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Rethinking the issue of campus drinking

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A potentially intoxicating national debate about college students' behavior started this fall. More than 130 university and college presidents have questioned the legal drinking age of 21, arguing that current alcohol-control policies aren't working.

The presidents want health experts and policymakers to have an "informed and unimpeded debate" about alcohol use and abuse.

This call to review and rethink alcohol policies is understandable, given that student drinking consumes an inordinate share of the time and resources of college faculty and staff. But stricter public policies such as the minimum drinking age of 21 have had some success in reducing dangerous underage drinking. So the burden of proof for those who would lower the drinking age should be extremely high.

Rather than resorting to rolling back the legal drinking age, college administrators should be trying to influence personal behavior and manage the environmental factors that affect alcohol consumption.

This is no small task, given the historical significance of alcohol in collegiate life. Changing the perception that college is essentially a drinking culture requires confronting some stubborn myths.

One is the misperception that underage drinking begins in college because of the pressure placed on students by their older collegiate peers. Interestingly, most college students who use alcohol regularly became familiar with it earlier in life, having experimented with it in high school. These students arrive on campus having already made the decision to make alcohol part of their socializing.

As a nation, we have been captivated by media reports about "binge drinking." Many believe today's college students are headed to hell in a booze-soaked handbasket. But this is not accurate.

Nearly as many college students report abstinence from alcohol as report "bingeing" at least twice in the last two weeks. Students tend to overestimate the nature and extent of their peers' drinking, and they underestimate the extent to which these same peers take steps to avoid the untoward consequences of alcohol use.

To correct the students' misperceptions about their peers' drinking, prevention specialists have started to use so-called "social norms marketing," with some success. Social norms marketing seeks to convey accurate information about student behavior to debunk misperceptions and empower responsible behavior.

Such social and environmental approaches are needed to counter abundant misinformation about normal alcohol use, including advertising by the beer and liquor industries.

College administrators today have a difficult task: balancing respect for their students' rights as young adults against the wishes of the students' parents, who want more collegiate oversight of student health and safety.

Some health and prevention experts question whether any minimum drinking age is appropriate. One alternative would be to focus on who can purchase alcohol instead of who can use it.

In and of itself, the minimum drinking age has not eliminated underage drinking, or this debate would not be taking place. But it's not clear how setting a new drinking age would eliminate the problem of untoward or dangerous drinking.

One of the most common arguments for lowering the drinking age to 18 is that if we trust young adults to vote or join the military, we should not "deprive" them of the "opportunity" to drink. This question has more to do with the larger issue of defining adulthood in our society. It extends well beyond drinking to driving, tobacco use, marriage eligibility and more.

The "coming of age" rationale for reducing the drinking age may be intriguing. But it must be weighed against evidence of saved lives and improved health under our current policies.

The college presidents' call for a national dialogue is called the Amethyst Initiative because the ancient Greeks believed that gemstone could act against intoxication. Let's hope this debate does not lead to any steps that might appease the Greek god Dionysus, who is often characterized as intoxicated, wild, frenzied and irrational. Misdirected or ineffective policies in this area can indeed be tragic.

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