



News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

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Red Bulls and Risky Behavior

Late night study sessions, commitments, friends, parties; college students never seem to have enough time. So they would seem to be ideal consumers of energy drinks, giving them that boost to get through a long day on not a lot of sleep. It's no wonder, then, that energy drink makers like Red Bull and Monster Energy market their products on campuses, and they and other products are sold in bulk in stores around colleges. According to data from Student Monitor, which does market research, 31 percent of college students report having bought an energy drink in the previous month.

A recent study suggests that the highly popular drinks may indicate something other than a student in need of a little extra boost. The study, published in the *Journal of American College Health*, found that students who consumed energy drinks made up a disproportionate share of those who scored high on a scale indicating an inclination toward risky behavior.

Of the 795 public university undergraduate students who were surveyed, 39 percent reported drinking at least one energy drink in the last month, and 26 percent had consumed energy drinks mixed with alcohol at least once (about half had done so more than once). But of students who scored highly on the risk-taking scale, 49 percent had consumed energy drinks, and 39 percent had mixed energy drinks and alcohol.

The findings emerged from a larger study of "toxic jock identity," which is characterized by "sport-related identity, masculinity and risk taking," according to the report. Kathleen Miller, the report's author and a research scientist at the Research Institute on Addictions at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said she included a question on energy drinks because she had observed individuals with this type of behavior consuming energy drinks.

Miller called energy drinks and risk taking behavior a "natural fit." Energy drinks are marketed to people who engage in "extreme sports" and other types of risky behavior, and the physical rush associated with the drinks appeals to risk takers, she said. Miller clearly notes, though, that while energy drinks may signify risk taking behavior, there is no evidence that the drinks actually cause such behavior.

Experts on college health say the study raises intriguing issues, but they are divided on whether Miller's findings resonate with what they see on campuses.

Donald Post chairs the Students/Consumers Section of the American College Health Association, and is a graduate student in biomedical research at the University of Central Florida, and a paramedic. His experience, he said, supports the study's suggested link between college students with risk taking behavior and energy drinks.

He said the consumption of energy drinks gives a person more confidence to pursue risk taking. "Just drinking that energy drink is enough to push them further" to do something they don't normally do, Post said.

He did stress that energy drinks are not necessarily dangerous, noting that as with most things, drinking them in moderation is fine. Post himself occasionally has energy drinks, especially during long shifts as a paramedic.



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But they can be dangerous, especially when mixed with alcohol, Post said. He has responded as a paramedic to situations when a person has mixed too much energy drinks with alcohol. "Basically what it's doing is making a drunk person awake," he said.

Mary Claire O'Brien, assistant professor of emergency medicine and public health sciences at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine, shares Post's concerns about the mixing of energy drinks and alcohol, since the caffeine from energy drinks diminishes the feeling of drunkenness. But while that leads her to suggest the banning of energy drinks that contain alcohol, as some do, O'Brien is not nearly as concerned about regular energy drinks.

Some campus officials go even further, questioning the conclusions of Miller's study. Brian Van Brunt, director of the Counseling and Testing Center at Western Kentucky University, said it was hard to know what to make of Miller's finding because the study only asked if students had consumed an energy drink on a day in the past month, but not how many. As with exercise or alcohol, Van Brunt said, consumption of energy drinks in moderation is not a problem.

Van Brunt said that better indicators existed to identify this type of behavior. He suggested that other questions asked in the study would be better warning signs for people who may have risk taking behavior. For example, people with this type of behavior tend to partake in unprotected sex.

As for what colleges should be doing, Van Brunt draws an analogy to credit cards. He could see a possible need for educational programs similar to those that some colleges use to warn students about getting into credit card debt, so that students don't run into problems with energy drinks.

— [James Heggen](#)

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Comments

stupid study

I would be more concerned with the amount of caffeine students are absorbing and the effect this is having on their sleep patterns. One of the first indications of a mental health issue is a disruption in sleep. The fact that most students stay up late and do not get enough sleep and end up using caffeine to get them through many days in a row, combined with the effects of alcohol and or other drugs—legal and illegal—has probably more to do with risky behavior than anything else. This is a stupid study that is so unscientific and limited the real issue is how it got published in the first place. Red Bull is loving the advertising I'm sure.

ccbb, at 8:15 am EDT on June 11, 2008

Maybe not so stupid?

I agree with the above commenter to a certain extent. Sleep deprivation is a foundational marker for student health and needs to be addressed head-on as an issue of primary importance. That does not, however, negate the importance of exploring other areas that also help to make up the web of factors that result in poor student health and risky decision making. It should be quite obvious that these sorts of drinks fit quite nicely into the caffeine category mentioned by the above comment and probably speak to larger issues of institutional and student culture that result in these types of excessive and destructive behavior. Why insult an attempt to better understand students? That process can lead to more nuanced insight into student behavior and health issues.

GJ, at 10:15 am EDT on June 11, 2008

I wish I knew what kind of risky behavior we were talking about.

Michael, at 10:20 am EDT on June 11, 2008

More counseling/study skills training required!

Is this study not another way of saying that students without much life experience who are thrown into a stressful experience may not know the best strategies for dealing with such?!

Study after study shows that the myth of cramming for college as a way to preform is just that. Not only does it hurt the performance of students on tests, but it can jump start the sleep disturbances that people suffering from even mild forms of mental illness suffer. Once the sleep cycle is altered it can be a downward spiral, which is true of everyone, not just college students.

I agree that colleges should not condone, but ultimately it is the students choices that matter. Those that choose poorly will go off campus to get their "magic solution in a bottle" or have their roommate pick it up for them.

Bob, at 11:40 am EDT on June 11, 2008

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