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ALCOHOL ABUSE ON CAMPUS: Would lowering the drinking age lower abuse?

Backers point to statistics that show binge drinking shot up when the age went from 18 to 21 in 1984.

By BETH QUIMBY, Staff Writer

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John McCardell

Several states are considering whether to lower the drinking age, a move some say would lead to less alcohol abuse at college campuses.

John McCardell, former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, believes lowering the legal drinking age will help curb binge drinking. McCardell, who now heads the Choose Responsibility campaign to lower the drinking age from 21 to 18, cites research that shows that binge drinking became more common after the drinking age was raised under the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984.

McCardell said teaching alcohol abstinence does not work.

"Tell me if I am wrong. I don't think there are very many people observing the law," he said.

He proposes state-issued alcohol licenses for 18-year-olds who complete alcohol education courses. The licenses would allow them to purchase alcohol.

"A miracle doesn't happen on the day you turn 21 or the day you turn 18 when all of a sudden you are able to make wise decisions about alcohol," McCardell said.

Several states have been considering other measures to lower the drinking age. The Vermont Senate has created a task force to study the pros and cons of a lower drinking age.

In Missouri, a signature-gathering campaign is underway to get an 18-year-old drinking age on the ballot.

The New Hampshire Legislature nixed a proposal to lower the drinking age for military personnel last year.

Similar proposals are now afloat in Wisconsin and South Carolina, though there have been no proposals made in the Maine Legislature recently.

The proposals are opposed by groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says driving deaths among 18- to 20-year-olds have dropped by 13 percent since the drinking age was raised to 21. States that allow people younger than 21 to drink stand to lose 10 percent of their federal highway money.

Tedd Goundie, dean of students at Bates College in Lewiston said he supports the idea.

"I often wish the drinking age were either 18 or 23 because having it at 21 puts colleges in an impossible position where a quarter of the students have legal access" and the others don't, he said.

Robert Dana, dean of students at University of Maine, Orono, calls the idea unhinged. He said it makes no sense because alcohol abuse does the most damage to developing brains.

"It is too simple to say you can give a course and the problems vanish," he said.

Staff Writer Beth Quimby can be contacted at 791-6363 or at:

bquimby@pressherald.com

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