December 2008

Amethyst Initiative

Maddie Crawford
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2009/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Think waiting until you’re 21 to drink is a rip-off? Some university presidents and chancellors around the country might be on your side...

By Maddie Crawford
Photos by Shing Kai Chan
They think, 'I wouldn't snap that stop sign. ' The crowd was dispersed by force with tear gas. The reporr also suggested a connection between the emergence of mixed-issue campus disturbances and the raising of the drinking age in 1984 to comply with federal mandates.

Mixed statistics regarding the effectiveness of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984—a law fining 10 percent of federal highway allotment to states failing to legislate and enforce the minimum age of 21 for purchasing and publicly possessing alcohol—have opened debate as to whether or not the minimum age increase produced positive results.

Amethyst Initiative

Last July, a group of university chancellors and presidents came together to address current laws concerning the minimum drinking age of 21. Alarmed by the behaviors associated with underage drinking—especially binge drinking—134 chancellors and presidents signed the Amethyst Initiative, a statement encouraging debate and discussion among elected officials regarding current laws.

The Amethyst Initiative calls on elected officials "To support an informed and dispassionate public debate over the effects of the 21-year-old drinking age." The initiative also states, "Adults under 21 are deemed capable of voting, signing contracts, serving on juries and enlisting in the military, but are told they are not mature enough to have a beer." Aside from encouraging debate, signatories of the Amethyst Initiative encourage public officials to reconsider the effects of the 10 percent highway fund attached to the 1984 federal mandate, as well as invite new ideas and proposals to prepare young adults to make responsible decisions regarding alcohol consumption.

Nick Desantis, staff assistant with Choose Responsibility, a nonprofit organization designed to stimulate debate and policy discussion regarding alcohol in American culture, says the signatories of the Amethyst Initiative do not call for specific policy change. They do, however, support dialogue and debate regarding the effectiveness of current laws.

"Support for the Amethyst Initiative springs from frustration that presidents feel in addressing problems of binge drinking by young adults on campus," Desantis says. "They can only send one message—stay away from alcohol completely. At the same time, many campuses have a fourth to a third of students at drinking age, and alcohol is present. Students not of age go into secretive, clandestine environments with pre-gaming activities that put them in danger."

Pre-gaming activities include consuming alcoholic beverages, often in a house or dorm room, before going to another destination where alcohol may or may not be available to underage drinkers. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that underage drinkers consumed more drinks than those of legal age—4.9 drinks to 2.8 drinks, respectively—on days they drank.

A common misconception of the Amethyst Initiative, Desantis says, is that it is simply a call to change the drinking age. The goals of the signatories include broadening discussion of all aspects of the current laws, and introducing other options than simply including an age minimum of 18 or 21 years.

While the Amethyst Initiative does not call for policy change, Choose Responsibility promotes amending laws to include changing the minimum age while mandating alcohol education. Although critics claim that the previous minimum drinking age of 18 failed to prevent alcohol-related accidents, Desantis says new approaches include informing young adults of the dangers associated with drinking.

"Education is our flagship piece," Desantis says. "We would require that anyone taking the alcohol education course has completed secondary education, a targeted policy to buffer drinking at the high school level. They would also complete a very serious, balanced course relating to alcohol education, including the medical and biological side of things. The program educates adults beyond what they'd see in the classroom setting."

Martinez says that while education will reduce the number of possible alcohol incidents incurred with an age decrease, it will not completely cancel out issues associated with underage drinking.

"Clearly if you were going to lower the age, you would absolutely have to bring in education," Martinez says. "Just as you better be ready to set aside money for rehab. Insurance rates are going to go up for cars and health because alcohol will be more accessible."

The Opposition

While 134 college presidents and chancellors signed the initiative, many others, like ISU’s President Gregory Geoffroy, declined the invitation. Iowa State’s executive director of university relations, John McCarroll, says Geoffroy supports the debate incited by the initiative, but would rather leave the discussion to the experts.

"[President Geoffroy] believes it is an issue that should be explored, and he believes there could be some benefit and experimentation or
“Students not of age go into secretive, clandestine environments with pre-gaming activities that put them in danger.”

- Nick Desantis
  Staff assistant with Choose Responsibility
trial runs on the drinking age,” McCarroll says. “He didn’t think it was appropriate for him to sign the initiative because he didn’t believe he had the expertise, and felt there are still too many questions that need to be answered.”

The Amethyst Initiative has yet to receive strong support from parents and health officials. A 2008 Nationwide Insurance Underage Drinking Survey found only 22 percent favored lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18. More than half of those surveyed also agreed that lowering the drinking age would increase binge drinking among teens, and that they would be less likely to send their kids to colleges with “party school” reputations.

Members of Mother Against Drunk Driving (MADD) acknowledge the common problems college presidents face regarding underage and binge drinking among students. Unlike signatories of the Amethyst Initiative, MADD supporters do not see a change in minimum age as a viable solution.

MADD recently teamed up with other health and safety groups—including the American Medical Association, National Liquor Law Enforcement Association, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence—to form the Support 21 Coalition. Supporting the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age Law, Support 21’s Web site, why21.org, offers information for parents and teens on how alcohol affects the brain, resources and tips for preventing underage drinking and arguments supporting current laws.

“Underage and binge drinking is a tough problem and we welcome an honest discussion about how to address this challenge,” MADD National President Laura Dean-Mooney said, “but that discussion must honor the science behind the 21 law, which unequivocally shows that the 21 Law has reduced drunk driving and underage and binge drinking.”

Instead of changing current laws, Support 21 calls for greater enforcement of the 21 Law, tougher sanctions for adults supplying alcohol to minors, adapting college campus environments and policies and working with community businesses to sell responsibly and ensure that those being served are 21.

“As the mother of a daughter who is close to entering college, it is deeply disappointing to me that many of our educational leaders would support an initiative without doing their homework on the underlying research and science,” Dean-Mooney says. “It does not make sense to increase access to alcohol when there are already so many problems with underage drinking.”

Drinking Around the World

While the majority of European and Asian countries set the legal drinking age at 18, results show a variety of consumption and behaviors exhibited by young drinkers. Countries like Ireland, boasting one of the highest drinking rates in the world, and Israel, holding one of the lowest rates, demonstrate the differences between cultures that set the same legal age. “In Israel, wine is a part of meals and religious ceremonies, kids grow up with it and there is far less problems,” Martinez says. “In Ireland there are looser laws as well, but the drinking occurs at parties and festivals, and they have one of the highest rates of alcoholism in the world.”

Students studying abroad in most European countries can experience atmospheres where drinking at 18 is legal. Amy, an ISU student who asked that her last name not be used, says she noticed a difference among young drinkers in London. “When you take out the thrill of underage drinking, of it being this extremely fun thing to do in someone’s basement or away from the police, it just becomes another social activity.”

“People view drinking as an accepted lifestyle,” Amy says. “When you take out the thrill of underage drinking, of it being this extremely fun thing to do in someone’s basement or away from the police, it just becomes another social activity.”

Boundaries and Discussion

Both those supporting and opposing the Amethyst Initiative, agree on one thing—underage binge drinking affects many college campuses, and a better understanding of the issue can bring positive change.

Martinez says instead of looking at two points—the right to drink and a person’s age—people should consider a triangle method, including the third point of maturity, when determining drinking rights.

“You could bring in proof that 18-year-olds are just as capable of handling alcohol as 21-year-olds,” Martinez says. “Can 18 be more mature than 21? Yes, but what is the probability? More 18-year-olds are in high school than in past years, and their bodies’ tolerance and maturity levels are not as good. It’s not about loose laws or age, it’s the third point that shows maturity.”

By providing alcohol-free social opportunities, college campuses can cater to a younger demographic and draw students away from house parties and bar scenes, Martinez says. At the same time, Martinez says college presidents should be open to discussion, but practice discretion when promoting the drinking age debate.

“The paradox is that some people think if you say you’re open for discussing it, that means that’s what we’re working toward,” Martinez says. “The more you talk about something, the more likely you’re going to want it, or change your mind. There’s something healthy about boundaries. Mature people will be able to express what they want, while yielding what’s best for society.”