

drinking to EXCESS

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Illustrations By Scott Swales

An off-campus, alcohol-fueled riot last spring confirmed what University officials and others have known for a long time—student binge drinking is a big problem. But through a long-term comprehensive approach to prevention, SU hopes to break the bottle's destructive grip on student life.

It was like a scene from the 1960s, with a defiant crowd of Syracuse University students chanting, "Hell no, we won't go." Shattered beer bottles carpeted the street, illegal bonfires nipped at power lines, and police marched through in riot gear. While its intensity rivaled a protest over the Vietnam War, this violent clash on May 1 addressed a more domestic issue: the students' right to party.

At Livingstock '99, an off-campus block party and music festival held in the Livingston Avenue area, revelers turned into rioters when the Syracuse police arrived and announced—by almost all accounts, politely—that the block party permit expired at 10 p.m. Instead of dispersing, many in the alcohol-fueled crowd of 1,000 students and others challenged the police. For three intense hours party-goers hurled insults, obscenities, and beer bottles at the authorities. They stoked bonfires with tree branches, mattresses, and lawn furniture, then formed a human barricade to keep firefighters at bay. Finally, at 1 a.m., a reinforcement squad of 50 police arrived to quell what had become a full-scale riot.

By the end of the night, 39 people, including 15 Syracuse University and 7 SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry students, had been arrested on charges ranging from littering to rioting in the first degree, a Class E felony. Although charges have been dropped against some students, others still face University judicial and criminal court proceedings. "We are very fortunate that a neighborhood didn't go up in flames and that no one was seriously hurt," says Barry L. Wells, SU's vice president for student affairs and dean of student relations, and the University's senior officer on matters related to alcohol and other drug abuse. "You can analyze this a million different ways, but

the bottom line is that this mob behavior was sparked by the excessive consumption of alcohol."

As one student pointed out, there was no reason for it. "The police gave us every chance to behave," Michael Stein '99 told *The Syracuse Newspapers*.

The Syracuse event, however, was not an isolated incident. Students nationwide are protesting the growing war against campus alcohol abuse. On May 1, 1998, 3,000 Michigan State University students revolted when alcohol was banned at a popular tailgating site. The same semester, 2,000 students at Ohio University confronted police when daylight-saving time deprived them of an extra hour of drinking.

While colleges and universities voice concerns about the full spectrum of alcohol and other drug abuse, their current focal point is binge drinking. A 1998 Harvard University School of Public Health alcohol study of more than 14,000 students at 116 colleges and universities found that 43 percent were binge drinkers, and 20 percent were frequent binge drinkers. For students in fraternities and sororities, the binge drinking rate was 81 percent. (The Harvard study defined a binge drinker as a male student who consumed at least five drinks and a female student who had four or more drinks in one sitting in the two weeks before the survey.) The research also found that the number of problems college students experience increases significantly when they binge drink. Many college students consider Harvard's definition an overreaction, but few deny that heavy drinking is a common occurrence. "Today's students don't go out to have a drink, they go out to get drunk," says Margaret Kip '99. "It's stereotypically what you do in college."

Moderation



On the heels of the Harvard study, *Time* magazine calculated that “America’s 12 million undergraduates drink 4 billion cans of beer a year, averaging 55 six-packs apiece.” More ominous still were the widely publicized, alcohol-linked deaths of 18 college students in 1996 and 1997. This sobering figure included a Louisiana State University fraternity pledge who had been lightheartedly wheeled out of a bar in a shopping cart after consuming an estimated 24 drinks. He died of alcohol poisoning a few hours later.

This past year at SU, a 19-year-old student nearly died after a night of drinking at a Marshall Street bar. The next morning, he was found in his room unconscious, with a blood-alcohol level of .46 percent—almost five times the legal limit for driving while intoxicated. “When I say that binge drinking is the most dangerous problem on our campus today, I do not exaggerate,” Wells says. “These are life and death situations. Alcohol kills more than brain cells. It interferes with our sense of community. It undermines our mission and core values. We are doing everything in our power to deal with this dragon.”

In 1996, Syracuse University conducted a compre-

hensive student survey and established its binge drinking rate at 43 percent. The survey also revealed that the University’s rate for marijuana use was 41 percent. A follow-up survey in 1999 showed the binge drinking rate at 49 percent, and marijuana use at 51 percent. The marijuana rates helped SU focus its prevention and intervention efforts on alcohol and other drugs. The importance of this inclusive focus was underscored in 1997, when an SU student fell to his death from a residence hall window. According to authorities, he was under the influence of drugs. “Some of my colleagues at other institutions collect data like this and hide it, because of the public relations problem,” Wells says. “At Syracuse University, this issue is not taboo. This is powerful information. We see it as a tool for effecting change.”

Wells concedes that most American universities, including SU, have a history of benign neglect toward the issue of alcohol abuse. Until 1985 the legal drinking age in New York State was 18, and the University had little control over students’ alcohol consumption. When the drinking age was raised to 21, SU tightened its alcohol policy, yet continued its *laissez-faire* ap-

proach. "I don't remember any semblance of regulation," says alumna Dessa Bergen-Cico '86, G'88, G'92, director of the Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement (SAPHE) Office at SU. "There were rules on the books, but kegs in the dorms. The times were different, and nobody identified it as a problem."

Instilling a Culture of Change

In the late 1980s, however, it became clear that excessive drinking was a problem. When the University took a close look at such issues as hazing, sexual assault, and violence in residence halls, it found that these dangerous behaviors almost always occurred in the presence of alcohol. A University task force on student rights and responsibilities and a subsequent task force on alcohol and substance abuse finally brought these issues center stage in 1994. Every year since then, the University has stepped up its effort to curb alcohol and substance abuse. According to Wells, SU has been in the vanguard of institutions addressing this problem. The University now has a comprehensive campus effort directed by the SAPHE Office, a proactive Chancellor's Commission on Substance Abuse and Campus Security, and a 12-point plan of attack that approaches the issue from all angles. There are clear policies regarding the illegal and excessive use of alcohol and other drugs—and a fortified University Judicial System to deal with violations. There are intervention and prevention programs, including a social norms campaign introduced this fall. There are alcohol-free social events and specific housing options for students who wish to entirely avoid these influences. And there's the Syracuse

Area College Community Coalition that's tackling off-campus elements of the problem, including underage drinking in local taverns.

Because of such actions, Syracuse University is well-equipped to deal with recent federal legislation that's sending some campuses reeling. The Higher Education Act Amendments of 1998 (HEA), which affect colleges and universities that receive federal funding, require colleges to address alcohol and other drug issues on several fronts, including following strict guidelines for establishing substance-abuse prevention programs, and allowing them to disclose information to parents and legal guardians when a student under age 21 commits a violation regarding alcohol or drug use or possession. Syracuse University meets or is in the process of meeting the stipulations of the HEA, which also includes the College Initiative to Reduce Binge Drinking and Illegal Alcohol Consumption. The initiative, a non-binding

resolution sponsored by U.S. Senator Joseph Biden G'68 of Delaware, encourages college administrators to "change the culture of alcohol consumption" on their campuses.

A first-year student enrolling at SU in fall 1998 encountered an atmosphere much changed since the eighties. Settling into Sadler Hall last year, Michelle

Elias '02 realized SU was "dead serious" about enforcing its substance-abuse policies. "I've visited other colleges where there are kegs in dorm lounges, and students walk around with open beer bottles," she says. "At SU, this is not permitted in any residence hall. If you're underage and caught in a student's room where there's beer, you're guilty by association."

Last year, SU unveiled a new Policy on Alcohol, Other Drugs, and Tobacco that was three years in the crafting. An equally comprehensive Code of Student Conduct spells out behaviors expected of students and the judicial consequences, which range from a warning to suspension or expulsion. While alert to violations, residence halls are not hyperfocused on uncovering policy infractions. "If our resident advisors (RAs) were cast strictly as enforcers, this would severely hamper their roles as resource people, mentors, and facilitators," explains Adrea L. Jaehnig, associate director of residence life. "We follow New York State standards regarding the right to search."

Jen Doherty '99, president of the Student Government Association in 1997 and a resident advisor during her sophomore year, knows the issue well. "I remember going through the halls once, knocking on doors for a floor meeting," she says.

"At one door, they asked me in. I found a group of freshmen playing a drinking game. How could I have any authority as an RA if I didn't write them up? They knew the rules."

Resident advisors, especially in first-year residence halls, are on the front lines of the University's battle against underage drinking. When behavior gets out of hand, public safety officers are available, and the SU Ambulance (SUA) is on call for medical emergencies.

Last year, SUA responded to 135 calls related to student intoxication, according to Bob Audet '90, manager of emergency medical services. "During one February weekend, seven out of eight calls were alcohol-related," he says, "and three students required advanced life-support backup from city ambulance crews."

SUA crews follow strict protocols for treating intoxicated students. Those with blood-alcohol levels above .30 percent are usually transported to a hospital emergency department. With blood-alcohol levels

Consequences

Influence

between .10 and .30 and no other injuries or drugs involved, students may be transported to the Health Center under a program called MISSHAP (Monitoring of Intoxicated Students; Support and Health Assessment Program), a bedside watch for intoxicated students. After several hours, the student is usually transported home, with recommendations for fluids, nutrition, and rest. After MISSHAP observation, some

Prevention

students have complained about what they perceive as interference in their personal lives, Jaehnig reports. "Students ask us, 'Why didn't you just let me sleep it off?' We tell them this is not a risk we want to take. We're well aware of students on other campuses who have died because someone let them sleep it off."

Students who reach the point of endangering themselves or others, destroying property, breaking the law, or otherwise crossing the clearly marked lines in the Code of Student Conduct, are charged with violations and referred to the University Judicial System. According to Anastasia L. Urtz, director of judicial affairs, the number of conduct violations doubled in the past academic year, from 803 to 1,601 cases. Among these cases, 917 were connected to alcohol, while another 105 involved other drugs, most commonly marijuana. "Since we're still identifying the scope of our substance-abuse problem, we expect these numbers to go up before they go down," says Bergen-Cico. "We believe we're looking at four to five years at least before numbers fall and we see a significant shift in the alcohol and drug culture on this campus."

Students charged with serious or repeated violations may be referred to Options, a short-term counseling and education

Awareness

program that helps them confront substance abuse. During the 1998-99 academic year, 250 students were seen in the Options program; while walk-ins are welcome, the "overwhelming majority" were first-year white males referred through the University Judicial System. "We don't deal with the students in a punitive format or label anyone an alcoholic or addict," Bergen-Cico says. "Our program encourages students to be honest with themselves, set their own goals, and modify their behavior."

Options's non-threatening approach reflects a growing trend. "Many people who work with campus substance-abuse issues have changed their strategy regarding abstinence versus moderation," notes psychology professor Kate Carey, who has published extensively on alcohol abuse. "We don't say, 'Do Not Drink.' We ask students to drink less and avoid dan-

gerous scenarios. Students relate to this approach."

Wells agrees that just saying no doesn't work. "We're not recreating Prohibition, we're providing useful information about the risks students are taking," he says. "But make no mistake—as an institution of higher education, we have a responsibility to enforce laws regarding the illegal use of alcohol and other drugs."

Fraternity and sorority members and student athletes, shown to be at higher risk than other students for abuse of alcohol and other drugs, receive special attention to lower that risk. At SU, new Greek members must take Alcohol 101, a two-hour seminar on the dangers of alcohol abuse. The seminar includes a visit to a virtual bar on CD-ROM, where students pretend to consume drinks with varying alcohol content and watch their blood-alcohol levels rise. "The Greek community paid attention to this problem before the entire University focused on it," reports Paul Buckley, SU's program coordinator for Greek life. In 1998, 49 SU students attended the Greek Summit on College Alcohol Use, facilitated by Michael Haines of Northern Illinois University, a national expert on reducing high-risk drinking. Sorority houses at SU are alcohol-free, and fraternity houses reduce the risk of alcohol abuse by adhering to University policies. Greek parties, for instance, must be registered with SU, beer must be served in bottles and cans—no kegs—and a security person must be hired to check proof of age. "I wouldn't say the system is perfect, but Greek students are aware of the issues, and Greek leaders are encouraging responsible behavior by their peers," Buckley says.

On the athletics front, Syracuse has submitted a proposal for an NCAA CHOICES grant to implement an athlete-targeted alcohol education program. According to the Higher Education

Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, student athletes have the highest binge drinking rates among students on college campuses. Athletics advisor Kenneth Miles suspects that some student athletes drink to escape a double dose of pressure from academics and athletics, and others drink because of peer pressure. Bergen-Cico, a former student athlete, believes student athletes are also prone to pushing themselves to extremes. "Some do everything to excess," she says, "including self-destructive drinking."

High-risk students, however, aren't the only ones targeted for prevention. The SAPHE Office develops educational programs for the campus at large, with a full calendar of residence hall workshops, public information campaigns, and an alcohol awareness week. It also sponsors a peer education program. "If anyone can get through to a student, it's another stu-



dent,” says peer educator Robyn Enes ’00. “We understand that college is a time for partying and experimentation. Instead of just condemning drinking, we explain its benefits and risks.”

This fall, the SAPHE Office is launching an ambitious multimedia campaign to reverse the freshman perception that heavy drinking is the college norm. “The actual level of high-risk drinking is lower than many students think,” Wells says. “When freshmen learn that excessive drinking is not as widespread as they assumed, they begin to live down to the actual levels. This social norms approach has been proven to affect the behavior of traditional college-age students.”

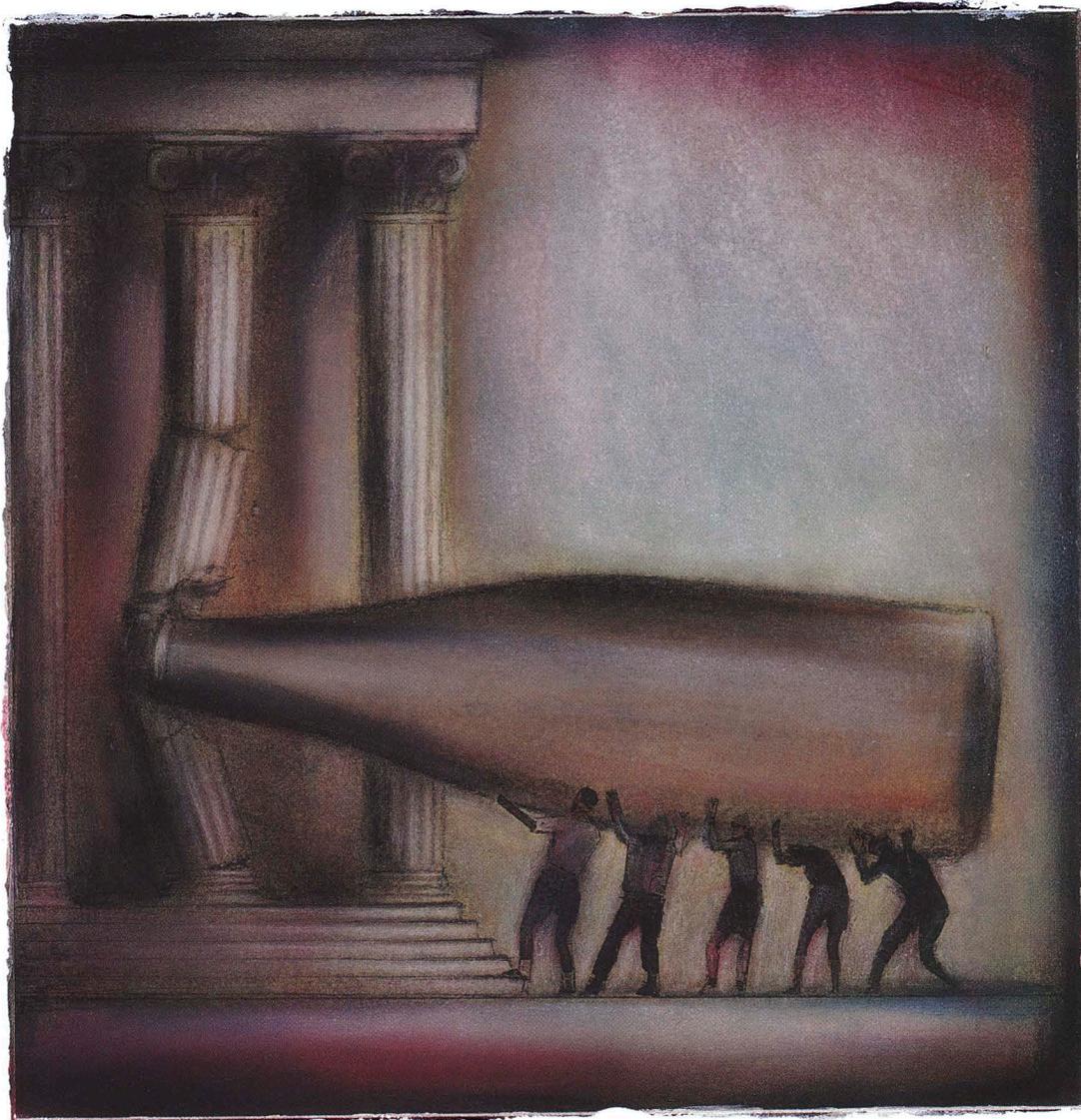
The University’s social norms campaign is funded by a grant from the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS). Ten New York State colleges and universities have received grants from the OASAS College Norm Misperceptions Program. After their campaigns have been implemented and assessed, the best ideas will be passed along to colleges and universities nationwide. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has funded a similar program on a national level, granting \$8.6

million to six universities with the highest binge drinking rates.

Increasing Social Options

When it comes to curbing alcohol and other drug abuse, education isn’t the only answer. The University also is increasing alcohol-free social options to stem the tide of students heading for bars and beer parties. “More will be accomplished by entertaining students than by educating them about alcohol,” says Mark Chorazak ’00, student representative to SU’s Board of Trustees. “What drives students to leave their rooms at night is a need to socialize. The University needs more creative, interactive activities, but it should steer away from marketing these activities as alcohol-free. It’s noble, but it’s the kiss of death if you’re trying to reach out to students embedded in the alcohol culture. You have to gear your marketing toward how much fun the event will be.”

Since the University is eager to fund more social activities, “students should stop complaining and step forward with ideas,” Chorazak says. “Perc Place, a cof-



fee house with live music in the Schine Student Center, is student-driven. And two years ago, some freshmen came up with the idea of keeping Archbold Gymnasium open until 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. A lot of people take advantage of that. Students don't go out until late in the evening, so a midnight basketball game or comedy show is great."

Wells appreciates such student input. "We understand that students want more social options," he says. "We're listening, and we're starting to invest in their ideas."

While many hearts sank at the news of Livingstock '99, the confrontation may yet play a positive role. The students captured on police videotape—dancing around leaping fires, screaming obscenities, and hurling beer bottles—could serve as prime examples for why it's unwise to consume alcohol in excess. "Alcohol acts on the emotional centers of the brain and disables the cognitive centers," says social work professor Paul Caldwell. "It impairs judgment and causes people to act out more primitive emotions that result in violence and aggression. It simply takes away

your ability to inhibit emotions and think clearly."

Jen Doherty watched the Livingstock '99 riot from a friend's porch. At first, the spectacle frightened her; soon she became embarrassed and then angry. "Livingstock took planning and effort," she says. "It was a great time to walk around and see friends at the end of the year. But the students who drank too much wrecked it for everyone. It was shocking to see that students ready to graduate from college could behave like that. They dragged our school's name through the mud, and ruined a nice tradition. And for what?"

Many students, at SU and nationwide, are asking the same question—and coming to the conclusion that binge drinking makes no sense. "Although riots and outrageous behavior make newspaper headlines, the majority of college students do not engage in binge drinking," Wells says. "In fact, more students than ever before are participating in volunteer activities and service learning. Students also are taking the lead in helping to create campus communities in which excessive drinking is considered socially unacceptable.

"It may take time," Wells concludes, "but many students are ready to change the campus drinking culture."

parental guidance ADVISED

It has long been believed that students learned to drink—or at least to “party hearty”—after they arrived at college. But recent research at SU and nationwide shows that heavy drinking and drug use usually begin in high school, if not in junior high. Since 1993, high school binge drinking has been steadily increasing, to 31 percent in 1997. The landmark 1998 Harvard study found that “a major determinant of college binge drinking is students’ alcohol use while they were in high school.” A survey of SU’s Class of 2002 revealed that 85 percent were drinking in high school or earlier, 22 percent were habitually binge drinking before college, and 40 percent habitually used marijuana. “Parents often deny that this behavior starts at home,” says Barry L. Wells, vice president for student affairs and dean of student relations. “They would prefer to blame the University. But we’re now having candid conversations with parents during summer orientation. Most are shocked to learn that a majority of students arrive at SU with a pattern of using alcohol and other drugs.”

The University now asks parents to join its substance-abuse prevention effort. Each summer, Wells sends parents of incoming students a memo titled “You’re Not Done Yet.” In

it, he offers advice on approaching students about these issues. “You assume parents talk to their children about these behaviors, but sometimes they don’t know where to begin,” says Dessa Bergen-Cico ’86, G’88, G’92, director of the Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement Office.

Oscar Pinoargotte ’00, who keeps a watch on intoxicated students at the Health Center as a volunteer, reports that “the number-one worry when students check out of the Health Center after observation for intoxication is: ‘Will my parents find out about this?’”

Soon, the University may approach parents up front when their children are involved in alcohol- or drug-related violations of the Code of Student Conduct. “In the past, federal privacy laws prevented us from notifying parents until their students were suspended, expelled, or removed from University housing,” Wells says. “The 1998 Higher Education Act opens the door for earlier parental involvement, which may help students head off bigger problems. Parents don’t send their children off to college to be hospitalized—or to die. The University is doing everything in its power to enforce the law, alter the environment, and educate students about high-risk behavior. But to win this battle, we need everyone’s involvement—students, faculty, staff, local businesses, law enforcement, and parents.”

Responsibility

what propels such risky BEHAVIOR?

Few deny that binge drinking is in vogue on college campuses. But it’s difficult to explain why students with such bright futures engage in such risky behavior. What starts students sipping is often a simple need to relax around other students. “Alcohol loosens you up and makes it easier to talk to other people,” says Dane Martinez ’02. Then there’s peer pressure, especially freshman year. “Freshmen like to travel in herds,” adds Mark Chorazak ’00. “More than anything, they want to fit in with other students.”

According to Jen Doherty ’99, it’s easy to spot the first-year students every fall, walking around in groups as large as 40, looking for off-campus house parties with beer. “It’s your first time away from home. You can stay out all night if you want. You’re experimenting with how much you can handle,” she says. “By sophomore year, the party and bar scene usually gets a little old. Careers and grades become more important. Then senioritis kicks in, and many students return to reckless habits.”

Margaret Kip ’99, who drank less and less as her college career progressed, is perplexed by alcohol’s hold over high-functioning students. “I see students who excel academically and contribute to the community in amazing ways spend personal time in such negative behaviors,” she says. “I don’t understand it.”

Neither do the SU professionals who address this problem. But they have theories. Barry L. Wells, vice president for student affairs and dean of student relations, suspects the liberalism of the late sixties and early seventies has shaped the students of the nineties. “The parents of our students came of

age during the civil rights movement, Vietnam, the sexual revolution, Watergate. Some of them were continually challenging the norms of society by wearing long hair, experimenting with drugs, and involving themselves in the social issues of the times,” he says. “Many found it hypocritical to take a hard line when they raised their children. Perhaps that’s why these children are more open to experimentation and more challenging of authority when it comes to issues like alcohol and other drugs.”

Social work professor Paul Caldwell believes “our culture of excess” sets the stage for this reckless behavior. “We’ve taken off the constraints,” he says. “There’s more stress and less accountability. We also market things in extreme ways, to the point of hedonism.” When you combine these external extremes with a personal need to numb feelings with alcohol, Caldwell says, “you create a very dynamic risk picture.”

Anastasia L. Urtz, director of judicial affairs, agrees with Caldwell, believing such behavior is a reflection of our society. She also notes that stress plays a role. “These students function at very high levels,” she says. “They feel tremendous pressure to succeed and yet a tremendous need to escape this pressure.”

Dessa Bergen-Cico ’86, G’88, G’92, director of the Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement Office, also sees large cultural issues looming behind today’s industrial-strength drinking. “Some of this is about the demise of intact families, the deterioration of community standards and personal responsibility, and the decline in spiritual foundations,” she says. “Many of our students are dealing with these losses. We recognize such risk factors for substance abuse among secondary school-age children, but fail to acknowledge that these are still factors among college students.”