

## *Drinking in College: One Professor's Personal History (Or, Look Where You're Leaping)*

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WHY SHOULD DRINKING among college students cause so much concern to so many? What, if anything, should we be doing about it? What can we do about it? Whom should we entrust with taking whatever actions are deemed appropriate?

These are a few of the core issues that have occupied the attention of university administrators, citizens, and public officials (including those in law enforcement) in communities surrounding campuses, public health officials, print and electronic media, parents and, in quite a different way, students for as long as there have been colleges, students and alcohol (Straus and Bacon, 1953). Such are the many groups who are, in one way or another, touched by drinking among college students. Personally, I have been struggling with many of these issues for over 20 years, admittedly on a "part-time" basis. My formal involvement with an action agenda focusing upon the "college drinking problem" began in 1979 when I and several other faculty members were asked to serve on a university-wide presidential task force charged with studying the issues for our university, Rutgers, and developing a comprehensive report with policy recommendations. There had been several tragic campus "events" that drew attention to and raised concerns about the potential hazards and consequences of too vigorous a pursuit of a good time. Prior to that time, my work had been more thought than action in that a portion of my scientific work centered on documenting and understanding the etiology, developmental trajectories and consequence of, and risk factors for, alcohol and drug use, abuse and dependence. My work typically focused on the adolescent and young adult years. From that standpoint, I assume, the president of Rutgers thought my presence would lend some measure of empiricism to what surely was to become a "hot topic" on campus and, as it turned out, for the state legislature and, ultimately, the federal government.

The effort resulted in a lengthy report, issued in 1981 after 2 years of study and wide-ranging debate, that be-

came the basis for a comprehensive alcohol policy, adopted, eventually, by the university board of governors in 1984. The comprehensive committee report, with its policy recommendations, was one of the first such reports issued by a major university. Much to the surprise of committee members, we received literally hundreds of requests for the report from universities and colleges across the country. We were in the alcohol policy business! In addition, the report resulted in the establishment of a range of campus-wide programs including what was to become a model student assistance program that remains active and in place today. Other program components that grew from this effort included an ongoing comprehensive educational program made available for all incoming students, the Greek community and student-athletes; special housing for recovering students or those wishing to live in substance free living situations; protocols for coping with intoxicated students designed for residence life staff; and expansion of an existing employee assistance program. Not only were we in the policy business, but we were evolving an elaborate system for approaching drinking in the college community.

More recently (1998) I was asked by the University's current president, Francis L. Lawrence, to chair a second committee charged to revisit the existing policy, examine the current "state of the problem," determine the extent to which the policy and the programs generated by the initial committee were meeting current needs of the university community, and make appropriate recommendations. The request was prompted largely by concern that much had changed in the intervening nearly 20 years, including changes in the drinking age from 18 to 19 to 21. In addition, drinking among students was garnering serious attention from university presidents across a broad spectrum of campuses as a result of a series of alcohol-related incidents, ranging from overdose deaths to nearly full-scale riots. As was the case with the original effort, every key administrative unit of the university (including those responsible for residence life, student health and public safety) was represented by high level decision makers. The faculty and student body were also well represented.

The committee met for almost 18 months. One important outcome of the committee's work was the recommen-

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dition to form a permanent university-wide standing committee to implement revised policy recommendations and monitor and coordinate programs. This recommendation, along with all key recommendations of the 1998 committee, were accepted by the president and endorsed by the university senate. The Alcohol Policy Implementation Committee was chartered in the fall of 2001, and I was asked to chair the committee. Thus, I find myself thrust into the role of a "quasi-administrator," coming full circle from the observer and finder of fact. Believe me, the role of program "monitor and implementer" draws one's attention to a very different piece of the problem landscape than does the role of the observer. What is also true is that, as a university community, we have recognized the need for continued vigilance and regularized programming for what is surely a problem endemic to the college experience. We are not alone in our efforts. Since that first report, the growth of programming for college students has been remarkable. The excellent comprehensive survey of campus programs by Anderson and Milgram (2001), now in its second edition, identifies over 100 promising approaches to dealing with drinking among students in place across the nation. The magnitude of this response is, of course, another sign of concern and commitment on the part of universities at large. These authors have developed a companion action planner (Milgram and Anderson, 2000) that outlines, in detail, critical steps necessary in the development of policies and programs. The guide also identifies key stakeholders and their potential roles in processes of planning and implementation.

It is these "circling of experiences" of the last 20 years that made me keenly interested when I noted that the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) had decided to focus attention on drinking among college students and make it a national priority. In 1998, NIAAA commissioned a special task force to study the issue and make recommendations. I believe it was the recent tragic, though often isolated, events related to drinking that had captured national attention and the ongoing concerns of presidents of major universities that formed part of the impetus for an NIAAA task force on drinking among college students. As part of its efforts, the task force commissioned a series of papers focusing upon drinking in college that will be published as a supplement to *JSA* in this volume year. One of the core papers commissioned by the NIAAA task force is being featured in this issue of the *Journal* (see: Hingson et al., "Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18-24"). This article reports the results of a novel approach to determining the nature and, particularly, the extent of the "problem," as well as the potential costs and consequences. Based upon the analyses presented by Hingson and colleagues, it seems clear that both our concerns and responses are warranted. By focusing on college students, our concerns are magnified by the thought that these individuals

may represent the "best and brightest" hope for our country's future. Hingson et al.'s observations serve to focus attention on other issues as well. For example, the "problem" is not only restricted to young adults living in college settings. The problem rates are similarly high and alarming for young adults (ages 18-24) who do not attend college but who also represent the backbone of our country's future. Most of these individuals are unlikely to have any exposure to systematic programming once they exit high school. It is also apparent that issues such as defining the nature of the problems and the scope of risk present methodological and practical challenges. For example, DeJong (2001) challenges the use of restricted definitions of, and criteria for, heavy episodic drinking often employed as a basis for projections about the nature and magnitude of the problem. Of course, Hingson et al.'s work raises serious questions about the need for practical preventive and palliative interventions. Presumably these should be theoretically based and empirically validated. One important observation that is apparent in Anderson and Milgram's (2001) survey is that few of the promising campus prevention programs, while theoretically sound, have been subjected to empirical validation, although some exceptions are noteworthy (e.g., Marlatt et al., 1998; Murphy et al., 2001). Those of us charged with practical programming responsibilities will be watching closely the results of evaluations.

What seems remarkable in this venture is the persistence and continuity of the central issues. It is instructive for those of you who are faced with either the lure of observing or the challenges of intervening to reread the work of Straus and Bacon (1953) that reports the results of the first comprehensive survey of drinking practices of college students. This pioneering effort examined the practices of 17,000 students from 27 colleges and universities spanning the years 1949-51. Incredible as it may seem, the projections of the nature and extent of use patterns and problems map almost perfectly on "modern" survey results. Furthermore, issues raised in that early volume are thoughtfully discussed and developed with uncanny prescience for today. The book also places the issues in a historical context that should not be overlooked by either scholar or administrator. Straus and Bacon end with advice that is as sound as any for those of us who would "get into the business" of drinking in college.

The universities' failure so far to act in these areas, to provide leadership in knowledge and understanding, and to serve as intellectual stimulators and guides to the rest of the educational world obviously does not rise from lack of problems, unavailability of research or the inapplicability of research to basic knowledge or to related practical and academic fields. It has its source in the intellectual and moral atmosphere which still surrounds the phenomena of alcohol and drinking in the

whole society. But the colleges may change their approach and if they work out more effective solutions of problems, they are not likely only to be accepted but widely copied by the rest of society. . . . This the colleges can do appropriately and with competence in so far as they recognize the responsibility and specifically prepare themselves for it. (Straus and Bacon, 1953, p. 214)

As for me, I have learned to “look where I’m leaping.” Commitment to our college-aged population takes time, creativity, resources and long-range commitment. After all, each year colleges and universities turn out a new “crop for the present” and accept new “seeds for the future.” Those who leave take with them the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs they have evolved. Those who arrive come with existing and emergent behaviors, attitudes and beliefs ready to be developed.

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