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HIGHER EDUCATION UPDATE

Academic Performance, Retention, and Alcohol Use

Overview

This edition of the Higher Education Update revises the May 2012 issue (ERIC538754) produced by the U.S. Department of Education’s Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention. The content has been updated and edited to reflect current research and evidence-based approaches.

The Effect of Alcohol on Academic Performance

While multiple factors can impact academic achievement—including income, family obligations, and student readiness for higher education—alcohol use can have a profound negative affect on academic performance among college students. The 2013 journal article “[Is Alcohol Consumption Associated with Poor Academic Achievement in University Students?](#)” compiles data from a number of studies showing that, over the past few decades, the relationship between problematic alcohol consumption and academic performance is a concern for university administrators and officials. Alcohol consumption has been negatively associated with academic performance, and heavy drinking has been proposed as a probable contributor to student attrition from college.

Data from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism’s 2002 seminal report “[A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges](#)” has been corroborated by recent [University of Minnesota research](#) (2015) that shows about 25 percent of high-risk student drinkers (those who consume five or more standard drinks at a sitting) report academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall. Indeed, a [nationally representative sample of college and university students](#) in the United States found that alcohol use was rated as one of the top ten hindrances to students’ academic performance.

At the same time, national attention is focused on improving academic achievement and supporting students to enroll and succeed in college as vital to building a strong economy and a solid middle class, as described in “[The President and First Lady’s Call to Action on College Opportunity](#) (2014).

The Effect of Alcohol on Retention and Graduation

The effect of alcohol use on retention and graduation rates has gained attention in recent years, and needs further research before a causal relationship can be established. The 2013 report [The Academic Opportunity Costs of Substance Use During College](#) stated that “research demonstrating [alcohol use’s] impact 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.”

In [“Is Heavy Drinking Really Associated With Attrition From College? The Alcohol–Attrition Paradox”](#) (2009), the researchers point out that student attrition at colleges across the United States poses a significant problem for students and families, institutes of higher education, and the nation's workforce competing in the global economy. While the researchers found that heavy drinking *contributes to* attrition, they also show that “there is little evidence that [heavy drinking] is a reliable predictor of attrition.” The authors conclude that interventions aimed at decreasing attrition should include a focus on reducing heavy drinking.

It behooves colleges from an economic standpoint to increase efforts to support student success and retention. Research outlined in [A Case for Prevention](#) points out that, “[S]tudent 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, \$5000 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.”

Evidence-Based Strategies

Colleges and universities recognize the role that alcohol can play in undermining student success and have taken measures to address high-risk drinking to increase retention and graduation rates. The authors of the 2002 study [Does Alcohol Consumption Reduce Human Capital Accumulation? Evidence from the College Alcohol Study](#) reported: “In addition to reducing other adverse outcomes associated with drinking ... policies to reduce college students' drinking can be expected to improve the quality of human capital they accumulate. The immediate benefits of this include reducing the likelihood of students dropping out of college because of poor grades and improving the likelihood of entrance into graduate programs (which is based largely on college GPA). The long-term consequences of improved academic performance include greater labor market participation and higher earnings.”

The 2010 journal article [“Magnitude and Prevention of College Drinking and Related Problems”](#) describes various evidence-based policies and programs to reduce college students' drinking. For example, a sizable base of scientific literature demonstrates that individually oriented approaches, such as screening and brief motivational interventions, can reduce drinking among students who volunteer for these programs and those mandated to receive counseling because of alcohol-related disciplinary actions.

However, these interventions do not reach a sizeable portion of college students with problematic drinking behavior. Moreover, community conditions and the availability of alcohol to those under 21 contributes to college drinking problems. In response, the article recommends that colleges and surrounding communities work together to implement multifaceted programs. The authors advise, “Collectively, [these programs] need to involve multiple departments of city government as well as concerned private citizens and organizations and multiple sectors of the college community, presidents, deans, other administrators, campus security, residence counselors, health service providers, alumni, faculty, and students if they want to most effectively reduce harmful drinking and the myriad of health and social problems linked to harmful drinking.”

What Colleges and Universities Are Doing

The mission of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug (ATOD) Intervention Services at the [University of California at Davis](#) is to empower students to make healthy and responsible choices concerning use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. It offers a variety of services, including assessment, training, group counseling, and treatment referrals at no charge to students.

[St Joseph's University](#) (SJU) provides resources for faculty members to help minimize the negative impact of alcohol on students' academic performance. It tells faculty that "effective strategies to increase academic success by minimizing the negative impact of alcohol abuse must involve the entire University community. SJU faculty and staff all have a role to play within the strategic plan to increase academic success and lower incidents of harm related to alcohol use and abuse."

Alcohol and drug prevention at [Auburn University](#) incorporates a public health perspective to address high-risk and excessive substance use. Its prevention approach strives to create an environment that fosters academic success, increase student retention, and promotes the safety and well-being of all members of the Auburn family.

Related Resources

- [Center for the Study of College Student Retention](#)—provides researchers and practitioners with a comprehensive resource for finding information on college student retention and attrition.
- [Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice](#)—dedicated exclusively to college student retention issues.
- [Promising and Practical Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Success](#)—offers promising and practical strategies, practices, programs, and activities that have improved rates of postsecondary success, transfer, and graduation.

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