

# Alcohol Use, Collegiate Patterns and Problems of

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Drinking in college has a long tradition in the culture of most college and university campuses and remains one of the most common images associated with students' social lives. Four out of every five students consume alcohol in college and two out of five are typically classified as heavy or high-risk drinkers based on their consumption levels (Presley, Meilman, and Cashin 1996; Wechsler et al. 1998). Research on the damage brought about by heavy drinking in college populations has demonstrated a wide range of negative consequences that personally affect the drinkers themselves, others with whom they come in contact, and the institutions they attend. The prevalence rates among students for various problems typically range from 5 percent to over one-third of the population in a given year. Longitudinal data suggest that although abstaining increased slightly in the 1990s among students in the United States, heavy drinking and associated consequences did not decline. Thus the problems generated by student drinking continue to present a major health hazard and social problem for higher education communities and society at large.

The relatively high rates of drinking in college in comparison with most other contexts reflect both the cultural context and developmental stage of most students. Drinking levels peak in the early years of young adulthood (18–24), which is the typical age range of most college students. Furthermore, in extending their education many students delay the commitments of marriage, family, and full-time employment that often constrain drinking to some extent. The peer-intensive environments of most colleges, where social life involves few older adults and other agents of social control, and the social rituals emphasizing drinking in college traditions such as fraternity and sorority initiations and pregame and postgame athletic parties further increase the pressure to drink heavily. Perhaps the best evidence of the unique power of this collegiate cultural context to promote and sustain heavy drinking among students is found in the clear pattern of data showing no change in the relatively high percentages of heavy

drinking college students in the last two decades when contrasted with marked decline in heavy drinking among high school students and noncollege young adults after increases in the drinking age laws to age 21 occurred in many states (Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman 1997).

It is also important, however, to emphasize that heavy drinking and its consequences, although commonly associated with college life, are *not* characteristic of the majority of students in most contexts. Most students erroneously tend to think that their peers are, on average, more permissive in personal drinking attitudes than is the case and, likewise, that peers consume more heavily, on average, than is really the norm (Perkins et al. 1999). When peer norms are misperceived as more problematic than is the case and when students think the majority of peers carelessly let drinking hurt themselves and others, then these misperceptions facilitate or give social license to the significant minority of students whose drinking is problematic (Perkins 1997; Perkins and Wechsler 1996).

## PERSONAL DRINKING PROBLEMS

To describe the broad terrain of problems resulting from student drinking, it is useful to categorize these problems depending on who suffers the consequences. Extensive personal consequences have been documented in national studies. Among 41,581 students responding to the Core Alcohol and Drug Survey at 89 institutions, 22 percent indicated that they had performed poorly on a test or project and 28 percent had missed a class during the last year because of alcohol or other drug use (Presley et al. 1996). Wechsler et al.'s (1998) nationwide College Alcohol Study surveyed 14,521 students attending 116 four-year colleges and universities in 1997 and found 30 percent of drinkers reporting missing a class and 23 percent of drinkers reporting getting behind in schoolwork during the current year as a result of drinking. A consistent negative

association between self-reported grade averages and levels of alcohol consumption also is revealed in nationwide studies (Engs, Diebold, and Hanson 1996; Presley et al. 1996), although causal certainty is not possible with these cross-sectional data.

Among personal health risks of student drinking, alcohol-induced "blackouts" or memory loss during periods of heavy drinking are frequently reported. In the nationwide College Alcohol Survey (Wechsler et al. 1998) 27 percent of drinkers reported at least one incident in the past year of having forgotten where they were or what they did because of drinking. Nationwide prevalence rates of injury to self among students as a result of one's drinking within a one-year period are approximately 10 percent to 15 percent (Presley et al. 1996; Wechsler et al. 1998). Across the nation 40 percent of students report at least one hangover and 47 percent indicated having nausea or vomiting as a result of alcohol or other drug use within the year (Presley et al. 1996). Twenty-three percent of drinkers had engaged in unplanned sexual activity during the current academic year and 11 percent of drinkers reported not using protection when having sex because of their drinking (Wechsler et al. 1998). More than 5 percent of respondents confided that they had thought about committing suicide and 1.6 percent revealed that they had actually tried to commit suicide within the last year because of drinking or other drug use (Presley et al. 1996).

The risk of rape victimization among female undergraduates has been linked to the victim's alcohol use (as well as to the perpetrator's consumption discussed below). Twelve percent of females participating in the Core Survey nationwide (Presley et al. 1996) reported having been taken advantage of sexually during the last year as a result of their drinking or other drug use.

Over one-third (36 percent) of drinkers in the nationwide College Alcohol Study (Wechsler et al. 1998) said they had driven after drinking alcohol during that school year. Arrests for driving while intoxicated were reported at a rate of 1.7 percent among all students in the nationwide Core Survey data (Presley et al. 1996), and 12 percent of students admitted experiencing some type of trouble with police or campus authorities as a result of their alcohol or other drug use. Engs and Hanson's (1994) national study of college students found six percent noting they had been in trouble with the law within the last year because of drinking, and two percent said they had been in trouble with school administration for the same reason.

Finally, it is important to note that relatively few students who report frequent negative consequences or a consistent pattern of problems from drinking also identify themselves as having a drinking problem (Berkowitz and Perkins 1986).

#### PROBLEMS OF COLLEGE DRINKING FOR OTHER INDIVIDUALS

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Residents of local neighborhoods and campus visitors as well as college students, faculty, and staff members may suffer as a result of individual students' heavy drinking, through consequences that are sometimes referred to as "second-hand effects." Damage to neighborhoods, to personal space of others in residence halls, and the unsightly residue of intoxication, such as vomit and litter, are common complaints in the aftermath of student parties where alcohol is conspicuous. Nationwide, 10 percent of college student drinkers report having damaged property during the current school year as a result of their drinking (Wechsler et al. 1998). Also, 12 percent of students report property damage because of other students' drinking (Wechsler, Moeykens et al. 1995).

Thirteen percent of students state that as the result of another student's drinking during the academic year, they had been pushed, hit, or assaulted, whereas 22 percent stated they had experienced a serious quarrel and 27 percent had been insulted or humiliated (Wechsler, Moeykens et al. 1995). Drinking also can contribute to the violence and damage others experience through sexual aggression by students who are under the influence of alcohol. An intoxicated student's inhibitions against inappropriate behavior are reduced or one's cognitive ability to accurately perceive messages discouraging sexual advances may be dulled (Abbey, McAuslan, and Ross 1998). National student data (Presley et al. 1996) found 10 percent of all males and 3 percent of all females acknowledging that within the last year they had "taken advantage of someone sexually" as a result of their own drinking or other drug use. Furthermore, another national study found that 21 percent of students had experienced an unwanted sexual advance because of another student's drinking within the school year (Wechsler, Moeykens et al. 1995).

Noise disruptions generated by student drinking on campus are likely to affect the quality of other students' lives as 43 percent of students note they have experienced interruptions of their study or sleep within the academic year because of someone else's drinking (Wechsler, Moeykens et al. 1995).

#### INSTITUTIONAL COSTS AND DAMAGE

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Student drinking also can deleteriously affect the institutional well-being of colleges and universities. The property damage reported by students because of drinking certainly includes campus property in residence halls and public restrooms, or at campus concerts and athletic events. Over one-quarter of campus administrators from schools with relatively low drinking levels and over half of administrators from schools with high drinking levels in a national study reported

that their campuses had a "moderate" or "major" problem with damage to campus property (Wechsler, Moeykens et al. 1995).

Academic failure and increased dropout rates related to student alcohol misuse become an institutional cost producing higher attrition rates and lost tuition revenue. The perceived academic rigor of the school may decline because of heavy student drinking, and strains in "town/gown" relations over student alcohol abuse may add to the institution's "image problem." In addition, the added demands placed on college personnel who are required to deal with drinking problems can be substantial in terms of counseling loads, calls for security assistance, and administrative hearings on academic and disciplinary cases. The time and emotional energy that college administrators must devote to students and families when a student is hospitalized or dies from alcohol poisoning or other alcohol-related incidents can be enormous. Finally, the legal costs of suits brought against academic institutions for liability in these circumstances present another major consequence.

#### VARIATION IN USE AND ABUSE OF ALCOHOL

The prevalence, extent, and consequences of student drinking exhibit substantial variation across sociodemographic categories. Consumption and consequences are heaviest in the Northeast region of the United States, followed by the Midwest, West, and South, respectively, and heaviest among Whites and Native Americans, followed by Hispanics, with Blacks and Asians exhibiting the least drinking and related problems (Presley et al. 1996; Wechsler et al. 1998). Fraternity and sorority membership are commonly associated with substantially higher levels of drinking and problems in most studies. Higher levels of religious interest and participation among students usually demonstrate a moderating effect on consumption. There is very little difference in drinking patterns among students by class year, however.

Virtually all research consistently shows male college students consuming more alcohol, on average, than female college students and more total consequences of drinking for males (Berkowitz and Perkins 1987). The large gender discrepancies in consumption do not always translate into the equivalent differences in intoxication levels, however. Women can achieve the same blood alcohol concentration as men while consuming less alcohol because of differences in body weight, fat-to-water ratios, and metabolism. Thus equal intoxication and negative consequences from drinking may appear for women drinking fewer drinks than men. Indeed, one nationwide study of students found that women who drank four drinks in a row were about as likely to experience negative consequences as men who drank five drinks in a row (Wechsler, Dowdall et al. 1995). Furthermore, gender differences in

overall negative consequences have historically been overestimated based on most research that has not adequately taken into account types of consequences that commonly affect female students who drink (Perkins 1992). Male students do, indeed, exhibit far more problems in public circumstances and in damage caused to other people as a result of their drinking. When damage to self and more private consequences are considered, however, this gender gap diminishes or even disappears in college student populations.

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