

Heavy-drinking colleges showing no improvements

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PISCATAWAY, NJ – U.S. colleges with the biggest student drinking problems have so far failed to turn the tide, according to a new study.

The research, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, found that at 18 heavy-drinking U.S. campuses, students' alcohol habits showed little change over a dozen years. In 1993, 58 percent of students reported binge drinking in the past two weeks; in 2005, 56 percent said the same. And although 28 percent of students in 1993 said they frequently binged, that figure was 32 percent in 2005.

The study did not look at what, if any, measures the colleges had taken to combat student drinking. But whatever they might have done has apparently not been enough, according to lead researcher Toben F. Nelson, Sc.D., an assistant professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

“Clearly the work is not over,” says Nelson, “because what has been done so far has not put a dent in the problem.”

For their study, Nelson and his colleagues focused on 18 U.S. colleges that had, in a 1993 survey, shown particularly acute drinking problems. More than half of students surveyed at each school reported a recent drinking binge -- defined as at least four or five drinks in a row.

Students at those same schools were surveyed several more times through 2005.

Nelson's team found that along with the persistently high levels of binge drinking, schools showed little change in the number of students who reported any drinking: 88.5 percent in 1993, and 86 percent in 2005.

Nor was there progress in the behaviors that often go hand-in-hand with problem drinking, like physical injuries, unprotected sex and drunk driving. In 1993, 37 percent of students said they had driven after drinking, and in 2005, the figure was the same -- although that marked a decline from a high of 43 percent in 1997.

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Yet, Nelson pointed to recommendations made by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism College Drinking Task Force and recent studies that show that there are effective ways to curb college drinking. One of keys seems to be getting the wider community to work with colleges, which includes more controls on the supply of alcohol and better enforcement of laws against underage drinking and alcohol-related violations, such as drinking and driving.

Many schools focus their efforts primarily on the students -- for example, offering counseling to those who've been found to have a potential drinking problem. But, Nelson says, "we also need programs with broader reach."

In a recent *JSAD* supplement devoted to college drinking problems, researchers detailed programs that have shown positive results at U.S. campuses, using interventions focused on individuals as well as universities and the surrounding communities.

Parents can also do their part by helping to steer their children toward schools where alcohol is less ingrained in the culture. "Not all colleges are the stereotypical heavy-drinking campus," Nelson points out. "Parents can help their child identify a college environment that will support healthy behavior."

He says that certain characteristics of a school can serve as a tip-off that heavy drinking may be common on campus -- including a strong fraternity/sorority presence and a conspicuous number of bars surrounding the campus.

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The study was conducted as part of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.