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## Lower the drinking age? The current policies simply aren't working

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In the academic world, as in the world at large, there are data, statistics, charts, correlations and formulae. These methods, of course, have great value. They allow us to take a "macro" view of public problems and to see patterns that can lead to informed decision-making.

Such an approach has informed much of our public policy on the subject of alcohol over the past 25 years. We have studied and restudied traffic fatalities, rates of binge drinking, brain development. Even when the findings are inconsistent, even contradictory, we have tried to frame policies whose effects can be best measured by more data, statistics, charts, correlations, and formulae.

But also in the academic world, as in the world at large, behind every individual statistic is a human story, and sometimes those stories, individually and even cumulatively, challenge what the supposedly "objective" data appear to show.

This reality, too, has informed how we view alcohol and its effects, and it is this increasingly frequent conflict -- between what "science" purports to show us and what experience in fact demonstrates -- that we might locate the current debate over the effects of the legal drinking age.

The law is quite clear: If you are under 21, you may not consume alcohol. And yet the vast majority of young people, whether in college or not, consume alcohol long before they turn 21. Supporters of the law continue to invoke "science"; those who question the law invoke "experience."

"Science," it is argued, supports a law that makes abstinence and enforcement the only tools a parent or a university may employ on young violators, whose numbers are vast and whose ingenuity in avoiding detection is increasingly acute. "Experience," on the other hand, suggests that "just say no" and "we will enforce the law without exception" are not the most effective way to enable young adults to make responsible decisions about alcohol.

Yet "science" can be tricky. Alcohol-related traffic fatalities reached a 10-year high in 2006. Half of the peer-reviewed studies on the effect of the drinking age on fatalities show a positive correlation; and half show no correlation at all.

College and university presidents are on the front lines. One hundred thirty have signed on to **The Amethyst Initiative**. The initiative does not take a position on what the drinking age should be. But it does state that "Legal Age 21" has wrought significant unintended consequences that simply must be examined with care. These include binge drinking; the possession of fake IDs; the frustrating difficulty of enforcement; and the ineffectiveness of the abstinence-only message.

The drinking age has effectively banished alcohol from public places and public view. But it has done little to reduce drinking. If you were to design the ideal venue for binge drinking, you would not design a student union, a dining hall, a restaurant or any public gathering place. You would instead design a locked dorm room, an off-campus apartment, a farmer's field - in short, a place conducive to clandestine behavior.

And that is exactly where binge drinking is taking place, in the most risky of environments. Ironically, the more successful a college is in enforcing the law - carding underage drinkers, braceletting those of legal age, limiting quantities, posting campus security - the greater the likelihood that alcohol consumption will simply move to a place out of campus sight and often beyond campus boundaries, effectively placing that behavior out of reach of campus authority.

The result? More than 1,000 lives of 18- to 24-year-olds are being lost each year to alcohol off the highways, and this number is increasing.

Supporters of the law continue to urge abstinence and enforcement. Such an approach makes no allowance for human judgment or discretion, for a consideration of the unique circumstances that surround every incident that becomes another impersonal piece of data. The 130 Amethyst presidents find these limitations immensely frustrating. They inhibit their institutions' ability to do what they do best, which is to educate.

Not everyone may agree that the drinking age should be changed. But it is hard to argue against discussion and debate. And those who would seek to stifle debate by bullying presidents into removing their names and urging parents not to send their children to the institutions represented on the Amethyst list need to be called out and reminded that this is not the way a civilized debate should be conducted.

The extraordinary public reaction to the Amethyst Initiative suggests that the debate needs to happen, that opinion is not all on one side of the question, and that the question is thus far from settled. That is why 130 courageous academic leaders have put the Amethyst statement forward and why the debate that ensues will lead to public policy that reflects the reality of the lives young adults lead.

John M. McCardell Jr. is the former president of Middlebury College. He is the founder and president of **Choose Responsibility**, a nonprofit organization formed in 2007 to promote informed public debate about the effects of a legal drinking age of 21.

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