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# Let My Students Drink

## College presidents say it's time to lower the drinking age

[Radley Balko](#) | February 2009 [Print Edition](#)

John McCardell, the former president of Middlebury College, says his time on campus taught him that trying to stop college students from drinking was a fool's errand. The 1984 federal law raising the minimum drinking age to 21 not only wasn't working; it was encouraging more reckless consumption.

Two years ago, McCardell started an organization called Choose Responsibility, which waged a national campaign to lower the drinking age to 18. The soft-spoken scholar soon found that many other campus executives felt the same way. In early 2008 he started the Amethyst Initiative, a collective of college presidents urging a public discussion about the drinking age. At press time, the Amethyst Initiative had 130 signatories, including the presidents of Duke, Tufts, Dartmouth, and Johns Hopkins.

Senior Editor Radley Balko spoke with McCardell in October.

**Q:** Why lower the drinking age?

**A:** We've had a law on the books for 24 years now. You don't need an advanced degree to see that the law has utterly failed. Seventy-five percent of high school seniors have consumed alcohol. Sixty-six percent of high school sophomores have.

The law abridges the age of majority. It hasn't reduced consumption but has only made it riskier. Finally, it has disenfranchised parents and removed any opportunity for adults to educate or to model responsible behavior about alcohol.

**Q:** Do you favor setting the federal drinking age at 18 or removing federal involvement altogether?

**A:** I would defer to the Constitution, which gives the federal government no authority to set a national federal drinking age at all. It's clearly supposed to be left to the states. So the first thing we need to do is cut out the 10 percent penalty [in federal highway funds to states that refuse to adopt the minimum age of 21], then let the states make their own policies.

**Q:** Supporters of the law say it has led to a reduction in highway fatalities.

**A:** If you look at the graphs for about 30 seconds, you might draw that conclusion. There has been a decline in traffic fatalities. But it began in 1982, two years before the law changed. It has basically been flat or inching upward for the last decade.

More interestingly, the decline has come in every age group, not just people between 18 and 21. And if you look at Canada, where the minimum drinking age is 18 or 19 [depending on the province], the trend in

highway fatalities has almost exactly paralleled ours. It's far more likely that the reduction in deaths is due to seat belt use, airbags, and safer cars.

**Q:** How has Mothers Against Drunk Driving responded to the Amethyst Initiative?

**A:** MADD's response has been disappointing and is unbecoming for an organization as revered as they are. They spammed the email boxes of college presidents, called them "shirkers," and encouraged parents not to send their kids to those colleges. All this for nothing more than a call for discussion. If this question is as settled as they say it is, why such an exaggerated response?

I think their tactics backfired. MADD tried to bully these presidents into removing their names. We lost three presidents as a result, but we gained 20 more. And I think it actually strengthened the resolve of the presidents who stayed on.

**Q:** MADD and other opponents of your objectives say the college presidents are just trying to pass on their own responsibility to enforce the minimum drinking age. But is it really a college president's responsibility to enforce criminal law?

**A:** That's a great point. It's about as logical as asking a couple of state troopers to come onto campus to teach calculus.

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