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The Age-21 Law Saves Lives; College Leaders Should Focus Instead on Prevention Strategies

By WILLIAM DEJONG

The small group of 128 college presidents who signed the Amethyst Initiative to protest the age-21 drinking law say they are calling for "an informed and dispassionate public debate" over the effects of the law. But to have a debate, there must be an issue that is debatable, and that's not the case here: The scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that the age-21 law is saving lives. The signatories could serve their students better by working with the current law and devising evidence-based prevention strategies that are being used successfully at other institutions.

College presidents who say their experience tells them the age-21 law isn't working haven't done their homework. In fact, public-health researchers have conducted dozens of scientific studies to look at the law's effects. Their conclusions:

- The age-21 law is effective in reducing injuries and deaths among young people. By one estimate, the law saves approximately 900 lives each year as a result of reduced alcohol-related traffic fatalities among young drivers. That is the case even though the law is indifferently enforced and frequently disobeyed.
- The age-21 law does not contribute to heavy alcohol use on campus, as the Amethyst Initiative group contends. There is no scientific evidence supporting this argument. Rates of heavy drinking among college students, assessed by the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future study, have remained fairly static since 21 became the minimum legal drinking age in all 50 states.
- Alcohol problems would not diminish if the legal drinking age were dropped to age 18. Based on past experience, there is every reason to think that the opposite would occur. In 1999, New Zealand reduced its legal drinking age from 20 to 18. The result was a dramatic upswing in traffic crashes and injuries among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Let's also remember that the United States tried such an experiment during the 1970s, when 29 states lowered the legal drinking age to 18, 19, or 20. The ensuing carnage motivated Congress to pass the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, in 1984, which

required states to mandate a legal drinking age of 21 or lose 10 percent of their federal highway appropriations.

Academic leaders need to accept the fact that the age-21 law saves lives and then move on to put into effect workable strategies that will reduce alcohol-related problems on campus. What are some of the most effective strategies colleges can use?

First, campus officials should provide universal alcohol education. Students are already familiar with the health and safety risks of heavy drinking. They also need to learn that, contrary to popular belief, high-risk drinking is not the norm for college students, which means that they do not need to drink heavily to fit in. Students who choose to drink also need specific guidance on how to keep their blood-alcohol concentration in a safer range.

Second, screening and intervention services are needed to identify and treat individual students who are problem, at-risk, or alcohol-dependent drinkers. For example, a program called Basics (Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students) uses two brief interview sessions to give students feedback about their drinking and to help them craft a plan for reducing their alcohol use.

Third, campus and community officials should work cooperatively to change the environment in ways that will reduce the appeal and availability of alcohol. That approach was endorsed by a recent National Academies report on underage drinking, which urged colleges to "adopt comprehensive prevention approaches including environmental changes that limit underage access to alcohol."

The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention has identified five groups of strategies for creating a safer environment on the campus and in the community:

- **Provide alternative activities.** Many campuses put additional resources into creating and promoting substance-free events and activities; provide greater financial support to substance-free student clubs and organizations; open or expand student centers, gyms, or other substance-free settings; and develop student service-learning or volunteer activities.
- **Send the right message.** Campus officials must state clearly their firm expectation that students will not engage in illegal or high-risk alcohol consumption. The declaration can be reinforced by modifying the academic schedule to increase the number of early-morning and Friday classes, increasing academic standards so that students will need to spend additional time studying out of class, increasing faculty-student contact, and improving faculty-student advising.
- **Reduce alcohol availability.** Campus officials can enforce policies that limit the times and places that alcohol is available to students on the campus. Key strategies include prohibiting delivery or use of kegs or other common containers, controlling or eliminating alcohol sales at sporting events, and disseminating and enforcing guidelines for registered parties.

- **Restrict alcohol advertising.** Campus officials have wide latitude to ban or restrict alcohol advertising on the campus and to edit the wording of party or event announcements. Off-campus, campus, and community officials can work together to eliminate alcohol promotions that offer low-priced drink specials or otherwise promote high-risk drinking.
- **Enforce the law.** Campus administrators should authorize and encourage the campus police to work in partnership with local law-enforcement agencies to uphold campus policies and local, state, and federal laws. The campus should never be viewed as an enclave that protects students from the consequences of illegal behavior.

College presidents who say the age-21 law has not worked are dead wrong. We should base our approach to campus alcohol problems not on anecdotes and general impressions, but on scientific research. Campus officials who have followed that path—at the University of Massachusetts, the University of Nebraska, and many other institutions—have been successful. Other college presidents should follow their example.

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