

College Drinking Consequences



The recent trial of a former University of Virginia lacrosse player in the death of his girlfriend brought into focus the consequences of college drinking and the shared responsibility to keep it under control.

Testimony at the trial of George Huguey V, convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 26 years in prison, described a college drinking culture and the inability of friends, for various reasons, to intervene in his heavy drinking.

College students "drink more on average than their same-age peers who are not enrolled in college," said Susan Bruce, director of the Gordie Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, a national center at the University of Virginia.

However, the perception that college is a big party and everyone is getting drunk is false, Bruce said. Most students are moderate to light drinkers, she said. Even at parties when everyone is holding a cup, some are nursing one beer all night and others have non-alcoholic beverages. Moderate drinkers who act "on this false belief of what is normal," may "have a few more (drinks) because they think everyone is doing it," Bruce said. "Those couple drinks can be important as to how the night ends."

About 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die annually from unintentional alcohol-related injuries, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Another 599,000 are unintentionally injured. About 25 percent of college students report academic consequences of their drinking — including missing classes, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers and getting lower grades overall, according to the institute.

Gayle Karolczyk's son, Tyler, a Clemson University sophomore who died of alcohol poisoning in November, wasn't a heavy drinker, his mother said.

"On Nov. 11 in one hour and thirty minutes, one bad decision turned our world upside-down," Karolczyk said.

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Three days before his 20th birthday, the model student and athlete drank two "Clemson cups" of vodka, about eight to 10 ounces, at a party at his off-campus apartment, said the Mount Pleasant mother who now talks at high schools about alcohol poisoning and how to recognize it.

"The minute someone becomes mentally confused, unresponsive, erratic breathing, loss of consciousness, throwing up or blueness of skin, call 911 immediately," Karolczyk said. "You cannot sleep off alcohol poisoning."

Kathy Cauthen, director of Clemson's EMpower program, said some students come to college "hoping for and expecting this new social activity." Some already may have started drinking in high school. When Cauthen entered the prevention field, she said the emphasis was on education and helping students "feel good about themselves and make good decisions."

In recent years, the spectrum has broadened to include prevention, law enforcement, environment and education. "We want to make sure we are addressing the broad spectrum, those who come in with drinking behaviors and those who don't drink at all," Cauthen said. "We would want to make sure" that non-drinkers or light drinkers are equipped with knowledge and strategies to help friends who may have alcohol-related behaviors. That can be as simple as a buddy system or as serious as a call to 911, Cauthen said.

In the past three years, rates of heavy or binge drinking have decreased at Clemson. However, the Clemson numbers exceed the national average, said George Clay, executive director of Student Health Services at Clemson University. Binge drinking at Clemson decreased from 55 percent in 2009 to 50 percent in the 2011 survey by the Core Institute at University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale, Clay said. The survey shows the national average increased from 44 percent to 46 percent in the most recent national snapshot in 2008, Clay said.

Of college students at the 10 South Carolina schools that participated in the 2010 Core survey, 85 percent reported drinking in the past year, 74 percent reported drinking in the past month, and about 51 percent reported binge drinking, said Michelle Nienhius, prevention coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services.

"Certainly it's an issue that we need to be concerned with in South Carolina," Nienhius said.

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Students both over and under the legal drinking age of 21 are binge and high-risk drinkers, and matters are complicated when young people mix alcohol with other dangerous behavior such as fighting, Nienhius said.

"Every parent wants their child to be successful, and drinking can lead to less success in college," she said.

Nienhius advocates "zero tolerance" for underage drinking and said those of legal age who choose to drink should do so "in a healthy manner so it won't interfere with their ability to succeed in school and to succeed in life."

Clemson University reported 145 liquor law arrests in 2008 compared to 341 in 2010, according to the most recent campus Security and Fire Safety report available. There were 162 liquor law violations reported for disciplinary action in 2008 compared to 446 in 2010, according to the report. There are numerous efforts to curb irresponsible drinking, Clay and Cauthen said. Those include: an online course on alcohol; increased city, campus and county law enforcement efforts, including traffic stops to discourage drinking and driving; and law enforcement working with local apartment managers to find ways to reduce excessive drinking at off-campus parties, Clay said.

A new chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous was started on the Clemson campus this semester, Clay said.

Incoming freshmen receive alcohol education at orientation, the university offers alcohol-free activities, and there's training to give residence hall staff more tools for early intervention, Cauthen said. Clemson's Medical Alcohol Amnesty policy, adopted three years ago at the request of students, grants amnesty from university disciplinary action to students who call 911 for themselves or a friend who may have had too much to drink and needs attention. Eight students used the policy during the fall 2011 semester, and 21 students used the amnesty policy last year during the spring 2011 semester, said Rusty Guill, associate dean of student affairs at Clemson. The calls seem to be more frequent early in spring semester each year, Guill said. It may be that students returning from holidays aren't busy yet with academic studies and it's not yet crunch time for finishing projects and studying for exams, he said.

Overall, there seems to be more awareness of the seriousness and consequences of irresponsible

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drinking, Guill said. "There are more programs out there and more people in tune to seeking help for someone who needs it." A recent Gordie Center investigation on bystander behavior asked students if they had seen someone who was very intoxicated and what actions they took. More than half of the students who said they didn't do anything said it was because they weren't sure the person really needed help, Bruce said.

The second most common reason was fear of getting themselves, their organization or their friend in trouble with the school or law enforcement, Bruce said. Other top reasons were uncertainty about what to do, feeling it wasn't their place to make a call, someone else called, or they sought help in other ways.

"You have to continually educate and keep reminding students so when the situation arises they really know what to do," Bruce said.

"Regardless of whether we are students or not, we all have people in our lives we are concerned about and wish we were doing more. We all have those regrets."

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