

An (other) Inconvenient Truth

The Backstory Behind the Drinking Age Debate

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Behind the fusillade of faulty arguments proffered by the Amethyst Initiative in support of lowering the minimum legal drinking age to 18 lurks an inconvenient truth: doing so would only exacerbate the current epidemic of underage drinking, further jeopardizing young lives at a critical juncture in their physical, social, and emotional development.

What we know is that alcohol is already used by young people more frequently and more heavily than all other drugs combined and that the average age for teens to start drinking is 13. Bad news considering that the earlier one starts to drink, the more likely it is he or she will experience alcohol problems later in life.

Add to those sobering statistics the fact that close to 1.5 million college students are killed, injured, or assaulted each year as the result of alcohol and you can see why a rallying cry to maintain the current law can be heard across the land.

Lined up against the small band of college presidents publicly endorsing the Amethyst debate is a broad swath of citizens, experts, and public servants. According to an ABC News poll, 78 percent of Americans do not believe that lowering the minimum legal drinking age is such a good idea. Neither do the American Medical Association, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, National Institutes of Health, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the U.S. Congress, to name but a few.

Amethyst acolytes argue, however, that a lower minimum legal drinking age will permit parents to teach their teens to drink responsibly before they head off to college – when their professors can pick up where Mom and Dad left off, perhaps offering students a glass of red wine over a meal of pasta, as suggested by one college president.

Uh huh.

First of all, the experiment of promoting responsible drinking at home has been an unmitigated failure: according to SADD's *Teens Today* research, more than half of teens who say their parents allow them to drink at home report that they also drink with their friends, compared with just 14 percent of kids whose parents do not allow them to drink.

Further, it seems unlikely – if not folly – to believe that binge-drinking college students are going to suddenly reverse course and engage in more civilized drinking simply because they can do it “out in the open.”

And even if they did, this argument bypasses important scientific evidence of the deleterious effects of alcohol on rapidly maturing adolescent and young adult brains.

This data, from some of the most respected neuroscientists in our country, is either dangerously downplayed or simply dismissed by Amethyst academic leaders who, according to some of their own colleagues, just don't want to have to

deal with the problem anymore. As Harvard's Henry Wechsler told MSNBC, "It's a nuisance to them, [but] I wish these college presidents sat around and tried to work out ways to deal with the problem on their campus rather than try to eliminate [it] by defining it out of existence."

No doubt, dealing with the problem of underage and binge drinking is a complicated, arduous task. But there are, in fact, strategies that seem to be working – especially those that track the National Academy of Sciences' call for a coordinated, consistent approach at all levels of society.

Such has been the case at the University of Rhode Island, which, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, moved aggressively to crack down on underage drinking, and at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, which realized a drop in high-risk drinking among first-year college students from 61 percent in 2005 to 43 percent in 2007.

Achieving success in preventing underage drinking on college campuses has an added benefit: older teens setting a positive example for their high school counterparts – students who would only gain greater access to alcohol at younger and younger ages should their 18-year-old classmates be allowed to purchase legally. After all, *Teens Today* reveals that the number one reason young people don't use alcohol is the 21-year-old minimum legal drinking age.

This debate is important to the future of young lives already at risk from the multiple mixed messages they absorb every day from a culture – and media – that glamorizes drinking, not to mention other risky behaviors often linked to alcohol. So, it's not the

discussion that is discouraging but rather a predetermined prescription by some that comes precipitously close to reversing years of progress in understanding and addressing underage drinking and the thousands of lives it affects – or ends – each year.

And all in the interest of ignoring yet another inconvenient truth.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. He is the author of the new book Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling. For more information about SADD, visit sadd.org. For more information about Stephen, visit stephengraywallace.com.