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College drinking is liberating, and a good excuse

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Bijabetesn Jayson, USA TODAY
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Diet & Weight Loss Colleges trying to stem the tide of student drinking have focused on the evils of

Provided to a support that can ensue when students drink too much. But new Children's Health

psychological-research suggests that the downsides of excessive drinking aren't bad

ensugh to make students stop.

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"They intend to get intoxicated," says psychologist E. Scott Geller, director of the Center for Applied Behavior Systems at Virginia Tech.

"We have shown in several studies that their intentions influence their behavior. If they intend to get drunk, it's difficult to stop that."

Geller, who has been studying alcohol awareness since the mid-1980s, notes that education hasn't worked.

"We thought if we could demonstrate to students that their performance deteriorated under alcohol, they would be convinced that their alcohol consumption has put them at risk," Geller says. But "knowing that one is impaired, physically and even emotionally, did not seem to reduce

Researchers even tried using Breathalyzers at parties and bars to show students their blood alcohol content.

"It actually encouraged them to drink more," says Geller, whose research team presented findings earlier this month at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C.

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by Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

On 'alcoholidays'

Researchers at Virginia Tech have been studying "alcoholidays," which is their term for a "nationally celebrated festival or holiday that is strongly associated with or defined by high rates of alcohol consumption." In studies of more than 1,200 students on St. Patrick's Day, 678 on Halloween and 105 on Cinco de Mayo, they found that:

- Students in costumes who reported celebratory motives had higher BACs blood alcohol levels than those without a costume or celebratory motive.
- Those who drank relevant themed drinks (such as green beer on St. Patrick's Day) had significantly higher blood alcohol BACs than those who drank other beverages.
- Students drinking themed beverages were significantly less aware of their current level of intoxication.

"I think everybody's aim is to get drunk on the weekend," says Brandie Pugh, 22, a senior at Ohio University in Athens. "It's not about the taste of the alcohol. It's about the effects of it. It's about the lowered inhibitions."

Colleges need to "acknowledge and reckon with" alcohol's appeal, says Laina Bay-Cheng, an associate professor of social work at the University at Buffalo-State University of New York, who also presented research at the meeting. In focus groups with 97 young people ages 14 to 17, she found that when teenagers drink, they think they can blame their actions on alcohol.

Students in her studies described alcohol as emboldening and said it offers "liquid courage," a phrase other researchers also have cited.

Drinking allows young women to "act out being sexually assertive, carefree, liberated," she says, and can be an excuse for their sexual behavior.

"If you have sex, you're a slut, and if you don't, you're a prude — but drinking allows you to do both," she says. "You can go out, get drunk, have sex and the next day say, 'I'm still a good girl."

Pugh says she has observed that sentiment on campus.
"'I was drunk so I hooked up with that guy.' 'I was drunk
so I missed my class this morning.' 'I was drunk so I got in
a fight.' If it's something they're not proud of, it gives them
an excuse."

Alcohol makes students more social and "creates a world of adventure," says Thomas Vander Ven, author of Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party So Hard, out earlier this month.

"Because so much can go wrong, interesting, exciting, funny things happen when you have many people intoxicated together," says Vander Ven, an associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Ohio University, which just this month was named the nation's top party school in an annual list by *The Princeton Review*.

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He surveyed more than 400 students around the country from 2003 to 2009, conducted 25 interviews and did more than 100 hours of field research.

His conclusion: The campus environment provides so much social support that even when students have bad experiences drinking, the help they get from friends afterward is seen as a positive.

Researchers at the University of Washington-Seattle cite similar findings in a study of 500 students in the journal *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* in May. Social benefits of drinking include a "boost of courage" and increased chattiness, they say, which outweigh negatives such as hangovers, fights or unwanted hookups.

"Part of the thrill of it is you don't know where the night is going to take you," says Ohio University senior Holly Ningard, 20.

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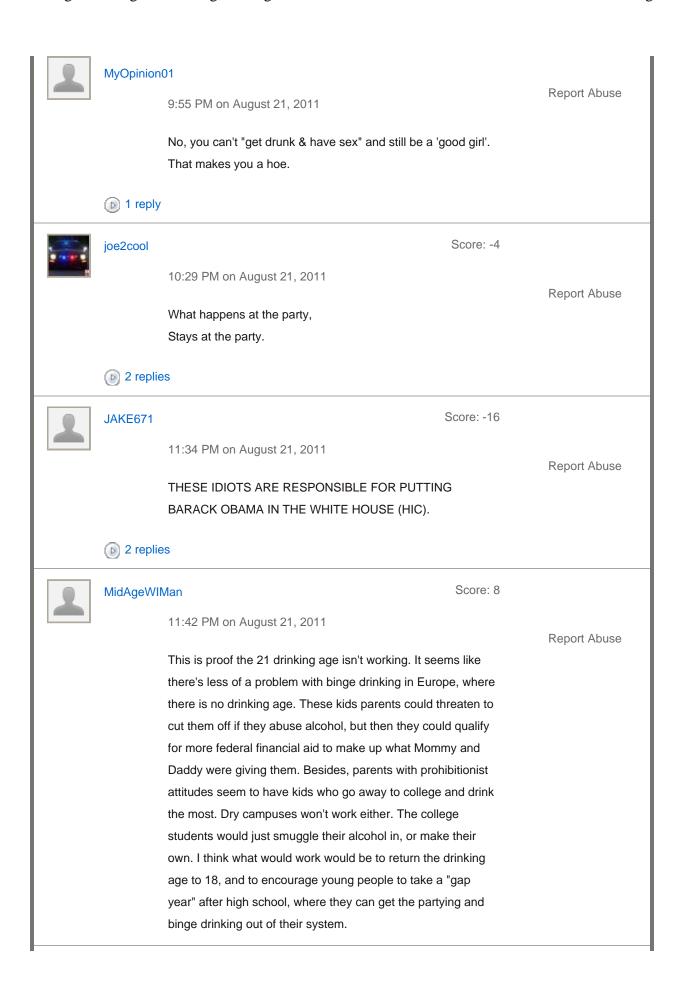
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Score: 18





mauimom

Score: 19

12:24 AM on August 22, 2011

Report Abuse

This reminds me of birth control verses abstinance: If they're going to have sex/drink anyway, then the focus should be on responsible behavior while doing so. I was not crazy about my son drinking at school, but at least he took the free bus or walked when he went out, or they had a designated driver (who got free non-alcoholic drinks). Also, we had lots of conversations, even once he started college, about the importance of condoms to prevent not only having sex with everyone your partner has had sex with (so to speak!), but also 18 years of responsibility for a life before he was ready and with the right person.

Sometimes you have to accept the fact that kids are going to make their own decisions, and they may not be decisions that you like or agree with. Best to grit your teeth and keep lines of communication open and remind them to at least be smart about those things.



The Mick

Score: 8

5:01 AM on August 22, 2011

Report Abuse

"We thought if we could demonstrate to students that their performance deteriorated under alcohol, they would be convinced that their alcohol consumption has put them at risk," Geller says. But "knowing that one is impaired, physically and even emotionally, did not seem to reduce alcohol consumption."

Clearly, they didn't bother asking present or past college students why they drank so much. Personally, when there was a weekend keg party in the dorms that I was invited too, I expected to drink to excess and escape from the hard work and worries I had dealt with the previous week.

Since I not only drank with students, but drank with people like Physics Nobel Prize Winner Glenn Seaborg (discover of Plutonium) and Chemistry Nobel Prize Winner Henry Taube (breakthroughs in ceramics) as well as my own research advisor Jerry Kresge (discoverer of how energy effects certain unusual chemical reaction rates), I would never have been convinced that occasional alcohol "deteriorated" my performance as a scientist. How it deteriorated my performance while drinking was immaterial.

1 reply



frieswiththat

Score: 30

11:58 AM on August 22, 2011

Report Abuse

Who in the hell needs a study to figure out that college students intend on getting drunk?





forever-con

Score: 1

12:38 PM on August 22, 2011

Report Abuse

joe2cool

10:29 PM on August 21, 2011

What happens at the party,

Stays at the party.

++++++++++++++++

joe2cool, agree but you would think that this would be the one rule that kids would keep. But today, because of cell phones, you have texting, pictures, videos that all can be uploaded. And as you know, once on sites like Facbook, your not going to get rid of them.

For my kids, son and daughter, I knew they were going to drink at school. I just pleaded with them to be careful what actually shows up on sites. It was to try and protect them as they went out after school to try and get jobs. Most companies are monitoring social sites and doing Google searches on potential employees.

1 reply



rogerb

Score: 0

12:38 PM on August 22, 2011

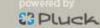
One thing these studies never go into, and tocuhed on by The Mick, is that college is hard, stressful work, and binge drinking is a way to blow off steam.

I would be much more calm and relaxed (after the hangover settled at least) following a bout of drunkenness.

That was the reason to get drunk: blow off steam and relieve the stress, in a social setting. Something that no other activity seemed to accomplish.

(though personnally I only got hammered once a month or two, with some lighter drinking in between).

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