

[The Network's Response to the Minimum Legal Drinking Age]

In response to the recent media focus on the Amethyst Initiative to study and discuss current underage drinking laws, The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol Issues offers the following for consideration:

- Open, dispassionate discussion that fully considers all sound research and scientifically based evidence, and that prompts further research on the issue of alcohol related negative consequences has been and continues to be a component in the development of strong, effective prevention practices.
- The current drinking age laws and their enforcement are pieces of an environmental management strategy that has proven effective at reducing negative consequences.
- The question is not "Will a change in the drinking age laws prevent the negative consequences associated with alcohol use among college students?" but rather "What is sound and effective prevention work that will reduce those negative consequences?"

[Responses to the questions raised by the Amethyst Initiative]

The research and literature around drinking age shows a preponderance of evidence in favor of maintaining the current minimum drinking age of 21 or raising it. The following responses are not intended to demonstrate any bias for the current minimum legal drinking age, but to simply reflect current scientific evidence and serve as fodder for further research and study.

Is the 21 year old drinking age working?

We suggest that campuses examine the causes of underage drinking in their communities. Evidence suggests that the law is not the problem. The problem may be a lack of enforcement of these laws and the easy access and availability of alcohol to underage students. Data does show us that college students under the age of 21 do drink; however, there is a greater number of over 21 year old students who consume alcohol. It is a myth that once students turn 21 they stop drinking or decrease their drinking.

Does the 21 year old drinking age create a culture of binge drinking?

The binge drinking culture exists due to a long list of influences, which include the popular media (TV, movies and music) glamorizing alcohol, alcohol advertising, and traditions on college campuses where alcohol is significantly involved. There is no scientific evidence that the 21 year old drinking age caused this binge drinking culture.

Would lowering the drinking age allow us to educate students about responsible use?

Logically speaking, the drinking age law does not need to change in order to educate students about responsible use. When educating underage students about alcohol, college prevention programs can help students understand the legal, physical, and financial consequences of underage drinking. Implementing prevention programs can challenge students to make informed, responsible decisions regarding their consumption of alcohol by implementing a comprehensive evidence-based strategy to address this problem on campus. Comprehensive programming features the combined implementation of multiple strategies to address the multiple aspects of the high risk alcohol and other drug use problem. Strategies include: education to change knowledge, attitudes and beliefs and behavioral intentions of alcohol and other drug consumption; the modification of environmental factors that contribute to the problem; health protection and harm reduction strategies; intervention and treatment.

[Evidence Based Justifications for the 21 Year Old Drinking Age]

Studies indicate that delaying the onset of drinking substantially reduces the risk of alcohol problems and dependence later on in life.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that through 2002, the increase in the minimum legal drinking age has saved 21,887 lives in the 50 states. NHTSA estimates that the current 21 year old drinking age will continue to save 1,000 lives each year. While alcohol was involved in 60 percent of U.S. vehicular fatalities in 1982, the rate in 2005 stood at 39 percent.

The 21 year old drinking age is also reinforced in the science literature relating to brain development. The frontal lobe of the brain, responsible for executive function or decision making capacity is still developing in an adolescent. It continues to develop into one's 20's and develops more slowly and often with complication when alcohol is introduced to the brain during this developmental process.

[How might this affect campus liability?]

Regardless of the minimum legal drinking age, which happens to be one of the most well researched and effectively documented public policy initiatives, campuses have a legal and ethical responsibility to create a safe and healthy campus environment for students.

[Helpful Resources]

Any informed discussion relies on a solid base of knowledge about the issue at hand. The Network, therefore, encourages you to take advantage of the resources listed below, to take the time delve further into the evidence and literature on both sides of this issue, and to consider fully aspects of associated violence, mortality, economy, and human development.

US Department of Education's Higher Education Center Resources
<http://www.higheredcenter.org/faq/108>

National Association of State Alcohol/Drug Abuse Directors
www.nasada.org

National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse
<http://niaaa.nih.gov>

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
www.nhtsa.gov