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# The Age-21 Law Isn't Working; It's Time to Debate the Issue of Abusive Drinking

By WILLIAM G. DURDEN

I support the Amethyst Initiative. In fact, I, along with seven other college presidents, co-authored the [presidential statement](#).

By design, the statement does not prescribe a particular policy change, nor does it state that we are advocating reducing the drinking age to 18. It does state the 128 signatories' belief that it is time for our nation to engage in a serious debate about alternative approaches to underage and binge drinking and to examine whether current public policies are in line with current realities.

Current law limits college and university presidents to preaching abstinence and enforcing the law—Herculean tasks. Clearly those approaches are ineffective. Our statement that "21 is not working" is based on the fact that, although the law says you may not drink until you turn 21, many young adults—in and out of college—consume alcohol before they turn 21. On its own terms, the law is not working. The abstinence message does not persuade. And the more successful we are in enforcing the law, the more successful we are in pushing drinking beyond our oversight and campus jurisdiction, and into more-dangerous behaviors.

The Amethyst Initiative seems to have hit a nerve among the American people, with strong voices on both sides of the issue clamoring to be heard. Overly simplified headlines and articles claim that college presidents are soft and want to take themselves out of the policing role and let students drink unabashedly. Such articles play a quick and easy blame game, which shifts the focus away from the problem and fails to even scratch the surface of a culture of alcohol misuse that runs deep in America.

Yes, the Amethyst Initiative focuses on young adults in college, as that is the group we deal with daily and among whom we are witnessing such dangerous behaviors. However, the crisis facing our nation goes far beyond simply determining the age at which adults can or cannot drink alcohol.

The problem of underage drinking is not a problem that is restricted to or necessarily even begins in college—and anyone who believes the problem isn't already in high schools, or even some grade schools, is refusing to face an ugly reality.

It is easy to blame college presidents and assert that they are turning a blind eye. But that accusation not only is false; it also ignores the fact that some of those 18-year-olds come to us already addicted to or abusing alcohol or drugs. They are dropped at our doorstep, and we are expected to "fix" them. Once an underage student arrived at Dickinson with his own beer stash. When he was stopped while trying to carry it into the residence hall, his parent said, "He needs this." We gave an unequivocal no.

For us to save our young people, we must get to the heart of the culture of drinking in the United States that has moved us into this crisis.

Recently a town resident called my office. Unable to reach me, he launched into my assistant, stating that I was "blind to uncontestable research showing clearly that minds are not developed enough until the age of 21 to make rational decisions." Does that same research hold for making judgments on the battlefield, in the voting booth, and behind the wheel of a car? Do we also then have mindless soldiers, voters, and drivers, since we legally permit those under 21 to engage in those activities? I would beg to differ, given the bravery and heroism exhibited by our young men and women in the fight against terror.

A great deal of research exists both to support and to refute the benefits of mandating a drinking age of 21. Much of that research and accompanying advocacy, however, has been devoted to drinking and driving. While that is a critical issue for college and university presidents, we deal increasingly with abusive nonvehicular underage drinking, resulting in death, physical violence, and sexual assault. Furthermore, we are not affiliated with any advocacy groups that support a younger drinking age, and we call for the same rigorous, third-party, independent analyses of their research and its application as we do for the research cited by those groups that oppose lowering the drinking age. The research can readily be misrepresented or misapplied, as it was with the town resident who asserted an "uncontestable research" position to me, without citation but with full conviction.

The problem of binge and underage drinking is a major challenge for us in college residential life, and it is a source of other negative and dangerous behaviors, such as violence and sexual assault. We do not take our obligation lightly. But problems remain despite decades of costly enforcement efforts—efforts that contribute to the rising cost of a college education but in which we persist because we have an obligation to observe the law.

Year after year, there is little to no lasting cultural change in the attitudes of American students, or of Americans over all, toward alcohol abuse, and each year, a new crop of underage students takes every opportunity to get around our supervision—often taking their illegal behavior into the surrounding communities, beyond the oversight we can offer on our campuses. That is most dangerous.

As has been suggested, we could expel every student who drinks while underage, but those students would simply go to another college or be turned out into society to continue their dangerous behaviors.

Perhaps the United States should act like countries with lower drinking ages, which have less of a problem with abusive drinking among youths but require stricter alcohol and drinking education in a nationally consistent manner, and inflict severe punishments on those who drink and drive. Might that perspective extend to individuals of any age who cause harm through binge drinking, with the addition that anyone who violates the limitations be subject to serious jail time, with no concessions?

I would challenge those who believe that a bigger hammer is the answer: Join the national conversation and help us get to the root of abusive drinking and to find answers that can give us real results. I would challenge those who accuse us of shirking our responsibility to clean up underage drinking among college students: Drop the macho rhetoric and confront reality as we see it daily.

Until we solve the inextricably related issues of underage drinking and American attitudes toward alcohol abuse, we are stuck in defensive mode. Without answers, we are left to deal with underage drinking in, essentially, a prohibition mode, which—from our perspective within colleges and universities—is not working.

As college presidents, we are justified in pursuing a conversation about the legal drinking age regardless of the outcome—lowering, raising, or maintaining the age limit. It is our mission to advance discussion of, and examine critically, the issues that matter. It is time to stop the ideological chatter and vicious accusations and prepare an informative national debate preceded by an unbiased evaluation of the research. It is time to test the effectiveness of our democratic process on an issue that matters to all citizens. It is time for Americans to organize and debate the issues. We have, at least, always been good at that.

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