

PART I -- SHOULD WE BE TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO DRINK?

By: Christopher Schmidt

Close your eyes and imagine....you are an administrator at a large public institution. You arrive in the office on Monday morning to a dozen voicemails and an equal number of emails, regarding a large party over the weekend. You begin to read and find out that a student who was at this particular party consumed an extreme amount of alcohol. He was not found until the next day, when the hosts of the party awoke to find their fellow student dead.

Wow! For my first real “publication” to the student conduct and other university administrators that I have worked with in various capacities, could I have picked a more interesting topic? I do not think so. Given that the vast majority of what we all deal with in terms of student conduct issues revolves around alcohol in some fashion, it is hard to imagine not discussing this topic. Furthermore, being at an institution so much in the news as of late almost requires that I take this opportunity to speak on a topic to which we all can relate. Alas, here I go.

Is there a simple answer to this question? Yes...and yes. I will say from the beginning that I believe that we should be teaching students how to drink. But, before I explore/explain that point, I think we need to break down the original question a bit.

First, who is “we?” I think this is probably the easiest part of the question to answer, but perhaps the most problematic to implement. It causes problems because stakeholders aren’t necessarily all on the same page and do not necessarily understand the roles they can play. The “we” is all of us, from the J. Doe student to the hall director to the university president. The roles played in student education are obviously going to be different, but in principle, we all need to be educators on this matter. The hall director or student conduct officer, for example, will excel in the practical – how do you drink safely? How do you find help for someone who hasn’t been drinking safely? What are your responsibilities to yourself, your university and others that support you? The senior administration, who set the tone and path of the university, need to educate not only incoming or prospective students, but also the university community as a whole, about the core values and mission of the institution, which will include behavioral expectations and rationales.

Internally, health educators, peer educators, alcohol prevention staff, perhaps campus police, and those in the counseling center are essential as well. Not to be left out though, are those that support the student in the journey from outside the institution: parents, family, other alumni, and friends. This is a huge part of the issue, in my opinion. Regardless of what you feel about whether a university should stand *in loco parentis*, we are not the strongest force in the lives of students. In a conduct meeting, the strongest reaction comes not from me asking the student about whether or not they feel they should be suspended, but rather from their reaction to the discussion with their parents or family. The student doesn’t care what I think of them or if I am going to be mad or less proud.

They care about those that have supported them all their lives and helped them to get to college in the first place. How many times have you heard a student say “my parents are going to lose it?”

Without question, parents, family, alumni and friends need to be involved in educating the students too. An engaged effort to teach students how to drink should harness that known characteristic of millennial students and get their already involved parents further involved. We have to make it an expectation that they support our values, voice and vision when it comes to alcohol use on our campuses. They have to know that we believe in their student’s success and that with their support, their children can achieve. Parents need to understand our expectations around alcohol and what we expect of their children. They should partner with us to support them, but engaging them in that partnership requires our initiative, not theirs.

This engagement comes not only from talking at student/parent orientation or sending out publications, but asking our entire institutions to be involved in the process – from admissions to student conduct to student services. *The process of changing the culture of alcohol on campus comes from a collective demonstration of the university mission.* If we let those interested in our campuses know our priorities and values, we will have those students and parents attending who support them. If we do not partner in different ways, we will continue down a destructive path which has lead and will lead to further heartache for us all.

What do we teach exactly? Here’s a tougher one, but I would argue that we teach several things. First and foremost, I think we need to teach that abstaining is the safest route, and we need to support and affirm those whose choice is to abstain. Next, we need to focus on those who choose to drink by emphasizing responsible drinking. Students who are permitted to drink must be aware of what will harm them, and how they can made decisions and behave within a harm-reduction framework. I am not a big proponent of alcohol classes, whether online or in person, but therein exists a start. Also, we need to consider what it would mean for colleges and universities to appropriately serve alcohol. I have heard that some institutions serve alcohol in varying degrees, some even providing wine at dinner! I’m not honestly sure how I feel about that yet, but would be open to the discussion. The main point is that we should challenge ourselves to be more creative in this area – let’s find way to speak about alcohol when alcohol is actually in the room.

You will notice that I said “students that are permitted to drink.” Needless to say, the largest part of our student populations consists of those who are underage. What about those under 21? Well, they need to learn responsible drinking as well. In fact, maybe more than those who are legally able, because we know that those over 21 are some of the lower-risk drinkers on many of our campuses. We need to educate underage students on the fact that our society has rules, by which they must abide, whether they agree with those rules or not. But, we do not want students who are sheep, blindly following *sans* thinking. Many students who come through my office sound the need for a change in the law with logical and illogical arguments--I can’t have a beer, but I can go to war. Drinking underage is an act of rebellion – part of the adolescent/college process– but we

have to be clear that the law is the law, whether or not we agree. Just because I want to drive 65mph in a 55mph zone, doesn't mean that I can. Or more precisely, I can, but there are consequences if I make the decision to do so—consequences which as an adult I am bound to acknowledge and accept.

We have help them to separate the fairness debate from the compliance debate. Why shouldn't we educate our students and prepare them more to deal with the boundaries that society has, and more importantly, how to challenge them appropriately? You are 18, you can vote! Argue and debate when you do not agree, but own it as civil disobedience if you just blatantly disregard the laws or pretend the rules don't or shouldn't apply to you. Part of maturity comes with knowing how to effectively deal with others, with other ideas and with constraints. Part of critical thinking involves knowing that your choices, whether now or in the future, will impact you and what that impact means to you. Part of responsible drinking is in following the law (and consequently our policies). Challenge and support, we always say. It applies even in the face of disagreement *and* the block party.

But, let's be honest with ourselves, people will say. It is naïve to think that those under 18 won't drink or that we can just talk about boundaries and it will work. True. I don't believe we should ignore reality, and I work at a school where the "reality" of college life is very much out in the open at the moment. The problem I see though is that the "reality" of college life is very dissimilar to the "real" world...the world of full-time jobs, mortgages and car payments. We are focusing on a reality that, while significant and life-changing for our students, is only a mere piece of the grander puzzle of adulthood. Our goal as educators should be to educate about the whole of one's life, not just the here and now. Even if we don't all agree that higher education should focus on more than academic development, students are delivering non-academic educational needs to our doorstep. Students need to understand how to keep themselves safe from harm or how to keep harm from others. If they come to college without that understand, we are the only ones who can teach it to them. They need to understand how to drink, how to find their limits how to drink safely within their limits, and how their limits change over time.

Let's also talk a little more reality. I would love to stay that the college/university experience is a right and would wholeheartedly support making it so. It isn't a right, but rather a privilege and we should treat it as such. Like many other privileges that we have, responsibility comes with it. Driving a car is a useful analogy. I was able to get my driver's license when I was 16, but I had the car taken away when I got into an accident. I was not, at that time, able to live up to my responsibility, thus the consequence. Drinking alcohol should be the same thing. Drinking is a right for those of legal age. I am old enough to consume alcohol, but should do so in a way that demonstrates concern for myself and others. If I don't, there are consequences. If a student chooses not to meet the expectations of the institution, whether inside the classroom or out, why shouldn't there be a consequence? More importantly, if we are trying to develop civic responsibility in our students, we need them to understand that they have rights, but also that the privileges do not always extend to them.

Education around consuming alcohol, I think, must have several components, including:

- High-risk (“binge”) drinking, “partying,” etc.
- physical effects of alcohol
- other behaviors that traditionally coincide with alcohol (drugs, noise, damage, sex)
- -your rights with regard to drinking
- school policies around alcohol, alcohol/drug use, consequences

I put the policy part last, mostly because we know that just saying that there is a rule doesn’t cut it. Let’s focus again on the realities of it all – excessive drinking, alcohol and drugs, alcohol and sex. Let’s focus on what happens when you drink and how it can impact your body, your decision-making and your success as a student. Let’s focus on how these decisions will challenge the values of our students and how choices can help a student better understand and appreciate difference. Finally, let’s focus on that fact that the student has responsibilities as an adult, whether or not they agree with them. We can and should and do teach them how to confront and respect that.

The last question we have to ask ourselves is: why take the risk of teaching an illegal behavior? I think the simple answer (and the one that I hope you have heard from me) is that we have to teach students to drink because we cannot afford not to teach it. We cannot afford to lose more students. Many of us have witnessed the impact of a student death on our campuses – if we don’t act in some meaningful way, it will happen again. All the policies we write won’t change that. We cannot afford to continually stand in front of a seemingly insurmountable problem without a course of action. We are going to have policies and procedures and practices, but teaching students about drinking will actually help us in the long run – we probably wouldn’t implement those “3 strike” policies as much. If we put forth the effort to educate now, we will save ourselves work later too! We have a responsibility as educators to educate – not just to make decisions about sanctions or whether or not a student is suspended. We have to be flexible. We are not going to keep students from drinking, but we should hold them accountable for it in a manner consistent with our institutional values and student development philosophies.

Have a happy weekend!

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.