

Alcohol: Many students drink with caution; some do not drink at all

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A study conducted by Professor Henry Weschler, director of the Harvard School of Public Health Alcohol Study, ranked the University as a moderate binge-drinking campus, Associate Dean of Students and Director of the Office of Student Life Laura Blake Jones said.

"We fall on the high end of the moderate," Jones said. "We're high enough that we're... concerned."

Why is drinking so pervasive in college?

The ability to make one's own decisions away from parents' watchful eyes may be part of the reason that

drinking is so ingrained in college life.

"They're away from home and they have all this freedom," sophomore Allison Blass said. "They can get drunk every weekend. It's their life."

Although Blass said she does not drink and many of her friends are not partiers, she hears stories about people who often go to bars and parties.

Junior Brandon Rhodes said "freedom and license" play a big role in drinking among students. For some it is like a "rite of passage," when they get to college.

"We have a culture built up around it," he said.

Rhodes is quick to point out that "there's nothing wrong with alcohol in and of itself," but when drinking is done in excess, "it's escapism and wasteful."

Studies at the University show that drinking tends to be higher among younger students and especially in the first term of school, Blake Jones said.

"The first few weeks of college before midterms are due and you've got all the new students who are transitioning to a new environment is, on every campus that I've been a part of, always a period of time when high-risk behaviors are happening," she said.

University health educator Ramah Leith said drinking may stem not only from the experience of freedom, especially for students leaving home for the first time, but some may also see it as an expectation—they have to drink because they think they see everyone else drinking.

"In some students' minds (drinking) is the college experience," Leith said.

Statistics have shown, however, that many students overestimate how many students drink and how much these students drink, Leith said.

In a Health Center survey conducted in 2002, 24.2 percent of students surveyed said they drank only one or two drinks per sitting; 31.4 percent had three to four drinks, while 23 percent had more than five drinks. However, in the same survey, when students were asked how much they thought their peers drink when they go out, 30.4 percent estimated it was three to four drinks, while 65.2 percent approximated that it was more than five drinks.

Leith said if students who drink keep seeing the same people over and over again at parties, they may assume that other people always spend their time drinking and it's the social norm.

"If you're in that situation, you feel that everyone is drinking," Leith said.

Such students also tend to surround themselves with other students who drink a lot, said University health educator Annie Dochnahl.

"Students tend to drink up to the expectations of their social group," Dochnahl said.

Sophomore Carly Beebe agreed.

Beebe said some students may keep drinking past their limits if other people also keep drinking.

"There's no one there telling them to stop," Beebe said. "They may be past the point of being able to stop (by themselves)."

Some students will say they are just social drinkers, but the exact definition of social drinking is a bit hazy for some, Leith said.

"Social drinking is not 'I go out with my friend on Friday night and get wasted,'" Leith said. "That's not social drinking."

Leith said social drinking means drinking moderately and does not involve chugging alcohol, drinking games or alcohol intake to the point of blacking out.

She said while students who drink excessively may not necessarily be alcoholics, they may not recognize that they have a problem.

"They are not just social drinking, they're drinking to get drunk," Leith said.

Social pressure is a factor in alcohol consumption

Freedom aside, students may also drink because alcohol is packaged as very appealing.

"It's sexed up," Rhodes said.

Dochnahl said alcohol is associated with "good times."

"Advertising by the alcohol industry shows drinking as risk-free, sexy fun," Dochnahl said, adding that the hangovers are never on display; what people see is fit, young, beautiful people enjoying their lives.

"When we are trapped in that imaging, it becomes part of our psychological landscape," Dochnahl said.

Many also say that alcohol acts as a "social lubricant." When some people drink they feel more at ease or outgoing, said Edel Davenport, associate director of the University Counseling and Testing Center.

Davenport said alcohol becomes part of the process of making connections and bonding with other students.

"They want to fit in," Davenport said, adding that by drinking, people who are shy or have a low self-esteem may lose some of their inhibitions. "It's kind of seductive in that way."

Leith agrees.

"It's just an unhealthy way they've found to be more social," she said.

Though for some students drinking may be all about having fun or creat-

ing social bonds, for others it could also be a balm for deeper emotional and mental wounds.

Davenport said if students have experienced grief, depression, loss or other turmoil in their lives they may use alcohol as a means to "feel better" and medicate themselves.

The daily pressures of going to school, and at times having to juggle educational needs with jobs and other priorities, could also drive some students to the bottle.

"A lot of students...are under a lot of financial stress," Davenport said.

However, some say college may actually not be the doorway to rampant drinking.

Student Judicial Affairs Director Chris Loschiavo said it's a misperception that students learn to drink in college — some start much earlier.

"Students are coming to college already with the experience, and those that have been drinking

(since) high school now in some ways have to be less careful because their parents aren't around," Loschiavo said. When high school students were asked to stand at an IntroDUCKtion session a few years ago if they had ever spent a night helping out a drunk friend, many stood, he said.

Many students do drink responsibly or not at all

Although alcohol abuse can be a problem for some students, many say they exercise caution.

"I'm not a big partier," said Beebe. "It's not like I'm doing it to get incredibly drunk."

Beebe said there is a limit to drinking which some people may exceed.

Senior Kari Gorman said she drinks "very rarely."

"I'm really busy," she said. "I don't feel the need for it."

Some students don't drink at all.

"I don't like being drunk and most of my friends don't drink," Senior Asa Telschow said. "I like to be in control of myself."

Telschow said he has seen responsible drinking as well as irresponsible drinking. He believes there may be reasons other than freedom that make alcohol a problem for some students.

"I've been on my own and that wasn't reason enough to get me drinking," Telschow said.

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