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## Beer before liquor, or liquor before beer : a research review of binge drinking escalation in Greek-letter societies on college campuses today

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## **Beer before liquor, or liquor before beer : a research review of binge drinking escalation in Greek-letter societies on college campuses today**

### **Abstract**

In 1990 college presidents rated college student alcohol abuse as the problem that gave them the greatest concern (Boyer, 1990). However, one specific college campus population that seems to be more likely to binge drink is those students affiliated with the National Fraternities and Sororities.

The purpose of this paper is: • To focus on and define the concept of binge drinking • To establish specific data that show that binge drinking is a problem with fraternity and sorority members • To research and suggest possible solutions that college administrators may use to combat the binge drinking problem on their campuses.

This Research Paper by: Thomas M. O'Shea

Entitled: BEER BEFORE LIQUOR, OR LIQUOR BEFORE BEER: A RESEARCH  
REVIEW OF BINGE DRINKING ESCALATION IN GREEK-LETTER  
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BEER BEFORE LIQUOR, OR LIQUOR BEFORE BEER:  
A RESEARCH REVIEW OF BINGE DRINKING ESCALATION IN  
GREEK-LETTER SOCIETIES ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES TODAY

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of Masters of Arts in Education

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by

Thomas M. O'Shea

May 2001

## INTRODUCTION

“Beer before liquor, never been sicker. Liquor before beer, you are in the clear.”

This statement is one that many college students today hear at some point during their time in school. From the first time colonists arrived here in the New World, bringing their alcoholic beverages with them, Americans have developed a problem with the over consumption of alcohol, however, no one single cohort suffers more from the over consumption of alcohol than the traditional-aged college students (Hewitt, 1995). Heavy episodic alcohol use or “binge drinking” among college students is now a nationally acknowledged problem in the United States. It is hardly surprising that college presidents rank alcohol abuse as the No. 1 problem on college campuses today (Wechsler, Nelson, & Weitzman, 2000, p. 39). In 1990 college presidents rated college student alcohol abuse as the problem that gave them the greatest concern (Boyer, 1990). According to the Harvard School of Public Health’s 1999 College Alcohol Survey, “seventy percent of college presidents believe binge drinking is a significant problem for their institutions...” (Wechsler, Lee, & Kuo, 2000, p. 200). However, one specific college campus population that seems to be more likely to binge drink is those students affiliated with the National Fraternities and Sororities. The purpose of this paper is:

- To focus on and define the concept of binge drinking
- To establish specific data that show that binge drinking is a problem with fraternity and sorority members
- To research and suggest possible solutions that college administrators may use to combat the binge drinking problem on their campuses

Many college students consume alcohol during their educational careers.

These students may have specific reasons to consume alcohol, but over-consumption of alcohol may lead to negative behavior. Over the past decade the over-consumption of alcohol has been coined “binge drinking”. The Harvard School of Public Health’s 1999 College Alcohol Survey defines binge drinking as “five or more drinks in a row one or more times during a two-week period for men, and four or more drinks in a row one or more times during a two-week period for women (a gender-specific modification to a national standard measure). Likewise, Wechsler’s (1996) report defines a drink as:

- A 12-ounce can or bottle of beer
- A four-ounce glass of wine
- A 12-ounce can or bottle of wine cooler or
- A shot of liquor taken straight or in a mixed drink

These specific figures have become benchmarks that indicate a lifestyle of heavy drinking and are the minimum amount of alcohol one needs to consume before alcohol-related problems occur. According to a study conducted by Phillip W. Meilman (1999) and colleagues, these specific alcohol-related problems may include:

- Getting into fights or arguments with others
- Getting physically injured
- Forgetting where one is or what one has done
- Engaging in unplanned or unprotected sex

Overall, students who drink in these or greater amounts differ from other students by virtue of frequency and severity of their alcohol-related problems.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Greek-Letter Societies have existed on U.S. college campuses since the founding of the higher education system back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Over the past 150 years these societies have flourished in our society to such an extent that it has been estimated that more than 725,000 college students were members of these organizations at the end of 1989 (Theiss, 1989). Almost monthly, a college or university fraternity or sorority makes the national news because of an escapade or underage drinking event resulting in bodily injury or worse. In an article by George Kuh and colleagues (1996), many outcome performances by Greek-Letter Societies fall well short from the espoused values and goals of their charters or missions. Some of these outcome performances include:

- **Academic Development:** during the orientation period new members' grades fall well below the campus average during the same period.
- **Intellectual Development:** fraternity men are well behind their non-Greek member counterparts in cognitive development after the first year of college.
- **Personal Development:** most Greek-Letter Societies lack diverse populations that are essential for the development of character and identity.

Although these three areas seem to be detrimental to a well-developed person, the most threatening problem in the Greek-Letter Societies today is related to binge drinking.

Benjamin Wynne and his fellow fraternity brothers downed enough alcohol to run up a bar tab totaling \$2,000 in one evening of consumption; Matthew Garofalo chugged from a bottle of Southern Comfort that his "big brother" provided; and Scott Krueger

tipped back some Jack Daniel's and then settled in for the night with a bottle of Bacardi spiced rum (Reisberg, 1998). These three individuals were doing what many Greek-Letter Society members do on a regular basis: pour tremendous amounts of booze into their systems in a single setting. However, what separates these three individuals from the rest of the group is the fact that Mr. Wynne, Mr. Garofalo, and Mr. Krueger did not wake up the next morning with the usual hangover experience. As a matter of fact, these three individuals did not wake up at all and died because of alcohol consumption problems. Alcohol consumption and negative experiences related to alcohol consumption are normative on American college campuses today. Men typically drink more than women and whites have higher drinking rates than all other racial or ethnic groups (Presely, Meilman & Cashin, 1993/1996). However, these activities are consistently greater in fraternities and sororities than in the general student population (Baer & Carney, 1993; Hendern, 1989; Lichtenfeld & Kayson, 1994). Weschler et al. (1998) found that in 1997, 65.0% of Greek students had "binged" in the previous two weeks, and among those who actually lived in fraternity or sorority houses, the rate reached 81.1%.

The Core Alcohol and Drug Survey, a research study conducted by Cashin and colleagues (1998), revealed alarming figures that support the notion that members of Greek-Letter Societies are more likely to binge drink compared to their non-Greek counterparts. This research study surveyed 25,411 students from 61 different institutions and examined the alcohol consumption levels, binge drinking rates, consequences of use, beliefs about alcohol consumption, and leadership positions of Greeks and non-Greeks nationwide. The results of the study indicated:

- Members of the Greek-Letter Societies averaged significantly more drinks per week than their non-Greek counterparts.
- Members of the Greek-Letter Societies engaged in heavy drinking activities more often than their non-Greek counterparts.
- Members of the Greek-Letter Societies suffered more negative consequences more often than their non-Greek counterparts (Cashin, et. al, 1998).

More specifically, as another study conducted by Presley et. al, (1993/1996) concluded, fraternity house residents averaged 20.3 drinks per week compared to 7.5 drinks per week for all males surveyed, while sorority house members averaged 6.2 drinks per week compared to 3.2 drinks per week for all females surveyed. Overall, seventy-four percent of Greek-Letter Society members reported involvement in binge drinking activities compared to forty-two percent of the general student population. Likewise, Presley, et. al (1993/96), concluded that fifty percent of Greek-Letter Society members performed poorly on exams or projects compared to twenty-five percent for all students surveyed; seventy percent missed classes compared to thirty-three percent for the general student population, and fifty-nine percent had an argument or fight compared with thirty-five percent for the general student population.

In the Report from the Harvard School of Public Health (1996), a gloomy picture is painted of binge drinking on college campuses today. The results of the study of over 17,000 students on 140-college campus nationwide suggest that:

- Fully eighty-four percent of all students surveyed reported drinking throughout the school year (forty-four percent qualifying as binge drinkers and nineteen percent qualifying as frequent binge drinkers)
- One-third of the schools surveyed qualified as high-binge drinking campuses (more than half of the responding students classified themselves as binge-drinkers).

However, once again the strongest predictor of binge drinking was found to be affiliation with a Greek-Letter Society. Specifically, eighty percent of those in sorority houses, and eighty-six percent of those in fraternity houses classified themselves as moderate to frequent binge drinkers (Wechsler, 1996). More astonishing is the comparison of the Greek-Letter members to their non-Greek counterparts. According to Wechsler's study (1996), sixty-two percent of sorority members were classified as binge drinkers compared to thirty-five percent of their non-Greek counterparts, and seventy-five percent of fraternity members were classified as binge drinkers compared to forty-five percent of their non-Greek counterparts. These figures suggest that students affiliated with Greek-Letter Societies are more likely to binge drink, engage in heavy drinking activities more often, and experience more negative consequences related to alcohol consumption than their non-Greek counterparts. However, the most astonishing result from this study is related to the level of binge drinking, engagement in heavy drinking activities, and experience of negative consequences that leaders of Greek-Letter Societies experience compared to the rest of the Greek-Letter Society members. The study conducted by Cashin and colleagues (1998), hypothesized that because of their positions of responsibility and leadership, Greek-Letter Society leaders would drink less, engage in

heavy drinking activities less frequent, and experience fewer negative consequences than their less involved Greek-Letter Society counterparts. The outcomes of this study revealed that the hypothesis stated was invalid.

According to Cashin's study (1998), the leaders of Greek-Letter Societies were consuming alcohol, engaging in heavy drinking activities, and experiencing negative consequences at high levels, at least as high and in some cases higher than others who were less involved within the Greek-Letter Society. As Cashin and his colleagues hypothesized, one would expect these leaders within the Greek-Letter Societies to be more sensitive to these issues due to the risk management and liability issues that accompany such an important position. Clearly, this is not the case and these leaders are serving as participants, and sometimes ringleaders, in setting norms of heavy drinking and behavioral loss of control. So, do these Greek-Letter Societies attract or develop binge drinkers during recruitment, selection, and initiation of Greek activities on college campuses nationwide? The research study conducted by Wechsler (1998) suggests that both of these dynamics are present on college campuses nationwide today.

The empirical data show that sixty percent of those who lived in fraternity houses had been binge drinkers in high school and over three-fourths of fraternity residents who had not binged in high school became binge drinkers in college. Sororities, on the other hand, do not seem so much to attract members already participating in binge drinking activities, but three out of every four women who had not binged in high school became binge drinkers while affiliated with sororities in college. All of this information suggests that although binge drinking, participation in heavy drinking activities, and involvement

in negative consequences on college campuses are on the rise, a specific focus needs to be directed towards Greek-Letter Societies located on college campuses nationwide.

## SOLUTIONS

All institutions of higher education are unique, each having its own culture and traditions, resources and priorities, and relationships with the local community.

However, according to Henry Wechsler (1998), every college with a substantial proportion of binge drinkers must begin with one fundamental question, Can we accomplish our mission and fulfill our students' goals if we tolerate behavior that compromises the quality of students' educational and social lives, as well as their health and safety? It does not matter if you are Dr. Mary Sue Coleman, President of the University of Iowa, Dr. Mark A. Emmert, Chancellor at Louisiana State University, or Dr. John Westling, President of Boston University. This simple question needs to be addressed because the university students who died at these institutions have died as a result of activities related to over consumption of alcohol. The findings of the studies discussed in this research paper suggest that there needs to be important changes for professional practice in several areas of student affairs. Some of these include alcohol education programming, leadership recruitment, organizational advisement, and leadership development, as well as the overall relationship between divisions of student affairs and student leaders (Spratt & Turrentine, 2001).

So, what are the correct solutions to take in order to combat the rising phenomena of binge drinking on college campuses? Is there a solution out there? Some believe that all college campuses should be alcohol free and any violators should be suspended immediately. Others believe that all Greek-Letter Societies should be abolished from the

university system. Yet others believe that more education needs to take place for the problem to be solved. No matter what the solution or decision, at least administrators on college campuses nationwide realize that the need to address the issue is pertinent, not only related to Greek-Letter Societies, but for the entire campus population. To more effectively address the problem, especially among Greek students, “officials need to implement programs that rest on a different set of assumptions that focus on student motivation, student participation, and campus-wide education” (Thombs & Briddick, 2000; Erikson, Riley, Cheung & O’Hare, 1997).

One popular solution to this problem has been to focus on the education of all university students at the individual institutions. More than 800 colleges and universities are tackling their campus alcohol policy problems utilizing brochures, posters, bumper stickers, and other media resources... (Haines & Spear, 1996). A popular way to incorporate this educational strategy is to develop an intervention program aimed at changing peoples’ perceptions on the amount of binge drinking actually occurring on the college campuses. A five-year study focused on changing person’s perspectives on binge drinking conducted at a public, residential campus of 23,000 students proved unsuccessful. However, a media campaign designed to change students’ perceptions on the amount of binge drinking as the norm showed:

- An 18.5 % drop in the number of students who perceived binge drinking as the norm on their college campus.
- An 8.8 % drop in the self-reported binge rate at that institution (Haines & Spear, 1996).

The apparent effectiveness of the media frenzy suggests that changes in perceptions of drinking norms may lower the number of students participating in these types of activities.

A similar campaign has been launched at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), a small public institution of approximately 14,000 students. The Student Activities Office, The Department of Residence, and University Health Services has teamed up to develop "4Max", a program to promote a four-drink maximum each time a student goes out. Like the previously mentioned study, "4Max" has utilized brochures, posters, bumper stickers, and other media resources to encourage the four drink maximum. Local businesses and companies have offered prizes and monetary rewards to students who have the bumper and window stickers displayed in their vehicles. Likewise, the sponsoring offices have joined forces to concentrate on the area of student programming and have developed alternative activities for students to participate in on the weekends. According to Robert Hartman, Director of the Department of Residence at the University of Northern Iowa, these programmatic efforts helps provide better environments for our current residents. These environments result in smarter choices being made by more people, more often (July 26, 2000). Due to the fact that the "4Max" campaign is still in existence, no specific results have been calculated. However, all university personnel involved in the program believe that general improvements have been made. A concrete example of this has been the reduction of alcohol related incidents during Homecoming Week at UNI. Although eighty percent of these incidents involved college students from other campuses, alcohol was a factor in 100 percent of the cases. According to Dave Zarifis, Associate Director of Public Safety at UNI, since the concentrated effort and

introduction of “4Max”, alcohol related events during Homecoming Week have dropped dramatically (July 28, 2000). Although these types of programs seem to help reduce binge drinking on college campuses, a holistic approach must be undertaken. By adopting such an approach, the entire university community will be working towards the same goals and objectives.

In the article *Alcohol and the American College Campus: A Report from the Harvard School of Public Health*, Henry Wechsler (1996) suggested that college administrators adopt a “Twelve-Step Program” that provides a model for them to change and mold to specifically meet the institutional needs. The following information describes the “Twelve-Step Model” in detail and shows why it would be useful when addressing the issue of binge drinking on college campus.

- **Step #1: Assess the ways in which alcohol is affecting your college:** many administrators have the notion that if you cannot see the problem than the problem does not exist. Often times upper-level administrators believe that alcohol problems do not exist on their respective institutions. As this paper has shown, binge drinking on college campuses is present everywhere and needs to be addressed immediately. The “Twelve-Step Model” suggests that administrators take a “Weekend Tour” (Wechsler, 1996). Begin on a Thursday night and travel around the university community every night throughout the weekend. Likewise, see how well students attend classes on Friday after the Thursday night festivities. All of these actions will help the administrators get a better feel for the social scene at their institutions.

- **Step #2: Admit that your college has an alcohol problem:** denial, a sense of futility, and a lack of resources have allowed many administrators to keep a low profile on prevention methods concerning binge drinking on college campuses. It is time for college administrators to wake up and admit that a drinking problem exists on their campuses. Even if the problem is not as big as those at other institutions, admit that a problem exists nonetheless.
- **Step #3: A systematic effort begins with the president:** commitment and leadership must always start from the top and filter down throughout the organization. Commitment to prevention programs needs to be supported by the top official at the institution before they will create results on the college campus.
- **Step #4: Plan for a long-term effort:** as stated throughout the paper, binge drinking has been part of college life since the higher education system has been created. Therefore, results will not take place overnight. It is important that the administrators have long term plans that will look at the problem continually for several years. According to Wechsler (1996), at least one four-year cycle needs to pass before any changes can be made.
- **Step #5: Involve everyone in the solution:** the solution that is chosen must involve all faculty, staff, support staff members, and community members to be effective (Chaloupka & Wechsler, 1996). A college-wide approach will allow the students that need help throughout the intervention, the opportunities to seek help if needed.

- **Step #6: Involve the local community in your efforts:** often times the so-called town-gown relationship is a keep factor in the success of the institution. It is important that all members of the community join forces to promote the solution to the problem
- **Step #7: Establish the rights of non-binging students:** it is important that the administrators and personnel at the institution protect the rights of the non-binging students. It is also important that these students are empowered to take the lead to help implement the program so it can be more successful in the long run.
- **Step #8: Target disruptive behavior for disciplinary action:** it is important that a strictly followed code of conduct is developed to handle cases on an as needed basis. These codes may be helpful in deterring people from breaking the rules and may result in fewer problems down the road.
- **Step #9: Address the problem of drinking at Greek-Letter Societies:** according to Wechsler (1996), any institution that is serious about correcting the problem of binge drinking must first confront the problem in the Greek-Letter Societies.
- **Step #10: Provide a full-time education for a full-time tuition:** simply stated, schedule exams and projects on Fridays and make attendance required on these days.
- **Step #11: Encourage problem drinkers to seek help or treatment:** make the referral and treatment resources readily available (Gregoire, 1997).

Likewise, administrators need to make sure that this process is efficient, effective, and confidential.

- **Step #12: Freshman Orientation:** this program should start long before students arrive on campus because it is important that you change the expectations of the incoming freshman before they arrive on campus. This is the group of people that have not been associated with college before and the first year is the one that will make or break success for these students. It is important that all personnel concentrate on these students so that the negative behaviors do not begin.

## **CONCLUSION**

Yes, the “Twelve-Step Model” suggested by Wechsler seems to be very neat and organized. However, administrators need to realize that there is no easy solution to the problem of binge drinking on college campuses. Only a comprehensive, concentrated, and wide-sweeping effort utilizing all parts of the university committee can be expected to have an effect on this long standing and deeply entrenched problem (Wechsler, 1996). Over time something tells me when I hear the phrase, “Beer before liquor, never been sicker. Liquor before beer, you are in the clear,” I will ask myself did Benjamin Wynne, Matthew Garofalo, or Scott Krueger hear these very words before they took their last breaths? It makes me believe that activities in which I have engaged with alcohol have been risky and I now know what the outcome could be.

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