



Answer to Underage Drinking: Make It Legal

Lower the Drinking Age? Colleges Tout Benefits of Allowing Alcohol at 18

By Susan Donaldson James

Aug. 20, 2008—

By the time Lizzy Holmgren turned 21 in her senior year at the University of Colorado at Boulder, she had already learned how to do shots $\frac{1}{2}$ 10 at a time $\frac{1}{2}$ or drink as many as 20 during a day of heavy partying.

But as a sophomore in 2004, when a classmate died in a highly publicized case of alcohol poisoning, she began to see the dangers. Just weeks after arriving as a freshman, Lynn "Gordie" Bailey and several other pledges were "encouraged" to drink four bottles of whiskey and six bottles of wine in 30 minutes as part of a fraternity "bid night."

Left to "sleep it off," the 18-year-old was found dead the next morning $\frac{1}{2}$ covered in ritual writing his fraternity brothers had scrawled over his body. One of Holmgren's friends had tried to wipe the ink off the corpse and couldn't sleep for weeks.

Quite frankly, said Holmgren, even though it's the students who "perpetuate" the alcohol culture, they need reining in.

"When you are older, it's not as cool to be drunk," she told ABCNews.com. "But when you are in school, you are so excited that your parents aren't there, that you feel you can't get into trouble and you are invincible."

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1,700 college students die each year in alcohol-related deaths $\frac{1}{2}$ not to mention the harm they cause other innocent victims in car accidents, sexual assaults and fraternity hazing.

The problem has vexed universities for so long that this week nearly 100 college presidents from some of the most well respected schools in the country proposed a radical idea: They are asking lawmakers to *lower* the drinking age from 21 to 18 to curb the allure and "underground culture" of college drinking.

If you make it legal, they say, it drives binge drinking out into the open, where schools and police can regulate it.

The controversial idea sparked immediate outrage.

A variety of groups, led by Mothers Against Drunk Driving, are fighting the initiative, faulting the universities for refusing to take responsibility for their underage students.

"We think their first concern should be the health, welfare and safety of the students, and it certainly

isn't," said Virginia native Jeffrey Levy, who first waged the war against the college presidents in 1997 after the death of his 20-year-old son in an alcohol-related car accident.

"Their facts are terribly wrong," Levy, who sits on MADD's board of directors, told ABCNews.com. "They want to take themselves off the hook. If they change the law, it's not their problem."

His 20-year-old son, Jonathan [¶] a passenger in a car driven by a friend who was "drunk beyond imagination" [¶] was one of five college students killed in Virginia in just one weekend. After that, Levy led an attorney general's task force to do something about it.

College Parties, Drinking and Death

"I spent next 14 months touring schools and I was appalled," said Levy, a former Air Force pilot. "I had no clue of the intensity of alcohol and behaviors that exist today.

"Colleges need to make clear to students that certain behaviors are unacceptable, like cheating and not paying your tuition bills. What about excessive drinking?"

Working with law enforcement, Levy said, "Every college president was on one side of the table and we were on the other. [The presidents] were mostly concerned with the image of their college and issues of liability."

And, he says, when colleges do act on lawsuits and compensate parents, "a zippered mouth is part of the settlement agreement."

John McCardell, former president of Vermont's Middlebury College, who started the initiative, agrees that liability "has to be one of the things a president thinks about." But he rejects the idea that legal concerns are the primary motivation of the idea.

Alcohol, he says, is a "reality in the lives of young adults," and the age 21 law "forces it underground and off campus where there is great risk."

He wants to bring college drinking out into the open, where colleges can better control it.

Holmgren, who saw firsthand the dangers of the college drinking culture, says she sees the logic in the proposal.

"You finally get your independence and you go crazy," said Holmgren, who says her drinking moderated when she became legal. "If you're allowed to drink whenever, it demystifies the whole thing."

The so-called Amethyst Initiative has refocused the debate on what parents, law enforcement, colleges and even the students themselves are calling a binge drinking epidemic that needs to be fixed.

"All the data show that by the time they go to college they have already experienced alcohol, so how can anyone say the law is working?" McCardell asked.

McCardell says he has received numerous letters after going public with the initiative showing many "parents are in our camp."

But MADD's Levy counters, "Colleges are not willing to be the bad guy and parents want them to."

Minimum drinking ages were established in the United States after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. When the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1971, many states dropped drinking ages to 18 or 19. But in 1988, after studies showed an increase in alcohol-related auto accidents involving 18- to 20-year-olds, all 50 states raised the age back to 21.

As a result, alcohol-related fatalities have dropped 56 percent from an all-time high in 1988, according to studies by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). The greatest decline was in the 16-20 age group.

Alcohol at Age 21 or 18?

"Colleges have an obligation to address this," said Dr. Ralph Hingson, NIAAA's director of epidemiology and prevention research, who conducted the updated studies. "But they can't do it alone. It's a larger social problem to address harmful drinking."

Not only must colleges set limits, according to Hingson, but "key forces" in society must intervene offering screening and counseling interventions, mandated treatments, ignition locks so drunk drivers cannot operate a car, setting lower blood alcohol limits and even raising the price of alcohol, which discourages students with less discretionary income.

"We need to all work together college presidents, professors, students, deans and alumni along with city officials," Hingson told ABCNews.com.

Christopher B. Gilbert, education law attorney at Bracewell and Guiliani in Houston, said public universities are largely immune from liability suits, but that doesn't mean parents have not tried to hold them accountable.

He understands the need for colleges to exert more control, but said the issue is complicated by a double standard.

"I have a problem with the country saying to people, you can send them off to die in Iraq, but you can't drink," he said. "It's a little patronizing. Not all people are mature at 18, but some aren't at 21."

According to Gilbert, the nation's legal approach is all about being 18.

"Everything else in our country is based on 18," he told ABCNews.com. They can drive a car, serve in the military, vote, smoke, drop out of school and marry. Even the health records of college students are off limits to parents because of privacy laws after age 18.

But Stephan Landsman, professor of tort law at De Paul University in Chicago, said many college students are "insulated from the real world and not street smart."

Even the Supreme Court has acknowledged in a death penalty ruling that brains under 18 are "not mature."

"The switch is not turned on and they are still developing," Landsman told ABCNews.com. "They are away from home for the first time and are vulnerable."

"But when you make things prohibited, you drive conduct underground," he conceded. "It's true for recreational drugs, marijuana, and it's true in sale of alcohol. So you have a black market and a gray market, behavior that seems a troubling phenomenon."

Kathleen Donohue, a 20-year-old student at Boston College, said many students who can't venture outside the dorms resort to drinking games and consume unhealthy amounts of alcohol.

"Since teenage drinkers can't go out and drink openly at bars and events, they are confined to the dorms where there is not a lot to distract them," she told ABCNews.com.

Landsman claims that data on the link between highway deaths and teen drinking tells lawmakers little about the relationship to minimum drinking ages, and that more "snapshots" should be taken of countries where 18-year-olds can drink. McCardell cites Puerto Rico, where the drinking age is 18 and alcohol-related deaths are down 11 percent.

Be Smart at Bars and Clubs

"These are a pretty smart and reputable bunch," he said of the university presidents, which represent some of the highest-tier colleges, like Dartmouth, Duke, Kenyon and others.

Still, not all college presidents are in the same camp, according to Outside the Classroom (OTC), a company that helps universities address high-risk drinking.

Their board is poised this week to deliver its first annual leadership award — a \$50,000 unrestricted gift to a college president who can inspire others to think differently about how to curb binge drinking. The Gordie Foundation, established in memory of the fraternity pledge who died at University of Colorado, was a major contributor to the award.

None of the 18 nominees supports the Amethyst Initiative, according to founder and CEO of OTC, Brandon Busteed.

"There is work presidents are and can be doing now that has nothing to do with the law to help students navigate this terrain," Busteed argues.

"It's great that there is a healthy debate," he said about the reaction to the Amethyst Initiative. "I am a supporter of MADD, but I like McCardell's fresh and new ideas."

Though lowering the drinking age has gotten more press, McCardell has also proposed a drinking license program that 18- to 20-year-olds must complete before be allowed to drink.

Meanwhile, after the death at Colorado, Lizzy Holmgren agrees with the university presidents that an overhaul of the law is needed.

"Once I turned 21, I definitely didn't drink as much," she said. "I drink more often, but in smaller quantities. Before, I would get really, really drunk two nights a week. Now, I have two beers and walk home."

Today, at 22, Holmgren works as a television host in Denver nightclubs where, she says, "With more access, people are much more responsible. If they get really drunk, they are thrown out."

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