

Today's First-Year Students and Alcohol

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Every year, about 4 million people do something they have never done before: enroll in an institution of higher education for the first time. Their backgrounds, characteristics, and reasons for attending vary widely, but they have at least one thing in common: they see some value in "getting an education." As will be documented in this paper, 6 years later, about half of them will have failed to graduate. Even more alarming, about one-third of them will fail to reenroll beyond their first year. There are anecdotal indications (although not much empirical evidence) that the first 6 weeks of enrollment is critical to first year student success. So it is in the best interests of both students and the institutions they attend to focus attention on the first year of college when trying to solve the problems on our campuses created by alcohol misuse. Efforts to combat the problems of excessive and underage drinking by college students must begin prior to enrollment and continue at least throughout the first year of college.

This paper will review the varying backgrounds and characteristics of today's entering students and the factors, which contribute to their success. Student experiences with alcohol will then be discussed within the context of the transitional issues students face as they try to survive and succeed in college. The paper concludes with an exploration of how institutions can develop policies and practices to help entering students deal with problems associated with alcohol use and suggests a research agenda which might expand our knowledge and understanding of this issue among entering students.

The Changing Demographics and Characteristics of Today's Students

College students have changed. Most of us associated with higher education recognize this fact, but the magnitude of the changes becomes apparent when we compare college students of today with those of previous generations. In 1980, Schoch wrote the following condensed description which is as relevant today as when it was written:

Remember Joe College? The young man who, after working hard in high school arrived at Berkeley, where he set out to sample the rich and varied intellectual feast at the University of California. Joe was independent, self-motivated, and academically well prepared. About his junior year, Joe settled on a major field of study, which he pursued with diligence and increasing confidence in order to graduate four years after his arrival.

Joe doesn't live here any more, Schoch concluded in 1980, and a review of the characteristics and demographics of today's students will confirm this for the year 2000, as well. However, we must resist the temptation to stereotype today's students in other ways. For example, it is fashionable to refer to today's students as members of "Generation X" (Copeland, 1992), "Generation 13" (Strauss & Howe, 1991), or "The Abandoned Generation" (Willoman and Naylor, 1995). Because there is very little research-based evidence to support these pejorative views of today's students (the term "Generation X" was coined by the novelist Douglas Copeland, whose fictional account of several young adults in their late twenties was never meant as a generational descriptor), we are better off looking at the research-based evidence in profiling today's students.

Today's college students differ in many ways from prior generations of students. The number of racial/ethnic minority students accessing higher education has grown dramatically, accounting for 28.6 percent of today's students compared to 17.9 percent in 1986. Today 71.4 percent of college students are white, 10.5 percent African American, 8.1 percent Hispanic, 5.8 percent Asian, 3.2 percent

international and 1 percent American Indian (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). Racial/ethnic group participation is quite uneven by type of institution and geographic location. For example, 68.1 percent of American Indian, Hispanic, Asian, and African American students attend 2-year institutions, compared to 30.3 percent of white students. In fact, half of American Indians (50%) and a majority of Hispanics (55.9%) attend 2-year institutions (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). Differences may also exist within ethnic groups, for example among the major Hispanic/Latino groups (Justiz and Rendon, 1989).

Until about 1980, more men than women attended college, but since then, women have outnumbered men among first time enrollees. In 1997, 55.1 percent of students in post-secondary education were women (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). Today's students are also older than earlier generations of students. Only about 61 percent of today's students are 18-24 (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). Most students today live off campus; only about 13 percent live in university housing (Upcraft, 1994). About 10 percent of today's students are disabled (Henderson, 1995). About 10 percent are estimated to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (Evans and Levine, 1990). And about 3.2 percent are international students (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999).

Enrollment patterns have also changed. More of today's students enroll part-time. In 1995, 35 percent of all undergraduate students were enrolled part-time, compared with 29.0 percent in 1976 (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1998). As a consequence of their part-time enrollment, their "stopping out" (the practice of dropping out and re-enrolling at a later date), and other factors such as financial and personal problems, fewer students are completing bachelor's degrees in 4 years. According to a survey by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, only 56 percent of full-time first year students graduate within 6 years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1998), nearly one-third of all undergraduates depart institutions of higher education in their first year.

Table 1: Changing Demographics of Today's Entering Students

1965	Today
White	All races/ethnicities
Majority men	Majority women
Enrolled full-time	Many enrolled part-time
Aged 18-22	All ages
Graduated in four years	Take 6 years to graduate
Majority live on-campus	Majority live off-campus
Abled	Abled and disabled
Presumed heterosexual	All sexual orientations
Native born	Mixed nationalities

But changing demographics tell only part of the story. Other significant changes have also occurred. For example, today's students have different attitudes and values from their counterparts in the 1960s. Today's traditional aged students, compared to those of the mid-1960s, are politically more conservative; less interested in "developing a meaningful philosophy of life;" more interested in

making money; more concerned about getting a job after college; more interested in the fields of business, computer science, and engineering; and less interested in the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences. On the other hand, there has been little change in the percentage of entering students who list "obtain a general education" (about three in five) as a very important reason for deciding to go to college (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999).

Further, American family dynamics are undergoing a transformation that is having a significant impact on today's entering students. The divorce rate increased rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s. The rate of divorce in 1995 was 5.0 per 1,000 people compared with a rate of 2.2 divorces per 1000 people in 1960 (Friedberg, 1998). According to the Stepfamily Association of America (1998), 35 percent of all children born in the 1980s will experience life in a single parent family for about five years before their eighteenth birthday. The number of families characterized by physical violence, sexual abuse, alcohol and other drug abuse, and other problems is also increasing (Gannon, 1989).

There are also changes in mental and physical health. Thirty years ago, students seeking help from college counseling centers presented problems clearly related to their college experiences, such as roommate problems, career indecision, academic difficulty, or relationship problems. Today, students present very different problems. According to the International Association of Counseling Services, Inc. (1998), counseling center directors report continuing wait lists for treatment, an increase over the past 5 years in learning disabilities, severe psychological problems, problems related to earlier sexual abuse, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, a 44 percent increase in alcohol-related problems.

Physical health problems are also increasing and are often closely linked to mental health problems. For example, eating disorders may result from psychological problems, but can very quickly become serious physical problems. Alcohol and other drug abuse can also create significant physical as well as psychological problems, as can various kinds of violence such as date rape. An even more alarming trend is the increase in sexually transmitted diseases among students; the most serious of which is AIDS. The HIV-positive rate among today's college students is approximately 2.4 per thousand, compared to 1.0 per thousand in 1983 (E. Jurs, personal communication, 1997).

The level of academic preparation of incoming students has also changed. Although a 30-year decline in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores between 1957 and 1987 has been well documented (Forrest, 1987), in recent years this trend appears to have leveled off (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). However, men continue to score higher than women, and majority students higher than minorities, with the exception of Asians. Perhaps even more important, about 29 percent of today's first year students are enrolled in remedial reading, writing, or math courses (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 1, 1998).

Sources of financing an education are also changing. Before 1955, virtually all students paid for their education with their own or their parents' resources, or with limited academic scholarship aid. Today, only about 20 percent of undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 22 are pursuing an exclusively parent/student financed education (*National On-Campus Report*, 1992).

Recent trends continue to put more financial pressure on students and their families. For example, according to the Citizens for Responsible Education Reform (1998), since the 1980s, college tuition has increased annually at the rate of two to three times the rate of inflation. Further, the typical bill for tuition, fees, room, board, books and incidentals at public institutions is \$10,069, which represents

23 percent of the average American family's household income (Time Magazine, 1998). Today's students must cobble together a financial aid package which is complex, difficult to access, and more dependent upon loans and work than ever before, in order to stay enrolled (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 1, 1998).

And finally, the reasons for attending college have shifted from previous generations of students. In the Fall of 1988, about 76 percent of entering students listed "to be able to get a better job" as the leading reason for attending college (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999), compared to 71 percent in 1976 (Astin, et. al. 1997). Further, about 75 percent indicated "to be able to make more money" (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*), compared to 54 percent in 1976 (Astin, et al., 1997).

Table 2: Changing Characteristics of Today's Entering Students

1965	Today
Politically liberal	Politically more conservative
General learning orientation	Vocational/career orientation
Family support	Mixed family support
Family stability	Family instability
Mentally/physically healthy	Less mentally/physically healthy
Academically prepared	Many lack basic skills
Self/family financed	Government/family/self financed

So today's student is quite different from "Joe College" described earlier. Meet "Josey College" a student far more like today's students than good old "Joe." After a somewhat mediocre high school academic record, Josey College enrolled at the local state university because she believed college graduates get better paying jobs. She lived at home, and financed her education with a part-time job, student loans, and a little help from her family. She wasn't much involved in campus life, except for an occasional beer party thrown by her apartment dwelling friends. After she completed a "developmental" English course, she endured what she considered to be "boring" general education courses. She decided to major in computer science because she figured there would be a good paying job waiting for her when she graduated. During her second year, Josey "stopped out" for a semester because she ran out of money, was struggling academically, and was stressed out because of her parent's divorce. After "getting herself together," she returned a year later as an elementary education major and graduated 5 years after she initially enrolled, with approximately \$15,000 in student loans.

Why are all these changes important? Because as institutions consider what they can do to reduce student problems associated with alcohol, they must base their policies and practices on a realistic picture of their students. While national trends provide guidance on what to look for in describing today's students, each institution must develop a profile of its students, and strive to create a good match between the students they educate and the policies and practices they develop to combat student alcohol problems.

Keys to First Year Student Success

If we ask first year students what it takes to make a successful transition to college, their intuitive response is "brains and hard work." However, their intuition does not match up well with the research on first year student success, although academic ability and motivation enter into the formula. The most well known and credible model of student success was put forward by Astin, who suggested that college success (outputs) is a result of who the student was before college (input variables), and what happened to the student during enrollment (environmental variables) (Astin, 1991). The primary purpose of his I-E-O model is to identify and estimate institutional effects on how students grow or change during the college years, taking into account the many pre-college variables that also have an influence on collegiate growth and development. So in order to help students succeed during the first year, we must have a more complete understanding of the many variables which contribute to their success and failure.

Input variables. Well over 150 pre-college variables have been identified as having varying degrees of influence on first year student success (see Astin, 1993 for a complete enumeration). The most critical are gender, race/ethnicity, academic aptitude, high school academic achievement, parents' education, parents/family income, age, disability, and expectations of success. In general, those who are most likely to persist into the sophomore year are women, nonminorities, students with good high school grades, students whose parents have more education and higher incomes, older students, able-bodied students, and those who expect to succeed right from the start (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).

At first glance, these pre-college influences seem to have few if any implications for institutional alcohol policies and practices. However, entering students' alcohol-related experiences prior to college may have a direct bearing on their collegiate experience. For example, an institution's approach to student alcohol problems may be determined, in part, by the extent to which its entering students already have alcohol-related problems. An institution that enrolls a number of students from families with alcohol problems must take this fact into account as it considers its approach to campus alcohol problems. Because there are demonstrated gender differences in alcohol use and abuse, an institution with mostly men might have different policies than an institution with mostly women. Entering students are not "blank slates" on the issue of alcohol. In fact, a majority (55 percent) is already drinking before they enroll in college (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). They also have varying degrees of personal, family, and environmental influences that are alcohol-related, and this variance must be taken into account as institutions consider appropriate alcohol policies and practices.

Environmental variables. Almost 200 "during college" variables have been identified as influencing first year student success (see Astin, 1993 for a complete enumeration). Certainly classroom experiences, major and curriculum make a contribution, but not nearly to the extent that many faculty believe. While some faculty may think of their classrooms as secure castles, protected by moats and thick walls, students often bring a manner of unwanted and counterproductive forces into those chambers of learning. They sit in class worried about the next tuition bill; they wonder about children in day care; they fight fatigue and have eight hours of work still ahead; they don't understand why the professor requires them to attend an evening lecture; they can't believe how long it takes to do the reading; they don't have time to work on the group project; and on and on. What occurs in the classroom, as important as it is to learning, happens in the context of something larger: students' experiences outside the classroom.

Research such as that summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) documents that students' experiences outside the classroom may contribute just as much to their collegiate success as their performance inside the classroom. In general, students who get involved in activities, participate in orientation, work on campus, make use of support services, spend an acceptable amount of time studying, establish effective interpersonal relations with other students and faculty, live in residence halls, belong to student organizations, and attend cultural events are more likely to graduate than students without such involvement (Kuh, et al., 1994). Having someone else, such as a family member, friend, or faculty/staff member take an interest in and care about one's success is also very important (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989). Contact with faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, plays a positive role in the experiences of beginning students (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Most relevant to this paper is the substantial research that shows that alcohol use has a direct impact on the student experience, both inside and outside the classroom. In fact, there is evidence that alcohol misuse is related to non-consensual sexual experiences (Himelein, Vogel, and Wachowiak, 1994), social myopia (Elias, 1996), failure to practice safe sex behaviors (Prince and Bernard, 1998), getting hurt or injured (*About Campus*, 1997), dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Knox, et al., 1997) and campus violence (Barrett and Simmons, 1998). Perhaps more importantly, alcohol use and misuse is positively related to academic problems (Wood, et al., 1997; *About Campus*, 1997), and negatively related to grade point average (McAloon, D. T., 1994; Presley, Meilman, and Lyerla, 1993).

Of course, campus environments exist within the larger societal environment, which also has an impact on the student experience. The most prominent examples are laws, which prohibit possession and consumption of alcohol for persons under 21 years of age, restrict the time, place, and manner of alcohol use, and prohibit driving while intoxicated. Alcohol policies and practices, therefore, must also be considered in the light of the larger social and legal environment.

In conclusion, research on student success, combined with the demographics and characteristics described above, stands somewhat in opposition to the way in which we typically think about today's first year students. Most of them do not live on campus. They commute or live off campus. Over one-third are over 25 years of age. Over one-third are studying part-time. Over one-fourth are enrolled in 2-year institutions. Two-thirds are working part- or full-time. These commuting, older, part-time, working students typically spend very little time on campus beyond attending class. Limited time on campus means fewer opportunities to connect with other students and faculty. It means less chance of getting involved with the academic life of the college. The challenge then, for institutions of higher education is to create alcohol policies and practices that are grounded in these demographic and developmental realities.

Transitional Issues

If we ask first year students what they are worried about as they enter college, their intuitive response is "getting good grades and finding friends," regardless of their backgrounds and characteristics. According to extensive research on entering students, their intuition is pretty much on the mark, although there are many issues they will worry about during their first year. Adapted from Upcraft (1989), these include:

Developing academic and intellectual competence. First and foremost, first year students must succeed academically and intellectually. Most entering students come to college with the primary goal of preparing for a career by getting good grades and graduating, but many soon realize that an

education is more than that. They recognize that they can learn how to learn, and also how to synthesize, integrate, criticize, and analyze what they learn. They can consider the moral, ethical, cultural, and spiritual implications of what they learn, and develop an appreciation for the aesthetic side of life. They also discover that they may not be as successful academically as they were in high school, and may have to make adjustments in their time management, study habits, major, and career goals.

Entering students must understand that research has shown that alcohol misuse and alcohol-related behavior have a negative impact on academic success. As cited earlier, students who misuse alcohol are more likely to experience academic problems such as poor class attendance and inability to focus, and thus earn lower grades. Too often, institutions assume that alcohol misuse impacts primarily on entering students' personal lives and establish policies and practices which ignore its detrimental effects on their academic success.

Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. As stated above, entering students express almost as much anxiety about finding supportive friends as they do about succeeding academically. There is evidence that establishing effective interpersonal relationships is an important element in college success (Terenzini, et al., 1994). All first year students, regardless of background and experience, must develop an interpersonal support system with their fellow students. They must find friends and participate in activities that require cooperation and good interpersonal skills. They must, perhaps for the first time, relate to students, faculty and staff of different cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, life experiences, physical disabilities, races and ethnicities.

In the context of the collegiate environment, the influence of friends and the peer group is well established. In particular, the peer group exerts a very powerful influence on student development during the college years, including alcohol attitudes and behaviors. The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (1973) explains this influence in this way. Students enter into a campus environment never before encountered. It is physically different, more homogeneous, and more intense. This environment has a powerful impact on students, and may vary in characteristics and power according to its history, composition, size, and collective attitudes, values, and needs. Students, particularly traditional aged entering students, have a high need to identify and affiliate with other students. Campus environments provide an opportunity to express this need because of the optimal physical facilities and students' commonality of purpose. However, while environments affect people (students' collective norms, values, and needs influence and change persons in a collegiate environment), people also affect environments (entering students develop, influence, and change their environment to meet their needs). Some students are very susceptible to the influence of the environment, while others seem almost immune. Similarly some environments are very weak, unstable and rapidly changing, while others are strong, stable, and less likely to change. When there is congruence between entering students and their campus environment, they are happier, better adjusted, and more likely to achieve their personal and educational goals.

According to Feldman and Newcomb (1969), the scope of peer group influence is enormous, because it can (1) provide or withhold emotional support, (2) help students achieve independence from home and family, (3) support or impede their academic achievement, (4) give students practice in getting along with people, and (5) support or challenge attitudes, values, and behaviors. This peer group influence is especially powerful in determining students' experiences with alcohol. For example, entering students who join fraternities are more likely to abuse alcohol than those who do not (Cashin,

J.R., Presley, C.A. and Meilman, P.W., 1998). At most colleges and universities today, one would be hard pressed to find a student social occasion or party that was alcohol free. Maintaining safe and legal drinking behaviors is also difficult because when one says "no" to a drink, it is likely that one is saying "no" to a friend as well. Further, there is some evidence that entering students misperceive the amount of drinking that occurs among other students. Perkins, et al. (1999) found that student perceptions of campus norms for alcohol use exceeded actual use. In conclusion, entering student alcohol problems must be considered within the context of their interpersonal relationships and peer group influence.

Developing identity. According to Erikson (1963), a sense of identity is fully developed when the way we see ourselves is consistent with the ways others see us. In addition to the general question "Who am I?" first year students often struggle with more specific identity questions based on gender, sexual orientation, race, cultural background, ethnic origin, or disability. The collegiate experience affects personal identity development, and entering students must make some progress on defining themselves more clearly. Some may even experience what Erikson (1963) described as an "identity crisis," a usually temporary period in which they lose most of their sense of who they are, plunging them into confusion, despair, and often destructive behavior.

For many entering students, alcohol use is one way of discovering who they are. Under the influence of alcohol a person may experiment with behaviors not normally associated with him or herself while sober, try out or confirm different gender identities, engage in more "relaxed" social relationships, reduce stress, and in general try to learn more about himself or herself. Most students discover that alcohol leads to none of these things, and go on and seek other healthier forms of self discovery and identity development. But some literally drown their identities in a alcohol, creating identity crises rather than identity formation.

Deciding upon a career and life-style. Although some students enter college not knowing what they want do, most have some career goal in mind. Presently, the career orientation of entering students is much stronger than it was 20 years ago (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, 1999). College is almost an immediate test of students' career commitment: a large percentage change their majors (often during the first year), and others drop out because of career indecision. Changes in interests, lack of academic success, and other factors contribute to an uncertainty about and changes in career choice. First year students must make some progress on deciding on a career, and thus on a major field.

Alcohol use and misuse may indirectly influence career decisions. For example, students who miss classes and earn poor grades as a result of alcohol misuse may find themselves much more limited in their career choices, or end up leaving college altogether. Further, students who maintain a continuous pattern of alcohol misuse or become dependent on alcohol may have difficulty in maintaining a career once they graduate.

Maintaining personal health and wellness. First year students must be aware of the impact of college on their physical and emotional well-being. They must be able to cope with the increased stress that college brings. They must learn to manage their time to meet their many commitments and they must deal with interpersonal issues. They must make decisions about sexual activity, nutritional habits, exercise, and perhaps most importantly, alcohol and substance use. Failure to deal with these issues can decrease their likelihood of academic and social development.

The deleterious effects of alcohol misuse on personal health and wellness are well established. The dilemma is that in spite of the fact that these negative effects are well known among entering students, they misuse alcohol just the same.

Developing an integrated spirituality and philosophy of life. Chickering (1969) sees college as a time when students develop a clearer sense of purpose and personally valid beliefs that have internal consistency and provide a guide for behavior. This is often done within the context of students' faith perspective as they reconsider their sense of right and wrong, their priorities in life, their religious and spiritual beliefs, and how they fit into the larger order of things in the universe. Their values and beliefs must be integrated and internalized so that there is a consistency between what they believe and how they behave.

The role of alcohol in their lives is very much a part of these considerations, particularly if alcohol misuse is inconsistent with purported values and beliefs. We do know that students with strong spiritual values and faith consume less alcohol than others (Astin, 1993). We also know that students under the influence of alcohol may say and do things that may be repulsive to their values and faith, compared to when they are sober. Too often, campus policies and practices ignore the possible positive influence of spirituality and faith in reducing alcohol use and misuse.

In summary, first year student "success" is more than earning a sufficient grade point average to graduate. It is making progress on educational, interpersonal, career, identity, health, and spiritual development, and taking advantage of the collegiate environment by growing and developing to one's maximum potential. And all of these developmental issues are relevant to alcohol misuse and should not be ignored as we consider campus alcohol policies and practices.

Policy Implications

What does all this mean for dealing with alcohol use and misuse in collegiate settings? How should this information frame our policies and practices? I suggest several implications of the changing nature of students, the research on first year student success, and the transitional issues faced by entering students.

1. **Frame policies and practices consistent with the mission of the institution.** A small, private, church related institution with an abstinence tradition will have quite different policies and practices than a large, publicly supported institution with a reputation as a "party school." Institutions whose alcohol policies and practices are inconsistent with their missions will have difficulty justifying both, and communicate a mixed message to their entering students.
2. **Frame policies and practices within the context of student backgrounds and characteristics at a particular institution.** When it comes to alcohol policies and practices, one size does not fit all, because every student body is different in the many ways described above. For example, alcohol policies and practices will be quite different for an institution which attracts mostly young, white, women of means who are seeking a liberal arts education, compared to an institution which enrolls mostly young men from wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, who are poor and seeking a technical or professional education. These policies and practices must vary because they must be consistent with the varying backgrounds and characteristics of the students an institution attracts.
3. **Frame policies and practices consistent with society norms and laws.** College campuses should never be sanctuaries from the law, including laws concerning alcohol use and misuse. In fact,

producing good citizens of our society is a major goal of higher education, and that includes obeying the law. Thus, while laws prohibiting alcohol consumption by persons younger than 21 years of age may be widely opposed, frequently violated, and perhaps even unwise, alcohol policies and practices must be consistent with these and other laws regarding alcohol use and misuse.

4. **Frame policies and practices consistent with the realities of the campus environment.** Just as student bodies are unique, so are the campus environments in which they study, socialize, and live. A commuter institution with no residence halls, no fraternities and sororities, and many part-time students has quite a different campus environment than an institution in which most students live on campus, join fraternities and sororities, and study full time. The alcohol-related issues that each campus environment presents are unique and should be reflected in an institution's policies and practices.
5. **Recognize the enormous power of the peer group in developing policies and practices.** Too often, our alcohol-related policies and practices focus on the individual (e.g., prohibitions against individuals who drink underage, restrictions on the time, place and manner of individual drinking behavior, and individual sanctions for individual violations). The fact is that virtually all collegiate drinking occurs in social contexts in which the power of the peer group to influence drinking behavior is holding full sway. An institution's policies and practices must recognize this reality.
6. **Consider alcohol interventions in the context of transitional issues.** Entering student alcohol problems do not occur in a vacuum; they occur within the context of the developmental issues faced by entering students. For example, in the collegiate setting, entering students' alcohol experiences almost always occur in social settings where interpersonal skills are needed. Or consider identity issues. Alcohol use may be part and parcel of students experimenting with behaviors and values toward the goal of finding themselves. Or academic issues. Excessive use of alcohol may be a direct cause of academic problems and poor academic achievement. And so on. We must never think of prevention as a single dimensional phenomena; it is intimately tied to students' overall development, and our policies and practices must reflect this reality as well.
7. **Education/prevention efforts should be comprehensive and integrated into entering students' in-class and out-of-class activities.** For example, freshman seminars for credit focused on helping students make a successful transition to college should include information and discussions about the role of alcohol in student life. Courses for credit focusing specifically on alcohol in the collegiate environment should also be encouraged. Outside the classroom, learning communities, where intentional efforts are made by faculty and student affairs staff to help students better integrate their in-class and out-of-class experiences present a unique opportunity to focus on education/prevention efforts. The development of prevention programs using computer related technology also has great potential for educating students about alcohol.
8. **Policies and practices should give special attention to the first few months of the collegiate experience.** Given the importance of the first year to student success (about one-third fail to enroll for their second year of college), an institution's alcohol education and prevention efforts must start immediately and intensively. Waiting until entering students drinking behaviors are well established is at best a missed opportunity and, at worst, a huge mistake which could result in serious and possibly irreparable harm to entering students.

9. **Policies and practices should not only focus on behavioral standards and prevention, but treatment as well.** Given the well documented relationship between excessive alcohol use and a myriad of student problems, institutions must provide services that help students who develop alcohol-related problems. This may mean offering treatment on campus, or arranging for treatment elsewhere. Whatever the choice, institutions must not abandon students who are troubled or dysfunctional as a result of alcohol misuse.

A Modest Research Agenda

In spite of the fact that there has been much research done on student backgrounds and characteristics, student success, entering students' transitional issues, and the relationship of all these variables to student alcohol problems, there are gaps in the literature. The following research agenda should be considered:

1. Determining the influence of pre-college experiences on student alcohol use.
2. Determining the differences in alcohol use among various student subpopulations, such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and others.
3. Determining the possible relationship between alcohol misuse and persistence to graduation.
4. Exploring in greater depth the power of the peer group, and how and institution might redirect this influence.
5. Exploring the relationship between institutional policies and their intended impact.
6. Determining in greater depth the influence of alcohol on entering students' personal and academic development.
7. Determining the impact of laws prohibiting underage drinking on entering student alcohol use.

Conclusion

The first year of college is critical to student success, and thus our efforts to reduce alcohol-related problems among entering students must initially be focused on this critical time. First year students are not the monolithic group they used to be. Their diversity must be taken into account as we consider how to deal with their alcohol-related problems. Further, entering student alcohol problems do not occur in a vacuum. They are a product of students' background and experiences prior to college as well as their experiences during college, within the context of the very powerful influence of the peer group. We must base our policies and practices on these realities if institutions are to have any success in combating alcohol problems among their students.

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