

PART II -- We Need to Teach Students How to Drink

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Let me start with a disqualifier for this conversation. If your campus is meaningfully dry and your students' social life is not alcohol-centered (on or off-campus), this thesis does not apply to you. But, some campuses are dry in name only. In reality, they are rather damp. Or, their environs provide all the lugubrious libations not available on campus such that all partying takes place off-campus. Let me state for the record that unless being a dry campus is a decision firmly based in religious conviction, I think it is unethical to push all drinking off-campus. It protects the institution from liability to an extent, but it does not protect students from the dangers of alcohol use and abuse.

I believe that campus alcohol-related problems are worsening. I do not think greater alcohol abuse is just a trend that is developing amongst students over time. I believe that our society is by its policies and laws unintentionally heightening the phenomenon of problem drinking. Historically, colleges have always contended with students who drink. But, the level of problem drinking (I do not use the term binge drinking) has become a crisis, and that is a modern development. To put a fine point on it, we are trying to enforce our way to abstention, and that is never going to work. We can't enforce our way to safer campuses. If enforcement is your primary alcohol intervention strategy, I need to tell you that no campus has ever successfully championed an enforcement strategy alone as the way to a safer culture, except for those mentioned above that are meaningfully dry.

Many commentators lay the blame for our current alcohol crisis on the uniform raising of state legal drinking ages, foisted on states by the federal government. Raising the legal drinking age in all states was the result of an effort led by Mothers Against Drunk Driving. By most accounts, raising the drinking age has saved an estimated 17,000 motorists from drunk driving deaths. Hundreds of thousands more have escaped injury. The success of this effort with respect to drunk driving is unquestioned. What I do question is whether we have ameliorated one problem only to exacerbate another. By making responsible use taboo for those under age 21, we have glamorized it. And, we have driven consumption underground. Colleges have become enforcers of policy and statute, to the extent that some suffer thousands of alcohol violations every year. Entire bureaucracies have been created to address the most frequent campus conduct violation—alcohol. Entire bureaucracies have sprung up to study campus alcohol abuse. Cottage industries of programmers, videos, study guides and online education cater to the crisis. Aided by the mandates of the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act, some campuses have become police states, pitting students and administrators into adversarial enforcement confrontations.

Campus enforcement of policy and law is having an effect. It is causing pre-gaming (or pre-loading) by students who lock themselves in their rooms for intense imbibing sessions that feature rapid consumption of high liquor content alcoholic beverages prior to heading out for an evening in which alcohol may or may not be available to minors at campus and off-campus social events. Students pre-game to ensure they will get wrecked

regardless of the alcohol options available to them at social venues. Enforcement efforts have also given rise to off-campus drinking clubs usually known by some name such as the “Rugby House,” “Soccer House,” “Kappa House,” etc. Ignorant hosts take on extraordinary risks so that they can provide social opportunities for their friends.

My colleagues, we are rapidly enforcing students to death, quite literally. We have traded reduced drunk driving deaths for extreme campus problem drinking and the deaths and injuries that are its inevitable consequence. Please be clear that I am not suggesting that colleges should not enforce their policies. But, I do challenge the wisdom of using enforcement above education as the means to create safer campus cultures. The law is not going to change anytime soon. Yet campuses are finding ways to engage students in meaningful, rational risk reduction efforts. Campus pubs are returning to popularity. College-sponsored beer gardens are no longer rare. Some colleges even serve wine at dinner in the Caf. Imagine that—treating students as responsible adults while still finding a way to meet the duty of care.

Growing up, I am proud that reasonable consumption was modeled by my family, and I was taught that wine at the table was not taboo, to be hidden, or abused on the sly. Europeans have been modeling safe, responsible alcohol use regardless of age for centuries, and it should be no surprise that their universities are not plagued by raging alcohol abuse the way that ours are (though recent studies indicate they may be catching up). Helicopter parents are the norm on our campuses now, and overprotected kids are barely able to stand on their own when they get to campus, so sheltered have their ever-hovering parents been since birth. Our students are not learning responsible use at home. If they don’t learn it on campus, they may never. We are the last chance for many students to be impacted on this issue at a cultural, environmental level. If we don’t step up to the plate, who will?

Many could argue that colleges are under no obligation to teach responsible use. You could even argue that colleges would take on legal risks in doing so. Yet, we are under an obligation to teach responsible use because the problems of abuse are landing firmly on our doorsteps, and on the courthouse steps. Colleges are being held accountable for the abuses of their students. Their high-risk behaviors are damaging our recruiting efforts, our retention strategies, our fiscal soundness, our insurance premiums, our reputations, and our subsequent ability to build endowments through major gifts. If we want to manage our risk (which is their risk), sooner or later we will have to ask the tough question—should we be teaching students how to drink?

What about the argument that teaching minors to engage in law-breaking behavior is unethical, and very likely to land colleges of the wrong end of huge liability. All potentially true. But, I am not arguing that we ought to TEACH STUDENTS TO DRINK. We must support our non-drinkers. And, I am arguing that if some population of our students is going to drink no matter what we do or say, we need to teach them about the legal implications of their decision to violate the law. AND, we need to teach them reasonable strategies for minimizing their risk, using protective behaviors intelligently, and surrounding their consumption with harm reduction techniques that will

make whatever illegal behaviors they engage in less likely to bring them and us to harm and liability. A student who spends an evening engaged in reasonable, low-risk consumption of alcohol who then goes home and has a safe night's sleep is not my problem. I don't lose sleep at night over such students, unless they are alcoholics. You need to realize that this is not a student over whom you need to lose sleep, either. We need to back off of enforcement as our main modus operandi.

Our problem is the student who goes out, gets drunk, and is involved in a collateral negative alcohol event, such as a fight, vandalism, drunk driving, date rape, falling off a building, arson, alcohol poisoning, overdose or death. Risk (or harm) reduction and protective behaviors are designed to reduce these collateral, unintended consequences. But, for fear of being permissive, we avoid essential conversations on the strategies most likely to save lives and cocoon our students from harm.

So, if education is the answer—and it is—what should we be teaching our students? We should be teaching our students how to get what it is most of them want out of drinking (to loosen up and have fun with their friends) without encountering the negative collateral effects they do not desire. I think the key is buzzing. When our students drink, most of them drink to get drunk. They get s\$#t-faced, hammered, bamboozled, wasted, f'd up, and otherwise engage in extremes of abuse. They do not get buzzed. Buzzing isn't hip. But, buzzing is all about control. Buzzing is the low-to-moderate risk consumption that helps students to enjoy the social effects of alcohol without making alcohol the social event itself (pre-gaming). Teaching students how to avoid blowing through their buzz until drunkenness is the most important skill we can teach. Riding the buzz all evening long is an art form. Most of our students suck at it. Those students who know how to do it are our low-risk drinkers. They know things about alcohol and drinking that other students do not, and they allow their knowledge to influence their decisions. They bring skill to their imbibing. Here is the analogy I use to understand the obligation to teach our students who drink how to buzz. When you were fourteen, your Dad may have let you steer the family car, or even take it up and down the driveway. You may even have been able to pilot it around a parking lot. You could make it go, stop and turn. Could you have handled a well-executed K-turn at that point? How about lane control on a highway at 65mph? Would you have had a clue about who proceeds first when four cars all come to a four-way intersection? Not likely.

To acquire the skill of driving safely and smoothly, you needed instruction, examples, rules and experience. Yes, you could get the car to move at age fourteen, but you could not DRIVE. Drinking is the same. Any moron with a hand, a mouth and a friend over the age of 21 can manage to drink. But, can they do so with any skill? Do they know the rules? Do they have the requisite experience and instruction? Do they know the drinking equivalent of defensive driving—protective behaviors? Hardly. We make it illegal for them to drink, ignore the fact that they do, and let them find their way without instruction, role models, or supports. What if we made 21 the national driving age and most 16-20 year-olds decided to drive anyway. Would that be unsafe? Could we stop millions of underage drivers? Should we teach them car control and highway safety techniques just in case the cops can't get them all? I know, I know—if you teach students how to drink,

it will lead to greater consumption. Just like if we teach more students how to drive, more of them will. That's not a tremendously logical argument, is it?

Buzzers know the rules of the road. What do these lower-risk drinkers know that our abusers do not? Among many things:

1. They know what a buzz feels like, as compared to being drunk;
2. They understand that a 16 ounce red Solo cup is not one drink, but 1.33 drinks;
3. They understand different proofs, and can compare alcohol strengths and quantities;
4. They know how to pace themselves and use food and non-alcoholic drinks to maintain buzzes without losing control; They avoid things like soda, which can increase alcohol absorption unintentionally;
5. They know how to ask for help when they need it and give their friends permission to intervene if necessary;
6. They accurately perceive their consumption and that of their peers;
7. They avoid celebration and excuse drinking;
8. When they go past their limits, they make sure a safety net is in place;
9. They respect their friends when they intervene;
10. They do not enable abuse for their friends, or allow their friends to enable them;
11. They avoid social situations designed for extreme consumption;
12. They use the buddy system meaningfully (women AND MEN);
13. They understand the myth of puking—that throwing up increases BAC, and not the other way around.
14. They understand that the statistic that you can metabolize about one drink an hour is not true for most people;
15. They understand how their bodies metabolize alcohol, and how changes in conditions can impact that metabolic rate.
16. They know that we ban kegs for insurance reasons, to protect them, not because we want them to drink less;
17. They understand what are lower-risk and higher-risk containers from which to drink;
18. They understand what happens when drinking games influence consumption;
19. They understand that some drinks can contain unknown liquors and/or drugs;
20. They understand that the order in which you consume different types of alcohol has absolutely no effect on whether you get sick or not; some of us can mix, others cannot.
21. They know what types of alcohol agree with them, and produce the most predictable, desired effects;
22. They know how to accurately track their consumption over time;
23. They know how to plan their drinking and employ strategies that help them to stick to their plan;
24. They don't mix alcohol and sex;
25. They know how use impacts tolerance, and how tolerance shifts over time.

The foregoing 25 ideas are just examples of critical competencies mastered by those who know how to ride the buzz. How many of these critical components are taught on your campus? Are any of these messages so unreasonable? Taken together, yes, they do teach students how to drink. But, the point is to teach students who chose to engage in drinking behaviors to do so with low-risk or moderate-risk choices. Each of these points can help to show the way. Any moron can put hand to mouth, but any student who owns these 25 points is not a moron at all. S/he is a contributing, responsible member of our community who knows how to ride the buzz. The question remains...will we give them the ticket to ride?

*All information offered in this publication is the opinion of the author, and is not given as legal advice. Reliance on this information is at the sole risk of the reader.*

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