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Let's not Lose our Investment in College Youth to Binge Drinking!

By Lise Gervais

Drinking rates among 8th graders and young teens have gone down by substantial amounts, but the decline in binge drinking among college students is less impressive. These results suggest the wisdom of shifting more focus to the college population. After all, these students represent a major investment in our future. Our investment is at risk when our college youth drop out due to drinking problems, or worse sustain death or injuries through vehicle crashes, falls and poisoning. Recently, a University of West Virginia student died after a fraternity initiation event. He was only 18. After drinking a large amount of alcohol, his BAC reached 0.49 – 6 times the legal limit! We cannot afford to lose these precious resources.

Alcohol related problems in students aged 18-24 each year

Death	Injury	Assault	Sexual abuse	Drove under the influence	Unsafe sex
1,825	599,000	696,000	97,000	3,360,000	400,000

Source: "Magnitude of and trends in alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students aged 18-24", Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009
<http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/CollegeFactSheet/CollegeFactSheet.pdf>

According to the University of Michigan, the last decade saw only a modest decrease in college student binge drinking from 39% in 2000 to 35% in 2013¹. (These percentages represent students who had 5 drinks in a row during the last two weeks.) For most students, college is the first time they are living away from home, without the watchful eyes of older adults and without the responsibility for good behavior for younger members of their community. College students say alcohol is easy to get and alcohol rules are not consistently enforced, making overdoing it easy.

Getting a degree can set young people on a track towards better financial stability. But partying hard while at college can change the trajectory of a young person's life in ways that they may not have considered:

- College is expensive, yet vitally important to career advancement. Binge and heavy drinking are associated with college failure, letting this expensive investment go down the drain.

For more information, see www.healthyalcoholmarket.com
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- A DUI can lead to a fine, and the related costs of court time, having a suspended license, etc. A DUI on one's record can impact employment, scholarships, entry into the military and even renting an apartment.
- Binge drinking in youth can be an indicator for problem drinking later in life.

Thanks to advances in brain science, we know that the prefrontal cortex, which governs rational decision making and thinking about the future, doesn't finish developing until about age 25. During this growth period, certain behaviors can change brain chemistry and heavy drinking is one of them. At a time when thinking about the future is a little hard to do, we are hoping to get young adults to do just that. But strategies to curb binge drinking among this age group also try to appeal to their day-to-day concerns. Alcohol can contribute to problems with excess weight. For example, a margarita packs a lot of calories: 360 for an 8 ounce glass and 540 for a 12 ounce glass. Drinking can affect skin negatively, causing acne, pastiness, red blotches-- things the average self-conscious young adult would rather avoid.

And we shouldn't underestimate the influence of parents, even on their kids at college. Psychologist Robert Turrisi, PhD, and colleagues at Penn State gave parents brochures to help them talk about alcohol with their children who were off to college in the fall. Four months later these students were drinking less than their peers. In another study, Kim Fromme, PhD, and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin asked college students to take a survey that assessed family attitudes and level of caring. They found that students who felt that their parents were aware and cared were likely to drink less.

Strategies that are aimed at the student, the campus and the wider community seem like the best hope at curbing college binge drinking. Students can benefit from information on how drinking can affect them and interfere with their goals as well as strategies for handling high-stress and high-risk situations. Colleges can help by hosting events where alcohol isn't the focus and making healthcare accessible to students that need it. In the wider community limiting the number of outlets, keeping the price higher to discourage price-sensitive youth and making sure alcohol regulations are being enforced and ID is being checked at stores and bars. As with most issues, going at a problem from multiple angles provides the best chance for success. A good source for strategies in dealing with this issue is: <http://www.udetc.org/documents/EnvStratCollege.pdf>

¹ Monitoring the Future, National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975 – 2013, Volume 2 College Students and Adults Ages 19 – 55, University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, p. 397.