

## ALCOHOL AND TEENS

# We've got to change the message on campus drinking

**Dr. Alan Blum** for *AL.com*

College students are back on campus, and so are the beer ads on near-by billboards and in football gameday programs.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), the first six weeks of freshman year is the most vulnerable time for heavy drinking and alcohol-related consequences because of a new set of expectations and social pressures.

The routine response of university administrations in recent years has been to require that freshmen view a brief online alcohol education module. But such material is often produced by alcohol industry-funded entities such as BACCHUS (originally an acronym for Boosting Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students) and the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility. Meanwhile, the industry blames drinking problems on genetics, parental upbringing, and peer pressure — in short, anything to avoid implicating its own multibillion dollar advertising campaigns to drive up consumption.

The theme of campus alcohol education programs is “responsible drinking,” with scant mention of the choice — much less the benefits — of not drinking. Alcohol industry prevention messages on college campuses and in the mass media are solely about drunk driving, underage drinking, and binge drinking (defined as more than 4 or 5 drinks in two hours), with industry-coined slogans such as “Drink Safely,” “Drink Responsibly,” “Don’t Drink and Drive,” “After Three Give Up the Key,” and “Think When You Drink.”

If the alcohol industry truly wanted to reduce the harmful effects of drinking by college students, then it would blitz the airwaves and social and print media with more truthful slogans like “Don’t Drink and Act Stupid,” “Don’t Drink and Fall Off Your Balcony,” and, of course, “Don’t Drink and Barf.” That’s because alcohol-related motor vehicle collisions, falls and assaults kill, maim, sicken, impregnate, or incarcerate thousands of high school and college students every year. The NIAAA estimates that annually there are 1,800 deaths among college students in alcohol-related accidents, 690,000 assaults of students by other students who have been drinking, and 97,000 reported sexual assaults related to alcohol.

What is the alcohol industry’s solution to drinking before driving? Choose a designated driver. That may save some lives, but it’s a cop-out that also enables non-designated drivers, including potential problem drinkers, to keep drinking. The latest enabling gimmick in Tuscaloosa and other university towns is a fleet of go-karts with brightly lit signs for Bud Light, Coors and Miller Lite that shuttle students to and from campus dorms and downtown bars.

Drinking is so ingrained in campus life that any serious effort by, say, the American Cancer Society to increase public awareness of even moderate drinking’s links to breast, esophagus and oral cancers would seem to be doomed to failure. Add to the list of alcohol’s common effects impotence, depression, ulcers, pancreatitis and a host of other debilitating illnesses.

Little publicized is the fact that before, during and after major college football games local emergency rooms are



**A billboard near the University of Alabama campus advertises Bud Light.** Courtesy Alan Blum

flooded with passed-out students from alcohol poisoning, several of whom wind up on ventilators in the intensive care unit.

“If there were another drug being used today that sent 20-30 kids a week to the emergency department, and a few of them died, it would be a national outrage,” noted Dr. Steven Kronick, an emergency medicine physician at the University of Michigan Health System in a 2015 report on drinking at Michigan university campuses published by the Center for Michigan, a non-profit public policy think-tank. The Center likened the crush of over 200 patients made ill from drinking at one Lansing hospital on the day of the Michigan State-Michigan game in 2014 to a “mass-casualty event.”

To be sure, abstinence in anything has become a dirty word, and calls for moderation have become a meaningless mantra. Meanwhile, the situation of teenage and college-age drinking is getting worse, as evidenced by the popularity of sweetened alcoholic beverages such as hard sodas, caffeine- and alcohol-fortified energy drinks, canned cocktails, flavored vodkas and flavored beers.

Just as we discourage teenagers from taking up smoking in order to prevent lung cancer, emphysema and heart disease later on, so universities must improve their education of the college-age population about drinking practices — and alcohol marketing — that lay the groundwork for serious diseases down the road.

As it stands, the virtual silence of medical associations, public health organizations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and universities themselves in the face of an unchecked culture of alcohol abuse on university campuses and the dramatic increase in alcohol promotions targeted to college students is deafening.

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