

Challenging the Premises of the Amethyst Initiative

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The Amethyst Initiative - a group of college presidents and chancellors pushing for national debate about the legal drinking age - has reinvigorated discussion on campuses across the country about underage student alcohol use and misuse. This comes at a good time, as recent events involving campus violence pushed alcohol and other drug issues to the back burner for many college administrators. Once again, the media is seeking statements from our campus leaders, bringing student affairs administrators and alcohol prevention practitioners back to the table to discuss important philosophical issues about the role of alcohol in a college student's life.

The premises outlined in the Amethyst Initiative create a foundation that does more than raise an issue of policy - they contradict what we know to be true about the problem of college drinking. Before entering a debate about policy, we first need to clarify and correct the assumptions that underlie the Initiative. In this article, we examine these premises and show where they are flawed and/or inaccurate and serve as a distraction to the real work of reducing high-risk alcohol consumption among young adults.

Premise 1: The Current Law is Not Working to Deter Underage Use.

On the front page of the Amethyst website, it states: "These higher education leaders have signed their names to a public statement that the 21-year-old drinking age is not working, and, specifically, that it has created a culture of dangerous binge drinking on their campuses."

There are several problems with this premise. The first is the statement that the drinking age law itself "is not working." In other texts and presentations, former Middlebury College President John McCardell states that the law is constantly violated and ignored by students on campus.

The statement exhibits a common misunderstanding about national, state and local laws and campus policies. Laws and policies "work" in tandem with education and enforcement to deter crime. A law is a codified community standard - it sets a tone for society about what is or is not acceptable, and it

enables a set of negative consequences to ensure compliance to the standard. Education goes beyond one-on-one or group curricula or peer presentations and posters. It includes the environment that communicates the "lived" standard every time an underage college student observes or experiences laws as they are obeyed or ignored. Rather than blame the law, campus administrators might look to the myriad of potentially conflicting messages we send via popular culture, film, television, music, and campus and community events, that declare it impossible to refrain from alcohol use until age 21.

A second response to this premise is that, when taken as part of a comprehensive environmental prevention strategy, the minimum age law does work. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's high-risk drinking project, NU Directions, has ten-year trend data that shows a marked decrease in both binge drinking as well as underage use. In 1997, the binge rate among the undergraduate student population was 62.7 percent; in 2007, it was 41 percent. Over that same period, the percentage of first-year students who reported abstaining from alcohol increased from 15.5 percent to 35.5 percent.

Premise 2: The Current Law Creates the Binge Drinking Culture

The second premise worthy of rebuttal is the assumption that it is the drinking age itself that is creating the binge drinking culture. Though many of us are familiar with the concept of "prohibition consumption," there's not a significant amount of scientific data to support the notion for college students. This is particularly problematic if we considered the college student use rates of other "illegal" substances. Many of these drugs - illegal at any age - have a minute fraction of the use rates among college students. From this perspective, we should see the same rampant use of all illegal substances on our campuses. The data doesn't suggest that such a phenomenon is occurring.

In the most comprehensive effort of its kind, the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism conducted a thorough and painstaking investigation into the causes for the nation's "college drinking problem." The existence of the minimum drinking age law was not listed. But many other factors - clearly within the control of college presidents and administrators - are on the list. These include a lack of clear policy, inconsistent enforcement, the promotion of alcohol and alcohol-centered activities on and around campus, the access and availability of alcohol on and around campus, and the lack of substantial and satisfying alternative activities for college students on and around campus, just to

name a few. In other words, the existence of the minimum drinking age law has about as much responsibility for creating binge drinking as the minimum highway speed law has in creating speeding. The question we must be asking is whether we have created an environment where alcohol use - at 18 or 21 - is a significant aspect of the college experience.

Once again, UNL's data serves as evidence that reducing binge drinking isn't dependent on changing the age law. The combined percentage of first-year students reporting abstaining from alcohol or consuming alcohol without bingeing increased from 42.2% to 65.5% over a ten year period. And as expected, a similar decline in primary and secondary effects was observed as the first-year binge drinking rate dropped. NU Directions never addressed the legal drinking age as a primary strategy for change. Instead, it focused on the environment surrounding college students of both legal and illegal drinking age.

Premise 3: College students represent all underage persons

Underlying the entire initiative is the premise that all underage persons in the United States are college students, or that those underage persons who are college students should be given special privileges. Data from 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health states that on average, 5.2 million young adults aged 18 to 20 were enrolled in college full-time (between the years 2002-2005). This represents merely 41.3% of young adults in this age range. Less than half of our nation's underage persons are even enrolled in our colleges and universities, so if age is the problem, shouldn't we see a similar trend in the rest of the population? The truth is, we don't. Data from the same study indicate that young adults aged 18-22 enrolled full time in college were more likely than their non-student peers to use alcohol in the past month, binge drink and drink heavily. A similar difference was noted when comparing students who lived with a parent, grandparent or parent-in-law with those who were not living with a parental relative. The same pattern was observed when comparing full-time male students with full-time female students. The phenomenon seems to have more to do with college, place of residence and gender than it does with age.

We should heartily welcome a discussion about the drinking age, but let's ensure that the discussion is based on sound thinking about the problem of college alcohol abuse. We encourage campuses across the country to clarify the premises of the discussion with their administrations and communities, and to use the vast collection of knowledge we now have about college alcohol abuse to

find the best solutions to the problem. Marshall McLuhan once stated, "We look at the present through a rearview mirror (and) march backwards into the future." Let's instead look forward, using all the best of our current knowledge, to make solid policies for our students.

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