



SADD Op-Ed:

Too Little, Too Late

Sex, Drugs, Alcohol, and the College Education of High School Students

By Stephen G. Wallace

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The University of Colorado's recent decision to step up supervision of football recruiting visits smacks of a "too little, too late" remedy for a problem of permissiveness punctuated by the alleged rape of female place kicker Katie Hnida. Too little because the issue likely transcends boys who play sports. Too late because nothing can really redress UC's past failures to provide a safe, healthy environment for prospective students – let alone to create a climate of control and accountability for those already enrolled.

School officials point to a new policy intended to curb the use of alcohol and sex as enticements for teenagers to come play ball, including shorter visits, adult chaperones, and curfews. A ban on outings to strip clubs, bars and parties is also on the list.

These steps make sense. So much so, one wonders what took so long. In fairness, Colorado is not alone. The fact that Chancellor Richard Byyny had to field questions about the impact of such policies on the team's competitive advantage in recruiting only adds an exclamation point to a common conclusion that something has gone terribly wrong with college football. Then again, football is not alone, either. Many high school visitors to college campuses appear to be at risk.

New *Teens Today* research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that a significant number of high school teens who have stayed overnight on campus have engaged in drinking, other drug use, or sex while there. And one in eight teens reports engaging in all of those behaviors. Here's the breakdown:

- One in four teens (25.5 percent) reports drinking alcohol;
- More than one in five teens (21.5 percent) report using drugs;
- More than one in four teens (28 percent) report 'having sex,' and an additional 4.2 percent report engaging in 'other types of sexual activity'; and
- One in eight teens (12.4 percent) reports engaging in all of those behaviors.

Clearly, many high school students, some as young as sixteen, are making poor, and potentially tragic, choices in unsupervised environments filled with access to alcohol, drugs, and sex. Particularly at risk appear to be boys, who are two to three times more likely than girls to report such behavior while visiting schools.

The facts are that the earlier young people use alcohol and drugs, the more likely it is they will develop lifelong problems with dependency, and the earlier they have sex, the more likely it is they will contract possibly life-threatening sexually transmitted diseases.

Neither point, however, speaks to the problems of alcohol poisoning, drug overdose, and sexual assault that are all too common on college campuses. A recent study supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reveals that drinking by college students contributes to an estimated 1,400 deaths and 70,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape each year. So critical, apparently, is the situation that a majority of college students actually favor stricter alcohol control policies on campus, according to a new study released by the Center for College



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Health and Safety.

Risks aside, college visits remain an important staple of the higher education selection process. But parents, teens and, especially, colleges must share responsibility for keeping young people safe during the sampling process. Some practical measures might include:

Parents

- Accompany your teens on college visits and find accommodations at an off-campus hotel.
- Discuss with your teens the choices they may have to make and role-play how they might best respond. Teens with parents who regularly engage them in open, honest dialogue about such important issues are much less likely to make poor choices.
- Explain your expectations. Parents who provide a strong level of guidance to their teens are more likely to have children who avoid destructive behaviors.

Teens

- Understand the risk behaviors you might encounter during a college visit.
- Explore possible dangerous "scenarios" with your parents and ask about their expectations for your behavior. Knowing what those expectations are will make it more likely you will try to meet them.
- Decide ahead of time (e.g. "in the event of") what choices you feel comfortable with. This will make it easier to do the right thing when a moment of decision arrives.

Colleges

- Assess the current risk behaviors of your students and visitors to campus.
- Respond with clear, firm policies that protect students, visitors, and hosts.
- Communicate and enforce campus rules. Students, underage guests, and their parents need to know that your college is serious about keeping young people safe.

With a new season of college visits fast approaching, the issue of on-campus supervision for high school students has particular urgency. Now is the time to put in place meaningful safeguards ... before too little becomes too late, again.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide. For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.sadd.org or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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