

# Recommendation for More Direct and Consistent Messaging to Underage Students about Delaying Alcohol Use

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## THE PROBLEM WITH COMMON CURRENT MESSAGES:

### Mixed messages and reinforcing unhealthy norms

In an effort to decrease resistance or to sound realistic or “in touch” with the student experience, well-intentioned people often deliver messages to students similar to: “I know you are going to drink, just be safe...responsible, smart, etc.” or “I’m not saying don’t drink, just be safe”. On the surface these seem like reasonable messages and they are certainly delivered with a harm reduction intention. However, in this paper you will read many research-based arguments why it is not realistic to expect an 18-20 year old to drink alcohol in a low-risk way. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention, 90% of the alcohol consumed by people under age 21 is in the form of binge drinking (CDC, 2012). Therefore, despite education about safe or responsible drinking, if an 18-20 year old drinks alcohol, more often than not it will be consumed in a high-risk way. Once that happens, they are no longer able to make “safe and responsible” choices and are vulnerable to experiencing a wide variety of negative consequences, some extremely serious.

Additionally, the real effect of a message that says “I know you are going to drink, just be safe” is to say that students are *expected* to drink, even though it’s *technically* against the rules. These kinds of messages confirm for students that drinking alcohol (which is typically consumed in a high-risk way by underage students) is a normal and expected part of the college experience. This normalization results in many students engaging in high-risk drinking very quickly upon arriving on campus, almost as an automatic response, and without an accurate sense of the risks they are taking.

Drinking under the legal age is against the law as well as against University policy. In written communication, the rules against underage drinking are quite clear. Additionally, laws and policies related to underage drinking are regularly enforced on campus and in the community. However, verbal communication by students, faculty, staff and administrators, who are in a position to influence student behavior and campus culture, often sends mixed messages about our “real” expectations of student behavior around alcohol.

Because of these mixed messages, when underage drinking rules and laws *are* enforced, it can be frustrating and confusing for students because they believed what they were doing was normal and expected college student behavior. Consequently, students in this position often question the value of the rule they were caught violating, not their choice to violate it. For students who don’t drink, hearing a message that suggests they are *expected* to drink can be a very frustrating and alienating experience; causing them to wonder if they can fit in and be successful on this campus.

## RECOMMENDATION FOR MESSAGES TO STUDENTS UNDER 21:

### “It is in your best interest to simply wait”

Student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators are in a position to influence student behavior and campus culture through their everyday interactions with prospective, new, and current students. As stated above, our written policy statements clearly prohibit underage drinking but our verbal communication often says something very different about our real expectations for student alcohol use and may be inadvertently reinforcing student perceptions that high-risk drinking is the expected norm

for student life. We know that sending clear and consistent messages about expectations is critical to reducing high-risk drinking by students. To achieve this, it is important for those in a position to influence student life to send messages with their verbal communication that is consistent with our written policies. A verbal statement that 1) is grounded in research on what can actually reduce risk for problems; 2) is consistent with our written policies; and 3) emphasizes why the expectations have value for student success might be similar to:

**Primary message:** *“We expect students to wait until the legal age to drink alcohol, if they choose to drink at all, because we know for a fact that it is in their best interest to simply wait.”*

**Supporting message:** We know, and a large body of research validates, that the outcomes for our students related to health, safety, academic success and future opportunities will be better if they simply wait until they are older to drink if they choose drink at all. Research supports that youth and young adults drink less and experience fewer problems where alcohol laws are clearly stated and consistently enforced, where access is limited, and where messages are not delivered that normalize risky drinking as an expected rite of passage (Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; McMorris et al., 2011). Our students’ success is our top priority and we know that if more students delay alcohol use until later in life, we will not only see improved outcomes for students who drink but also for students who don’t drink by reducing secondhand consequences of high-risk drinking.

We understand that this may seem unrealistic to many because our culture promotes risky drinking to young people as a normal and even necessary part of the college experience. We believe, however, that this has been a dangerous message which has resulted in too much harm, for too many of our students, for too long. We no longer want to send messages to our students, however unintentional, that reinforce risky drinking as the expected norm.

## **RATIONALE FOR A “SIMPLY WAIT” MESSAGE**

### ***The benefits of waiting are enormous***

#### **1. Health & Safety:**

The direct and secondhand consequences of high-risk drinking by college students are well established (NIAAA, 2010a). If more students simply wait to drink until they are at least 21, there would be a significant reduction in the number of students who experience serious negative consequences as a result of their own or someone else’s drinking including: alcohol poisoning, injuries, violence, sexual assault, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and death.

Additional health and safety reasons to delay drinking include:

- The risk for developing alcohol dependence decreases by 14% with each increasing year of age of drinking onset (NIAAA, 1998).
- The risk for experiencing lifetime alcohol abuse problems decreases by 8% with each increasing year of age of drinking onset (NIAAA, 1998).
- Alcohol is the leading contributor to death from injuries, the main cause of death for people under age 21 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

- Alcoholism develops much faster in a younger person and is most prevalent in the 18-20 year age group (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).
- When people drink in a high-risk way when they are under 21, they are more likely to be heavy drinkers later in life and experience ongoing health and safety problems that affect them, their families, their jobs, and their long-term health outcomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; Hawkins et al., 1997; Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 2006).

The long-term public health benefits of encouraging young people to delay drinking are tremendous. If more people delay drinking until later in life, we will not only see fewer alcohol abuse and dependence problems among people under 21, but over time we will see a reduction in these costly problems among people over 21 as well. The result would be an enormous positive impact on the vast array of social problems caused by alcohol abuse and dependence.

## **2. Academic success:**

High-risk drinking negatively impacts academic performance and success (Pascarella et al., 2007; Wolaver, 2002; Porter & Pryor, 2007; Whitt, Edvalson, Asel, & Hansen, 2008). Changing the definition of the college experience by sending a clear and consistent “simply wait” message about drinking will help students come to college with healthier expectations about college life. As a result, students would be more likely spend more time, earlier in their college career, engaging in the kinds of academic and career preparation endeavors that lead them to be much better prepared to enter a competitive job market after college. A potential added benefit of increased academic focus by students earlier in their college careers might be that more students proceed to graduation in four years; possibly resulting in a reduction in student loan debt accumulated by students. Additionally, if more students delay drinking until they are 21, fewer students will have their academic success negatively impacted by *other* people’s drinking.

## **3. Future opportunities:**

Delaying drinking until later in life means that fewer students will experience consequences that negatively impact their future opportunities including:

- Legal problems they experience as a result of poor decisions made while drinking
- Losing or failing to establish the necessary academic focus to be successful in college because of high-risk drinking
- Not being prepared to take advantage of opportunities that would benefit their future because drinking and partying became a priority over academic and career preparation activities in their early years of college
- Developing alcoholism which has life-long implications for future success and quality of life.

## **4. A better environment for all students to be successful:**

If fewer students drink under age 21, we will create a healthier, safer environment that is more conducive to success for all students. Many of our students don’t drink and they report feeling overwhelmed by what they see as a party school culture on our campus and concern that they may not be able to be successful socially or academically at this school. We need to demonstrate our support for non-drinking students and validate that their choice to not drink, at least at this time in their lives, is an intelligent and mature choice that will benefit them greatly both now and in the future.

## 5. **Economic impact:**

Substantial economic savings could be experienced if more people delayed drinking until later in life. The negative consequences of underage drinking cost the citizens of the United States \$62 billion and the State of Iowa \$580 million in 2010 (PIRE, 2011). These costs include alcohol-related crime and violence, traffic crashes, property damage, medical care, work loss, alcohol treatment, and pain and suffering associated with the multiple problems resulting from the use of alcohol by youth. Excessive drinking by all ages cost the U.S. \$223.6 billion in 2006, of which \$94.2 billion (42%) was borne by federal, state, and local government (Bouchery et al., 2011). Imagine the cost savings on our own campus related to property damage, public safety, counseling, and judicial and student conduct efforts if more students simply waited until they were 21 to drink. Because we know that the longer people wait to start drinking the less likely they will experience alcohol problems later in life, emphasizing the importance of delaying drinking will have a positive impact on economic costs related to high-risk drinking by people of all ages.

### ***“Simply wait” is consistent with a harm reduction approach***

Delivering consistent messages to students encouraging them to simply wait until they are older to drink, because of the significant benefits of doing so, is consistent with a harm reduction approach. The choice not to drink is already selected by many of our students. In a survey administered by Heath Iowa to incoming first-year students before the start of the fall 2012 semester, sixty percent identified themselves as non-drinkers or as currently abstaining from alcohol. Further, the percent of undergraduates reporting any drinking in the last thirty days is at the lowest level in twenty years of data collection (NCHA, 2012). These numbers show us that thousands of our students are already making the choice not to drink, at least at this time in their lives. It is therefore not unrealistic to suggest that students may choose to avoid or delay alcohol use if we are more consistent in our messages encouraging them to do so. It is important that we validate the choice not to drink or to delay drinking as legitimate options for students, rather than suggest with our comments (directly or indirectly) that we *expect* students to drink. Additionally, delaying alcohol use until they are older is the surest way to reduce risk and harm and therefore this message should certainly be part of our overall harm reduction efforts. Delivering a “simply wait” message to people under 21 enhances, rather than contradicts, other harm reduction efforts on campus and in the community that seek to reduce negative consequences from excessive drinking.

### ***Brain development means low-risk choices with alcohol are unlikely by 18-20 year olds***

Without significant external controls in place that restrict access to alcohol as well as the quantity, speed, and frequency of consumption (e.g. vigorous enforcement or strong religious beliefs and cultural values against drinking to intoxication), low-risk drinking by 18-20 year olds is not a realistic expectation regardless of our best efforts to educate them about safe and responsible drinking. At the age of 18-20, the human brain is undergoing an important period of transition and does not reach full maturity until about age 25. This means that although 18-20 year olds have reached legal adulthood, when it comes to brain development, they are in the later stages of adolescence. The last part of the human brain to reach maturity is the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for judgment, decision making, and impulse control (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Though it varies by individual in terms of degree, the developmental stage of an 18-20 year old is characterized by a preference for risk-taking and sensation-seeking activities (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). This combination of risk-taking and sensation-seeking tendencies along with a not fully matured capacity for sound decision making means that the typical 18-20 year old is not operating at full capacity when it

comes to making low-risk decisions about alcohol. Alcohol further impairs judgment so, once they start drinking, an 18-20 year old will be even less likely to make low-risk choices around alcohol.

This is not an issue of intelligence and it does not mean an absence of judgment by 18-20 year olds. It is simply a normal stage of development. At this age they are able to make sound decisions in emotionally neutral situations but have more difficulty in situations with heightened social or emotional overtones that intensify their innate drive for novelty and sensation seeking (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). As stated by the Surgeon General of the United States, “given that certain situations can override an adolescent’s good intentions and sound decision making capacity, it is important to structure the social system surrounding youth to minimize negative outcomes” (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

There are healthy ways to meet students’ developmental needs for risk-taking and sensation-seeking that can have a valuable impact on their lives; including exposing them to new experiences and challenging skill-building opportunities that will give them a competitive edge in the job market upon graduation. Students may be more likely to choose these healthier options if we did a better job of encouraging them to delay drinking until they are further into their college careers, if they choose to drink at all.

### ***Educating about risks of high-risk drinking does not lead to lower risk drinking***

It has been demonstrated by research that information-only prevention initiatives tend to increase knowledge but that increased knowledge does not result in behavior change, including reducing risky drinking (Larimer & Cronce, 2002, 2007). Educational initiatives have a place in a harm reduction approach but they must be supplementary to efforts that change environmental conditions that promote high-risk drinking as a normal part of the college experience (Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse, 2002). Research has documented promising results for one-on-one interventions with individual problem drinkers to help them moderate their consumption; however, no education program has successfully taught entire populations of youth to drink responsibly. Responsible consumption comes with maturity and maturity primarily comes with age and as certain other protective mechanisms such marriage and first job begin to take hold in a person’s life.

### ***“Responsible” drinking messages do not reduce risk for problems***

Typical efforts to promote “responsible” drinking provide too vague of a definition of what “responsible” means (if they define it at all). Responsible drinking campaigns fall short because they do not define the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption that is actually related to one’s risk for experiencing problems related to excessive drinking. Responsible drinking campaigns that *are* more specific about risk reduction typically only focus on drinking and driving which, while important, ignores the vast array of negative (and sometimes tragic) consequences beyond drunk driving that can happen when people drink excessively. Additionally, responsible drinking campaigns promoting designated drivers (rather than decreasing consumption) have actually been found by research to *increase* risk for other kinds of problems related to high-risk drinking. This is because when people know they have a designated driver, they often believe they are being “safe” and therefore tend to drink *more* on that occasion than usual; exposing themselves to a variety of additional consequences including sexual assault, injuries, and alcohol poisoning (Rivara et al., 2007). Even if responsible drinking was well-defined, because 18-20 year olds are in a developmental stage in which they have a heightened preference for risk-taking and sensation-seeking, as well as a diminished capacity for sound judgment, they are unlikely to limit their drinking to quantities which research has determined are truly low-risk (though not no risk) for experiencing health or safety problems (NIAAA, 2010b):

- One standard drink per hour
- No more than three (women)/four (men) standard drinks on any day
- No more than seven drinks (women) /fourteen drinks (men) in a week

***We can't educate our way out of this problem. We need to change the environment.***

Our decisions about alcohol are not only shaped by our individual characteristics. Our decisions about alcohol are influenced in large part by our physical, social, economic, and legal environment. In order to reduce high-risk drinking and its related negative consequences, we need to change the conditions in the environment that make high-risk drinking more likely including: low prices, low or inconsistent enforcement, easy access, community norms and traditions that promote and normalize high-risk drinking, alcohol promotions and advertising that promote or normalize high-risk drinking (Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse, 2002). Interestingly, the strategies with the *least* evidence of effectiveness often have the most public support and strategies with the most evidence of effectiveness are often met with the greatest resistance. Part of the reason for that is a poor translation of research to the general public but also because the strategies that have the most evidence of effectiveness *require* people, institutions, industries, and systems to do things differently. The strategies that effectively reduce high-risk drinking and the related negative consequences are often greatly resisted by those who are required to make changes, especially powerful industries (such as the alcohol industry) that benefit greatly from the status quo.

***The European myth***

There is a commonly held perception that American young people drink more frequently and experience more alcohol-related problems than their European counterparts. Europe is often held up as an example where there are more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes which then foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. This is a myth. Despite anecdotal reports of adults teaching youth to drink in moderation, survey data provide no evidence that European youth are more responsible about alcohol consumption than American youth. The truth is, youth in European countries drink more, get drunk more often, and at earlier ages than U.S. youth (Fries & Grube, 2010). Countries with lower drinking ages suffer from alcohol-related problems by youth and young adults similar to or greater than in the United States (Rehm et al., 2001; Room, 2003; Grube, 2005).

***The forbidden fruit myth***

Many may believe that delivering clear and consistent messages to students to delay drinking until they are of legal drinking age will drive 18-20 year olds to drink more dangerously because it has become a "forbidden fruit". Research supports the opposite is true. Contrary to common beliefs, more lenient policies around alcohol use by youth and young adults do not lead to lower risk drinking. This has been found to be true whether studying national policies or parenting practices (McMorris et al., 2011). Youth and young adults drink less and experience fewer problems where alcohol laws are clearly stated and consistently enforced, where access is limited, and where messages are not delivered that normalize risky drinking as a normal rite of passage for youth. Studies show that young people who wait until at least 21 to start drinking will drink less and continue to do so through their twenties at which point brains develop to full maturity and risk for problems begins to decrease significantly (Hingson & Kenkel, 2004).

***We regularly set clear expectations, guidelines, and requirements that promote student success, why would it be any different when it comes to alcohol?***

Based on our expertise, we regularly establish rules and requirements that direct students toward a path that we know will give them a greater chance for success. For example, we don't hesitate to

communicate clear rules and consequences regarding cheating, course and graduations requirements, and clear warnings against behavior we know is dangerous to them such as texting and driving. We do not avoid saying “don’t do this” or “you must do that” in these instances for fear that students will rebel and do the undesirable behavior even more or because we know that some may still do it even though we have warned them against it. Instead, we make our expectations clear because we know it is in their best interest.

## CONCLUSION

Overwhelming evidence says it is in our students’ best interest to wait at least until they are 21 to drink, if they choose to drink at all, and that if we establish clear expectations with consistent enforcement they will drink less and experience fewer consequences. Why would we hesitate to state that expectation unequivocally and as often as possible?

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