

**Commentary**

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**Lowering the Drinking Age: What Does the Research Say?**

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It is inconceivable that anyone would ignore historical experience and solid research to advocate for a policy that is a proven failure. A small group of college presidents, including leaders from Middlebury, Dartmouth and Duke, is doing so, however, in support of the Amethyst Initiative which claims that "the 21-year-old drinking age is not working" and "has created a culture of dangerous binge drinking" (1).

As a nation we previously lowered the legal drinking age to eighteen and experienced the tragedy of an increase in preventable deaths of young people caused by driving while under the influence. By 1988, every state had raised its minimum legal age to 21 in order to purchase and possess alcohol. From then until 1995, alcohol-related traffic deaths amongst youth decreased 47% (2). According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, approximately 900 lives a year are saved because of this higher age limit. That equals close to 17,000 people since 1988, when this higher age limit on drinking was adopted by all states (3).

An increase in alcohol-related deaths would not be the only devastating impact of the preposterous suggestion of the Amethyst Initiative. Alcohol addiction would most likely skyrocket as well. Studies have shown that early onset age of drinking is a strong indicator of successive alcohol addiction (4). Research has also shown that alcohol use at an early age could seriously damage the long and short term growth processes of the developing brain (5). This is proven science, not the opinion of a cluster of disillusioned college presidents.

One particular study done by an epidemiologist at Washington University School of Medicine found that more than 30 percent of those who began drinking at age 17 or younger became alcohol dependent, either presently or in the past. For study subjects who reported that they started drinking at age 21 or older, that number dropped to one in ten – a dramatic decrease in addiction (6).

Despite all of these staggering statistics, advocates for lowering the drinking age hypothesize that it will remedy binge drinking, a growing problem on college and university campuses. In proposing an age change, these university presidents overlook that binge drinking frequently begins in high school and not college. They also ignore that lowering the drinking age will put alcohol in the hands of more young people – many of whom are still in high school - growing the problem even further.

Dr. John McCardell, President of Choose Responsibility, a group advocating for the Amethyst Initiative and former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, argues that current underage laws force drinking underground, causing more problems than they solve. "The law is out of step with reality," he says. "The law is so obviously unjust and discriminatory. It ought to at least be the subject of debate." Unfortunately for Dr. McCardell, all legitimate historical and current evidence about the dangers of early age onset drinking discounts his theory.

If college presidents really want to help reduce binge drinking, they could discourage, or better yet, ban marketing materials associated with alcoholic products on campus, strengthen rather than weaken their drug and alcohol policies and incorporate mandatory education about drug and alcohol issues with each new freshman class. Simple actions such as banning beer kegs and offering substance-free housing send a very clear and strong message to students about school campus culture (7).

The Amethyst Initiative represents an insensitive and painful setback to all of those who have experienced the loss of a child from an alcohol-related incident. Would trying to change the college culture, so that falling down drunk is not deemed cool, be so much harder than encouraging a dangerous supposed rite of passage? For McCardell and others, it apparently is because they are ready and willing to throw in the towel. If you want to teach responsibility, giving in is not the way to do it.

**References**

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