

Alcohol Information Directed at Underage Students: Abstinence or Education?

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Course: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies EDLP 225 :: Advanced Seminar: Ethical Decision Making

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Term: Spring 2004

Educating students about the dangers of alcohol abuse leads to many ethical dilemmas. One of the most prevalent dilemmas an alcohol educator will face is that of educating underage students on how to make responsible choices regarding alcohol use. Students that are over the age of 21 are given education on how to drink alcohol in a safer manner, but students under the age of 21 are not provided with this information. The practice of withholding information about responsible alcohol consumption from students under the age of 21 is unethical and causes harm to both the student and the higher education institution.

The use of alcohol among college students has been a concern since the first colleges were founded in the United States . Alcohol, especially the over-use of alcohol, can have devastating effects to students. Binge drinking, most recently referred to as high-risk drinking, is defined as five or more drinks in a sitting for men and four or more drinks in a sitting for women (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo & Lee, 2000). Many students, both under and over 21 engage in sessions of drinking that end in the student having a loss of consciousness. Solutions to this issue have recently become a priority on many campuses due to the increasing number of alcohol-related student deaths. However, creating useful policy and developing successful programs to curb high-risk alcohol activity remains a challenge to a majority of institutions.

Although it is illegal, many students under the age of 21 drink alcohol. Often students will come to college and experiment with alcohol for the first time. Because of the students' lack of experience, institutions are faced with students as young as 17 over-indulging themselves. "Underage students consumed more alcohol (compared to their of age peers) per occasion and perhaps as a result, experienced more alcohol-related problems," (Wechsler, Kuo, Lee & Dowdall, 2000, p. 24). These students are left to deal with the consequences of high-risk drinking which frequently include damaging events to the drinker, such as physical fights, alcohol poisoning, rape and even death. In spite of these occurrences, most institutions follow a strict alcohol policy promoting only abstinence from alcohol to students who are under the age of 21.

Most higher education institutions offer alcohol education such as tips on how to drink responsibly, what foods to eat and avoid when consuming alcohol, phone numbers to call if they find themselves unable to drive and signs of alcohol poisoning to students who are over 21. However, to students who are under the age of 21 alcohol education consists of one message 'don't drink, it is illegal.' It is unrealistic of these institutions to assume that because underage students are not being exposed to alcohol education they will choose to abstain from alcohol.

The administration of many institutions argue that the law states that people under the age of 21 can not drink alcohol and therefore they will not encourage them to do so. They may be justifying this ethical decision using the Ethic of Justice. "Educational administrators in societies whose governments are committed to certain fundamental principals...can and should look to laws and public policies for ethical guidance," (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2000, p. 12). These administrators may feel as if they must uphold the law, regardless of whether it may be the best thing to do in all situations.

From an ethical standpoint, is it ethical to withhold information from students that may at some point save their lives? The concept of the Ethic of Care asks questions such as 'who benefits from these decisions,' and 'who is hurt by these actions,' (Shapiro & Stefkovich 2000). Not educating students under 21 about strategies to drink alcohol responsibly does not help anyone. It does not help the student, as they will continue to be ignorant about alcohol use, and it does not help the institution as they will continue to have students over-indulging themselves with a potentially harmful substance. Both parties are also hurt by these decisions. Students participating in high-risk drinking behavior stand to hurt themselves both mentally and physically. Universities are hurt by the damaging effects of high-risk drinking on students, as well as the negative publicity that occurs when their institutions are known as 'party schools.'

Students' rights are being abridged when they are not provided with education that may decrease the chance of them abusing alcohol. Ethical principles state that rights, including the right to know, the right to privacy and the right to property, shall not be abridged. In this case the students' right to know is denied. If there is information that may help a student make wiser choices regarding alcohol, that student should be informed of that information. It is their right to be

educated about alcohol and they then have the right to decide whether they will take that education into consideration or not.

Educating students under the age of 21 on responsible alcohol consumption is an ethical dilemma that every higher education institution will face. Although it is illegal for students under the age of 21 to drink alcohol, many students still partake in this behavior anyhow. Withholding education that could result in lower incidences of high-risk drinking among underage students is unethical. Higher education institutions need to provide this education to all students regardless of age.

References

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