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Opposing view: Education can work

Licensing course would do more to curb abuse than failed age-21 laws.

By John McCardell

Though alcohol-related traffic fatalities are lower now than in 1984, they are higher than they were 10 years ago. Indeed, for the first two years after the drinking age was raised, such fatalities increased in the 16-20 age group. We must be cautious in asserting cause-and-effect relationships.

There are other considerations. How to calculate the role of safer automobiles or mandatory seat-belt laws? How to treat the demographic reality that the number of 18- to 20-year-olds has risen and fallen over the years?

How to explain National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data showing that more lives have been saved by safety restraints in the past two years than have been saved by legal age 21 in all the years since the law changed? And how to regard the 1,000 alcohol-related deaths each year among 18- to 24-year-olds off the roadways, a number increasing at an alarming rate?

Finally, how to measure cultural change? The "designated driver," unknown 25 years ago, is now commonplace. Drinking and driving, in short, has become unacceptable. For this sea change in cultural perceptions, credit is due to organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Education can work.

Yet, ask high-schoolers about alcohol education, and you will hear about temperance lectures and scare tactics. Then ask colleges that have tried more reality-based approaches, such as AlcoholEdu. You will hear of significant reductions in reckless drinking and alcohol-induced behavioral problems. Education can work — if it reflects the social environment young people know.

Education should result in licensing. A young adult completing a comprehensive alcohol education course should be permitted to purchase, possess and consume alcohol. The license would certify that the holder is prepared to make responsible decisions. It would also serve as an incentive: Those violating the laws of the issuing state before turning 18 forfeit eligibility; those violating the laws after turning 18 immediately forfeit the license. This could do more to curb teenage drinking than anything we have yet tried.

Much has changed in the past 23 years. But alcohol remains a reality in the lives of 18- to 20-year-olds. Effective public policy should acknowledge that reality and create the safest possible environment for it.

John McCardell, former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, is the founder and director of Choose Responsibility.

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