Understanding the Risks and Consequences

Most of us underestimate the nature and range of alcohol-related negative consequences for drinkers, for others and for the community as a whole. This is, in part, because data about harm was traditionally collected only at the individual level. Recent research provides data that better conveys the impact of college drinking at the community level too.

Risk for Individuals

Harmful consequences of drinking rise in proportion to the amount of alcohol consumed. The national data in the table below convey the relationship between the usual number of drinks consumed when drinking and college students' self-reported alcohol-related injury.

# drinks usually consumed	% drinkers at each level	% at each level reporting an alcohol-related injury in the past school year
1	13	2
2	21	4
3	18	9
4	15	14
5	12	18
6	8	23
7	4	26
8	3	30
9+	5	33

Source: Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (1993, 1997, 1999, 2001 national surveys)

Risk for the Community

However, at a community level, students who drink at the 5/4 level *and below* also pose a major public health problem at colleges because:

- Even relatively low levels of blood alcohol concentration are associated with increased risk of injury and death in motor vehicle crashes (Wechsler and Nelson, 2008);
- There are many more students who drink at that level.

In fact, many more students report they were hurt or injured at lower, rather than higher, levels of consumption. This is known as the **Prevention Paradox**.

- The heaviest drinkers (those at "high risk") account for only a small percentage of the overall alcohol-related harms in a community. The majority of harms at the community level occur among drinkers consuming at a less extreme level associated with a lower, but non-zero level of risk (Weitzman and Nelson, 2004).
- This does not suggest that we should forego treatment efforts or all "high-risk" approaches. However, these high-risk students typically come to the attention of authorities such as Student Conduct or police (Weitzman, Nelson, 2004) and may best be reached using individually based secondary or tertiary (treatment-based) approaches. The Prevention Paradox only suggests that by itself, the individual and/or high risk drinker approach is not sufficient to yield community-wide reductions in harm or change in the ongoing college drinking culture (Nelson, Toben, 2005).
- Though it is hard to get away from "putting out fires", the evidence shows that campuses can get a seven times greater return on its alcohol risk management investment if we shift the 80/20 ratio so that 80% of the AOD resources focus on the student abstainers and moderate drinkers instead of disproportionately on the high risk drinkers (OTC, 2011).

Positive Consequences of Drinking
College drinkers experience many negative consequences, some of which are very serious, but students also experience many positive consequences related to drinking. Positive consequences associated with college drinking have been studied - more in terms of general expectancies (e.g. feel relaxed, more outgoing, attractive) than specific, real-life experiences. Examples of expected and reported positive consequences include: meeting new friends, had fun, socialized, romantic encounters, sex, stress relief, expressed myself, celebrated, controlled my drinking, had a nice meal, etc.

Negative Consequences of Drinking
While a majority of students do not experience negative consequences as a result of their drinking, they have been well documented in national and UC Berkeley samples. Similar to colleges across the country, we are concerned about harm - both for drinkers themselves (direct) as well as for those around them (second-hand effects).

Physical	Hurt or injured self	8% (A)
	Was pushed, hit or assaulted*	10% (B)
	Nauseated/vomited	36% (C)
	Had sleep or study disrupted*	38% (B)
	Forgot where you were of what you did	20% (A)
Interpersonal	Been insulted or humiliated*	16% (B)
	Had serious argument or quarrel*	6% (B)
	Been taken advantage of sexually	12% (C)
Legal	Damaged property	6% (A)
	Had property damaged*	8% (B)
	Driven under the influence	21% (A)
	In trouble with police or school authorities	11% (C)
Academic	Missed class	18% (C)
	Performed poorly on an assignment or test	18% (C)

*Indicates second hand effect
Sources: (A) NCHA 2014; (B) CSS 2012; (C) AlcoholEdu 2014

Impact on Academic Performance
Amount of time drinking alcohol is a predictor of academic performance in college. The only activity that is more important is the number of hours a student spends studying outside of class.
- The number of hours college students spend studying has dropped from 25/week in 1961 down to 15/week in 2003 and students spend more time drinking than studying on average. (Babcock, 2009).
- Students with an A average consumed an average of 3.4 drinks per week, while B average students consumed 4.5 drinks, C average students 6.1 drinks, and D or F students 9.8 drinks (Presley, 1996).
- One-fourth of Cal students report academic problems due to their alcohol use, such as earning lower grades, doing poorly on exams or papers, missing classes and falling behind in their studies (CSS, 2010).

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