PREVENTION UPDATE

Academic Performance, Retention, and Alcohol Use

Overview

Drinking remains a significant part of the college experience for many students across the nation. The 2010 Monitoring the Future survey found that 65 percent of college students reported alcohol use in the past 30 days, 37 percent reported occasions of heavy drinking (five or more drinks in a row in the past two weeks), and nearly half (44 percent) reported having been drunk in the prior 30 days. In addition, about one in eight college students (13 percent) reported having 10 or more drinks in a row at least once in the prior two weeks, and one in 20 (5 percent) reported 15 or more drinks in a row. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's 2002 report *A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges,* about 25 percent of college students report academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall. Indeed a study of a nationally representative sample of college and university students in the United States found that alcohol use was rated as one of the top 10 hindrances to students' academic performance.

For example, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "one in three students has missed a class and one in five has performed poorly on a test or project due to his or her drinking. Carolina students who drink frequently or in large quantities are also more likely to have lower GPAs, and poor academic performance is the number one predictor of failure to graduate."

A Case for Prevention points out that colleges are becoming increasingly concerned about the effect of alcohol on student success and retention. "Indeed, there is good evidence that college drinking is related to poorer academic performance. Heavy drinkers are much more likely than non-heavy drinkers to report missing class and performing poorly on tests, and surveys have shown an inverse relationship between alcohol use and grade point average. Other recent studies show an inverse correlation between alcohol use and sleep quality, which in turn is linked to poorer class performance. The effect of these factors is that heavier drinkers are more likely to leave college before graduating. Although there are no published reports of the economic effect of alcohol on student retention, student dropout is clearly troubling from an economic standpoint. Financial costs include lost revenues from tuition, fees, services, and housing, and the loss of contributions from would-be alumni, which accounts for billions of dollars annually. To a medium-sized public university (10,000 students, $5,000 net annual revenue per student), a loss of 5 percent additional first-year students would represent an annual loss of $625,000 to the institution."

The effect of high-risk and heavier drinking on academic performance has been well documented in a number of studies. However, research demonstrating its effect on retention is limited. The multiple factors influencing a student's decision to leave college make it difficult to directly correlate students' alcohol use to the ability to succeed in college.

What the Evidence Tells Us

A 2008 study pointed out that student attrition at colleges across the United States poses a significant problem for students and families, higher education institutions, and the nation's workforce competing in the global economy and asserted that "heavy drinking is a highly plausible contributor to the problem. However, there is little evidence that it is a reliable predictor of attrition. Notably, few studies take into account

indicators of collegiate engagement that are associated with both heavy drinking and persistence in college." The researchers analyzed the effect of heavy drinking on attrition among 3,290 undergraduates at a large Midwestern university during a four-year period, and student attendance at a number of college events was included as a covariate. After controlling for event attendance (an important indicator of collegiate engagement), heavy drinking was found to predict attrition. They concluded that these findings "underscore the importance of the college context in showing that heavy drinking does in fact predict attrition and in considering future intervention efforts to decrease attrition and also heavy drinking."

A 2008 study, "DUI Arrests and Academic Attrition," indicated that "being arrested for a DUI increases the odds of attrition by 74 percent to 110 percent relative to not being arrested or cited. A DUI arrest has greater attrition implications from the first to second year of college than it does for second to third year or third year to fourth year attrition. The largest DUI effects appear when examining attrition from the first to fourth year." A 2007 study, "Alcohol-Related Legal Infractions and Student Retention," found that students with multiple arrests for alcohol-related legal infractions are at risk for attrition. The researcher concluded that "immersion in college life may reduce the odds of attrition among arrested college students."

A recent New Zealand study found that "heavy drinking (5–9 drinks for women, 7–13 for men) and extreme drinking (10+ for women, 14+ for men) predicted significant impairments in next-day physical and cognitive functioning. Extreme drinking produced the most detrimental effects. . . . Such drinking was associated with the least amount of sleep, feeling the least refreshed, excessive tiredness and a higher incidence of feeling ill. It was also associated with more problems concentrating and impaired workload management."

Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

The University of Connecticut uses a parents' Web page called Preparing the Freshman to point out that alcohol is associated with missed classes and poor performance causing lower GPAs. It says, "The academic connection between alcohol use and academic performance is clear. According to the 2005 Core Institute's national study on college student alcohol use, students who choose not to use alcohol, or have 4 or fewer drinks per week are most likely to get A's. . . . Students who attain a B average choose not to drink or drink 6 or less drinks per week. The national Core Institute also found that 40 percent of all academic problems are due to alcohol or other drug use and that 28 percent of all college drop outs are due to alcohol or other drug use."

Related Higher Education Center Resources
Publication
• *College Academic Performance and Alcohol and Other Drug Use*
Case Study
• Texas Tech University: Collegiate Recovery Community