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Debate of drinking issue needed

AS I SEE IT

By John E. Bassett

“Why in the world did you sign the Amethyst Initiative?” asked one of my favorite Clark University alumni yesterday. “Lowering the legal age for drinking to 18 is one of the worst things we could do.”

“This is not about changing the laws or lowering the legal drinking age,” I replied. “This is about Americans facing the truth that we have among our young people and college students a major health and social problem in binge drinking and, more generally, excessive drinking and driving under the influence.”

I signed the Amethyst Initiative because it is the only call I have seen to put this issue on our national agenda. We need to pull our heads out of the sand and face the problem directly.

If we lower the legal age and do not eliminate or sharply reduce the problem, we have done a bad thing despite all the pleas for fairness and equity we hear from, for example, the National Youth Rights Organization. If at some point we are persuaded that changing the laws really would solve the problem, we should probably change them. I would guess that half the presidents signing the Initiative want to change the law; the other half know the problem, don't yet know the solution, but do recognize that the laws and policies we have now are not working. The initiative itself does not, remember, call for lowering the age to 18. It just says what we are doing now does not work.

Prior to the federal highway act of 1984, which withheld highway funds from any state without a minimum legal age for drinking of at least 21, many states already limited legal drinking to persons 21 and older. Those states did not, however, have a problem with binge drinking or any more excessive drinking than the states with laws that said “18.” Those other states, to be sure, often did a good bit of over-the-border business on weekend nights.

Young people have always, legally and illegally, indulged in alcohol, gotten drunk and occasionally proved to be alcoholics. We have now a very different and growing problem. I am not convinced it is due to laws saying “21,” although I do recognize there can be a small thrill to

getting away with something illegal. That does not explain the need to go “blotto” before the party even starts in order to have a “good” time. Nor does it explain the amount of recidivism for DUI offenses among people over and under 21.

We all know of other countries where young people have small amounts of wine with meals, grow up without being driven to alcoholic excesses and even look at extreme drunkenness with disdain. Can we really argue that age-21 laws are the primary reason behavior in America is so different? Other cultural factors have made such behavior an “entitlement” or an initiation rite among groups of college students and other youths.

Frankly, we do not know enough about those factors over the last three decades, nor about the precise deleterious effect of excessive alcohol on brain development, nor about relations between alcohol usage and laws in many other countries. We do need a national dialogue, more research and knowledge, and reasoned conversation.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, a wonderful organization, has come out strongly against the initiative itself. They need to be part of the dialogue. Others with the sole aim of changing the legal age for drinking to 18 will not attend to any discussion of the complexities of the issue. They need to learn to listen.

Most of us signing the Amethyst Initiative know America has a problem. Shutting off the dialogue is like limiting sex education only to abstinence, a limitation that has had harmful effects. Let’s not compound this other serious problem by failing to discover the best ways to address it.

John Bassett is president of Clark University.