority (51.8%) of female students typically consume alcohol one day or less, and the majority of respondents (51.4%) typically consume three or less drinks per occasion.

As expected, women are stigmatized for becoming intoxicated, particularly in comparison to Hobart students. While respondents condemn both female and male intoxication at similar levels, findings also show that respondents approve of male intoxication at higher rates than female intoxication.

Respondents who overestimate the percentage of students who intentionally become intoxicated and then engage in casual sex are more likely to do so themselves. For instance, of the respondents who overestimated the actual norm, 69.4% had engaged in this behavior, compared to 23.0% of respondents who held accurate perceptions.



Class year also has a bearing on the number of times a student has engaged in this behavior since first coming to college; as class year increases, it becomes more likely that a student has engaged in this behavior. Additionally, the degree to which a student stigmatizes others for this behavior affects the likelihood that she will have engaged in the very same behavior herself. For example, 28.2% of respondents who condemn this behavior have done so themselves, compared to 43.0% who do not condemn this behavior. A total of 59.5% of respondents who approve of this behavior have done so themselves, compared to 27.6% who do not approve.

Finally, female students who consume alcohol more frequently and in larger quantities are much more likely to become intoxicated and engage in casual sex during their time at college. Of those students who typically drink three or more days per week, 70.1% have engaged in this behavior, compared to 25.0% of those who typically drink one day per week. Of those students who typically engage in “high risk drinking” behaviors (consuming 5.5 or more drinks per occasion), 56.3% have become intoxicated and then had casual sex, compared to 20.7% of those who typically engage in “lower risk drinking” behaviors (consuming 1-3 drinks per occasion).

This study highlights the gender contradictions William Smith women experience. Traditional gender norms are still taken into consideration when it comes to perceived stigma regarding female intoxication and sexuality. Women are either wholesome or promiscuous—in other words, the “Madonna-whore” dichotomy is still very much apart of American culture within the context of our campus. And yet, it appears as though college women may have found a loophole. Why do one-third of female students become intoxicated and then engage in casual sex; why do 17.1% of these students become intoxicated with the intention of engaging in casual sex? Moreover, why do nearly 80% of female students overestimate this percentage? Perhaps these young women believe that by consuming alcohol before having casual sex, their “wholesome” image can remain intact. After all, it was the alcohol talking—not them.

bibliography

- ABBEY, Antonia. Alcohol-Related Sexual Assault: A Common Problem among College Students. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 14 (2002): 118-128.
- ABBEY, Antonia, BUCK, Philip O., SAENZ, Christopher, and ZAWACKI, Tina. Alcohol's Effects on Perceptions of a Potential Date Rape. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* September (2003): 669-677.
- BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS. Criminal Victimization in the United States—Statistical Tables Index: Definitions. www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ July (2005).
- CORE INSTITUTE. The Core Alcohol and Drug Survey. Southern Illinois University (2005).
- GEORGE, William H. and ZAWACKI, Tina. The Role of Alcohol in Campus Violence and Sexual Assault. *Use and Harm Prevention: A Resource for College Students*, Tanglewood Research (2005): 133-151.
- JERSILD, Devon. *Happy Hours: Alcohol in a Woman's Life*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers (2001).
- MAGGS, Jennifer and LEE, Christine. Drinking Motives, Alcohol Expectancies, and Consequences: What Do Students Expect When They Drink, and What Actually Happens? *Use and Harm Prevention: A Resource for College Students*, Tanglewood Research (2005): 95-107.
- MAYO CLINIC. Liver Problems: Common Problems and How to Avoid Them. www.mayoclinic.com/health/liver/DG00038/ February (2007).
- NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON ALCOHOL ABUSE AND ALCOHOLISM (NIAAA). Alcohol A Woman's Health Issue. NIH Publication No. 04-4956. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2005).

PARKS, Kathleen A., ROMOSZ, Ann M., BRADIZZA, Clara M., and HSIEH, Ya-Ping. A Dangerous Transition: Women's Drinking and Related Victimization From High School to the First Year at College. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* January (2008): 65-74.

PERKINS, H. Wesley. Research on Women's Drinking. *Catalyst* 6 (2000): 6-7.

WHITE, Helene Raskin, HUSELID, Rebecca Farmer. Gender Differences in Alcohol Use During Adolescence (Chapter 7). *Gender and Alcohol: Individual and Social Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies (1997): 176-198.

artwork

Cover graphic designed by Max A. Miller
Contact: mamiller5@bsu.edu

Contents art:

Cointreau Liqueur	www.cointreau.com
Orange slice	http://commons.wikimedia.org/
Lime slice	www.pbase.com
Lemon wedge	www.corbis.com

acknowledgements

H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Department of Anthropology and Sociology

David W. Craig, Ph.D
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Department of Chemistry

For more information visit:
<http://www.AlcoholEducationProject.org>



This zine was funded through Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Department of Anthropology and Sociology.

© Copyleft Samantha Miller, 2009
Feel free to quote, adapt, reprint, and reproduce,
but please attribute to the author.