

Are College Students Alcoholics?

Aaron M. Brower, PhD

Are college students alcoholics? We get this question a lot. It is a different question from “Is student drinking worse than ever before?” or “Is student drinking out of control?” This question is specifically about whether college students are alcoholics—whether their drinking is making them alcohol dependent or whether they are headed down a road to long-term alcohol abuse.

We get this question from people with different agendas: from those who are sincerely interested in whether college students *are* alcoholics and from those who want to discuss why students drink, what harm drinking causes in a campus community, and how universities should best handle it. But we also get this question from those whom we call the *Carrie Nations*. Their question often leads to a one-sided lecture about the evils of alcohol (and society) and their contention that prohibition is the only real stance to take and that universities should promote abstinence.

We also get the question from people who simply want the issue of college drinking to go away. Very often these questioners are bar owners or others with ties to the alcohol industry, although equally often they are alumni who are remembering their college days and are asking us what all the fuss is about. From these people, the real statement they are making is, “I know students aren’t alcoholics, so what’s the big deal?” College students, they say, have been drinking excessively since colleges began, so the best thing a university can do is just get out of the way. Students, they say, need to experiment and learn through trial and error—just as they did when they were in college.

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My associates and I do *not* believe that college students are alcoholics or are alcohol abusers as diagnosed from a psychiatric point of view. At the same time, it is clear to us that college students do abuse alcohol, according to the most common-sense definition, and that this abuse inflicts real consequences on themselves and others. We also believe that a university should do certain things to monitor and manage this behavior for its students. Those things, however, are unique to a college community and would not work in a community at large or even with these same people if they were not in college. By confusing college drinking with alcoholism or traditional alcohol abuse, we muddy the view of college drinking and create roadblocks for intervention.

But I’ve jumped ahead. Alcohol and drinking have a long tradition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, so much so, in fact, that our recent drop in the “party schools” rankings was met with chagrin in some circles. As a university, we approached this problem in all the typical, piecemeal ways: with alcohol awareness campaigns, with alcohol-free programs, and with offers of help to those we identified as having serious drinking problems. We were about as successful with these efforts as was everyone across the country, which is to say that we weren’t making much of a dent in the problem.

We needed a new approach. The realization that our efforts had been wrongly based on the view that college drinking was a subset of the types of problem drinking that show up in society at large helped us search for that new approach. Seeing problematic college drinking as a type of traditional alcoholism or alcohol abuse was getting us nowhere; we needed to view the problem from a completely new vantage point. We began to look at public health approaches and community action programs that see problems as supported by forces in the immediate and distant environment and recognize that the solutions need to come

from broad-based community partnerships. We began to focus on campus and community norms and expectancies and the policies, regulations, and enforcement of laws to control the alcohol supply and demand. In addition, we examined who benefits economically from student alcohol use. And we considered weekend and evening options that were truly viable from the students' points of view.

Our efforts received a huge boost when we received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 5 years ago. Similar grants were awarded to 10 campuses across the country and were provided specifically to direct campus and community leaders to the problem of college drinking as a phenomenon unique to colleges and universities. The grants have been a godsend that is all too rare, particularly given the enormous amount of money and attention that the alcohol industry devotes to developing college drinkers. The grants have created an opportunity for people on campus and in the surrounding community to focus significant amounts of time and attention on a specific and serious problem in a way that has allowed real change to take place.

With this grant, we have extensively studied why students drink, how they drink, when they drink, and what they drink. We have evaluated approaches that have worked and strategies that have not worked on our campus. Several themes arose.

First, our definition of the problem of student drinking for a campus has been an important guidepost to reorient our efforts. Instead of focusing on the drinking behaviors of individual students, we have focused on the problems for the campus and community. That is, if a student goes out, gets drunk, comes home, falls asleep, and gets up the next morning without any problems, even if he or she does it every single night, we do not consider this a problem that requires university action. Of course, this type of behavior is not what we want to encourage in our students, but we have taken the explicit position that college students are adults who can make their own decisions about how they use their time. Instead, we have defined student drinking as a problem for the campus and the community when students physically and sexually hurt themselves and other students, when they destroy property, and when their behavior disrupts others and prevents them from doing well in school. We have defined student drinking as a problem that is based on its community consequences rather than on an individual's drinking behaviors.

Second, we have found it important to help others understand that college problem drinking is a product of the college environment. The commonly used definition of *college binge drinkers*—male students who consume 5 drinks in one sitting and female students who consume 4 drinks in one sitting—has been useful for us. We know that this definition remains somewhat controversial, but for us it creates a reasonable threshold when student drinking becomes associated with serious consequences (eg, violence, sexual assaults, vandalism, and school failures).

The more descriptive term that we sometimes use is *episodic high-risk drinking*, which conveys a more accurate

picture of how students drink: ingesting a large quantity of alcohol in a relatively short period of time and doing so relatively infrequently (ie, not every night or even regularly). But note that this definition and that used for college binge drinking are wholly different from the way the American Psychiatric Association defines alcoholism and alcohol abuse. In the association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (*DSM-IV*),¹ the definitions of alcohol dependence and alcoholism focus on the individual's need to drink more and more for the same effects and his or her inability to stop drinking. Continuing to drink in the face of repeated interpersonal, legal, and work-related problems is termed *alcohol abuse*. Again, the problems with college drinking are entirely different from problem drinking in society as a whole.

Third, the binge-drinking pattern for students on our campus is typical for a heavy-drinking campus according to several national studies—going out and getting drunk one night on the weekend. A lot of students drink this way occasionally (from once a week to once a month or less), although a small portion drink this way much more frequently. Overall, we find that about 60% of our students occasionally binge this way, whereas about 6% to 8% of those who drink are considered frequent binge drinkers—they binge either 2 or 3 times a week or on several weekends in a row. Even on our campus, about 10% of the students do not drink at all.

We find that students go through cycles of this type of drinking. It is worse at the beginning of the school year and subsides as the semester wears on and as school demands increase. Binge drinking also peaks following exam times, during home football weekends, and during spring break. Some "developmental" progressions can be seen in these patterns, with many new students engaging in this type of binge drinking for the first time very soon after they arrive on campus and then moving away from it in their subsequent years at school.

Finally, we find that college binge drinking, as a consistent pattern, ends for almost all students when they graduate from college and move on. Thus, this is a pattern that is strongly determined by living in a college environment and by the developmental life stage of being a college student. The vast majority of students never drink in this way again or engage in this same type of drinking only when they return to campus for alumni weekends or for football games. "Real life" is a strong disincentive to this type of drinking.

That college binge drinking is largely determined by and is a product of the college environment has been an extremely important point to get across as we have talked to people on our campus and in our community. Unlike alcoholics per se, students in college seem to be able to turn their willingness to binge drink on and off, depending on their environments (eg, whether they have exams to study for or whom they are with). And although a small segment of our students become alcoholics, this percentage is roughly the same as the percentage of alcoholics in the general

population. We have found no studies whatsoever that show that drinking in college leads to later-life alcoholism or long-term alcohol abuse. On the other hand, we have found many studies that show that the drinking habits of 18- to 22-year-olds attending college are different from the drinking habits of 18- to 22-year olds who do not attend college.² (The focused "drinking to get drunk" of college students who put the drinking itself as the centerpiece of that night's activity does not characterize 18- to 22-year-olds not in college.) Again, real life is a strong disincentive for the kind of binge drinking that college students do.

The facts that the campus and community problems result from college drinking patterns and that college binge drinking is a college-environment phenomenon distinguish college binge drinking from alcoholism. With this distinction clear, we can continue to direct campus and community efforts toward interventions that work. Alcoholism is best addressed through individualized treatments that emphasize abstinence. College binge drinking is best addressed through several types of initiatives that stress shifting the role that alcohol plays in the college environment. From our reviews of the literature and from our own efforts, we have concluded that college binge drinking is best addressed by decreasing student anonymity, by providing consistent and coherent expectations about what it means to be a college student on campus, and by consistently enforcing policies that maintain these expectations. In contrast, we have found that the approaches that are *most* effective against alcoholism are the *least* effective for combating drinking as a campus and community issue.

Individual, one-on-one approaches, by definition, focus people's attention on how they must change their own behaviors. Environmental approaches, on the other hand, focus attention on the central role that campus and community departments, units, divisions, and other groupings, as well as economic, political, and social factors, play in the solution to this serious problem.

Equating college binge drinking with alcoholism has only served as a distraction for our campus—it obscures both a clear view of the phenomenon itself and the intervention strategies that work. Ironically, we have found that the group most invested in maintaining this confusion has been the alcohol industry. Although viewing college binge drinking as alcoholism can create more public "buzz" on the issue (which one might think the alcohol industry would downplay), we have found that this confusion ultimately leads people to absolve the alcohol industry of its responsibility in effective solutions. If college binge drinking is an individual problem determined by individual choices and responsibilities, then the solutions rest with individuals who seek help and who stick with their resolutions to change. If, instead, college binge drinking is an environmental problem determined by a set of campus, community, and individual/developmental factors, then the responsibility for the solutions

rests with all of us who can ensure that our campuses and communities do not encourage and support these behaviors.

NOTE

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