A Sober Assessment of High-Risk Drinking on College Campuses

A few years ago, in the middle of a snowy night, an officer of the Cornell University Police Department found a shirtless young man sitting on a rock in the creek in one of our gorges, dangling his feet in the water. Asked what he thought he was doing, the student explained that he was calling a friend to pick him up.

The majority of college students will never drink enough to wind up in a situation like this—or worse—but a significant minority will come close. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), "about half of college student drinkers engage in heavy episodic consumption," commonly defined as downing five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks for women at least once in a two-week period. Since about 21.6 million Americans were enrolled in college in fall 2012, the number of students who engage in high-risk drinking on U.S. campuses easily exceeds the population of New York City.

As part of its Changing the Culture initiative, the NIAAA has compiled data on the consequences of heavy drinking for college students. For example: Each year, nearly 700,000 students are assaulted by fellow students who have been drinking. Almost 600,000 students are injured—and about 1,825 students die—as a result of alcohol poisoning and alcohol-related accidents, including motor vehicle crashes. Each year, nearly 100,000 students are survivors of sexual assault, including rape, while under the influence of alcohol; 400,000 students have unprotected sex while drunk; more than 100,000 students were so intoxicated while having sex that they weren't sure if they consented or not.

Heavy drinking is especially hard on young brains. In their forthcoming book, What Are They Thinking? The straight facts about the risk-taking, social-networking, still-developing teen brain, Aaron M. White and Scott Swartzwelder cite research indicating that many of alcohol's negative impacts are more pronounced in late adolescence than in adulthood. The greatest impairment is found in attention, memory, judgment, decision-making, information processing and language skills. According to the NIAAA, about 25 percent of college students report negative academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers and receiving lower grades overall. The long-term effects include a higher risk of lifelong

alcohol dependency than more temperate peers.

Does college cause heavy drinking? Statistics suggest that some young men and women pick up bad drinking habits as undergraduates. However, the 2011 edition of Monitoring the Future, a study of the behaviors, attitudes and values of American secondary school students, notes that 22 percent of 12th-graders reported episodes of heavy drinking and 40 percent had consumed alcohol in the previous 30 days. We can assume, then, that alcohol is a part of life for at least some incoming college freshmen.

However, college life may cause individual students to dial up the amount and frequency with which they drink. "A Call to Action: Changing the culture of drinking at U.S. colleges," a report by the NIAAA-supported Task Force on College Drinking, presents evidence of higher alcohol use among undergraduates than peers who do not attend college and attributes it to a perception of alcohol as central to college life. Arriving on campus anxious to establish their place in a new setting, first-year students learn from upperclass men and women "that alcohol is a necessary ingredient for social success. These beliefs and the expectations they engender exert a powerful influence over students' behavior toward alcohol."

Like many other colleges and universities, Cornell has been reshaping its campus environment to discourage the culture of drinking. Knowing that students tend to overestimate their classmates' alcohol intake, thus inflating the amount of alcohol they perceive as normal, we spread the word that the majority of Cornell students drink moderately or not at all. We restrict the availability of alcohol on university property. Since undergraduates have told us that we don't offer enough attractive alternatives to the late-night party scene, we are working with student leaders to develop more alcohol-free options. We emphasize safety in messages that include explicit warnings against "chugging" shots of hard liquor and advice on how to pace alcohol consumption during a social event. And we encourage students to seek help immediately when faced with an alcohol-related medical emergency.

Cornell is one of 32 U.S. colleges and universities participating in the National College Health Improvement Project's Learning Collaborative on High Risk Drinking. The collaborative is scheduled to wrap up its investigation in April 2013 and we believe that it will provide us with additional tools for reducing high-risk drinking.

We realize that we have a long way to go – and that it will take a village to change deeply entrenched habits and behaviors. So we are reaching out to parents of college students.

We ask that you consider a conversation with your son or daughter during the inter-session break. You might begin by sharing this blog. Or by asking open-ended questions—"What is there to do on campus at night?" "What do your friends do for fun?"

The conversation might lead to some eye-opening revelations. Your student may tell you about friends whose drinking habits scare you to death—or talk about his or her own hair-raising adventures. He or she may ask uncomfortable questions about your own experiences with alcohol or drugs. You will have to decide for yourself how you want to respond, but after decades of talking with young people, we recommend that you keep an open mind and avoid either lecturing about risks and remedies or glamorizing your own college experiences in ways that might be read as permission to indulge in the same behaviors.

Half of all college students observe the dumb and dangerous stunts, rambling conversations and other side effects of overconsumption around them and opt to imbibe moderately or not at all. You may find that one of those students is yours. If not, now's the time to identify the problem, encourage your child to recognize it as a problem and begin to do something about it

http://www.forbes.com/sites/collegeprose/2012/12/17/a-sober-assessment-of-high-risk-drinking-on-college-campuses/

To learn more about Underage and College Drinking, click here.

Click here to download NCADD's Fact Sheet On Underage Drinking.