

SLATE

WHAT WOMEN REALLY THINK ABOUT NEWS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE.

OCT. 15 2013 11:55 PM

College Women: Stop Getting Drunk

It's closely associated with sexual assault. And yet we're reluctant to tell women to stop doing it.

By Emily Yoffe



Young women are getting a distorted message that their right to match men drink for drink is a feminist issue.

Photo by Luca Francesco Giovanni Bertolli/iStock/Thinkstock

In one awful high-profile case after another—the U.S. Naval Academy; Steubenville, Ohio; now the allegations in Maryville, Mo.—we read about a young woman, sometimes only a girl, who goes to a party and ends up being raped. As soon as the school year begins, so do reports of female students sexually assaulted by their male classmates. A common denominator in these cases is alcohol, often copious amounts, enough to render the young woman incapacitated. But a misplaced

fear of blaming the victim has made it somehow unacceptable to warn inexperienced young women that when they get wasted, they are putting themselves in potential peril.

A 2009 [study of campus sexual assault](#) found that by the time they are seniors, almost 20 percent of college women will become victims, overwhelmingly of a fellow classmate. Very few will ever report it to authorities. The same study states that more than 80 percent of campus sexual assaults involve alcohol. Frequently both the man and the woman have been drinking. The men tend to use the drinking to justify their behavior, as [this survey of research on alcohol-related campus sexual assault](#) by Antonia Abbey, professor of psychology at Wayne State University, illustrates, while for many of the women, having been drunk becomes a source of guilt and shame. Sometimes the woman is the only one drunk and runs into a particular type of shrewd—and sober—sexual predator who lurks where women drink like a lion at a watering hole. For these kinds of men, [the rise of female binge drinking](#) has made campuses a prey-rich environment. I've spoken to three recent college graduates who were the victims of such assailants, and their stories are chilling.

Let's be totally clear: Perpetrators are the ones responsible for committing their crimes, and they should be brought to justice. But we are failing to let women know that when they render themselves defenseless, terrible things can be done to them. Young women are getting a distorted message that their right to match men drink for drink is a feminist issue. The real feminist message should be that when you lose the ability to be responsible for yourself, you drastically increase the chances that you will attract the kinds of people who, shall we say, don't have your best interest at heart. That's not blaming the victim; that's trying to prevent more victims.

Experts I spoke to who wanted young women to get this information said they were aware of how loaded it has become to give warnings to women about their behavior. "I'm always feeling defensive that my main advice is: 'Protect yourself. Don't make yourself vulnerable to the point of losing your cognitive faculties,'" says [Anne Coughlin](#), a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, who has written on rape and teaches feminist jurisprudence. She adds that by not telling them the truth—that they are responsible for keeping their wits about them—she worries that we are "infantilizing women."

The "[Campus Sexual Assault Study](#)" of 2007, undertaken for the Department of Justice, found that the popular belief that many young rape victims have been slipped "date rape" drugs is false. "Most sexual assaults occur after voluntary consumption of alcohol by the victim and assailant," the report states. But the researchers noted that this crucial point is not being articulated to young and naïve women: "Despite the link between substance abuse and sexual assault it appears that few sexual assault and/or risk reduction programs address the relationship between substance use and sexual assault." The report added, somewhat plaintively, "Students may also be unaware of the image of vulnerability projected by a visibly intoxicated individual."

"I'm not saying a woman is responsible for being sexually victimized," says [Christopher Krebs](#), one of the authors of that study and others on campus sexual assault. "But when your judgment is compromised, your risk is elevated of having sexual violence perpetrated against you."

The culture of binge drinking—whose pinnacle is the college campus—does not just harm women. [Surveys find that more than 40 percent](#) of college students binge drink, defined by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) as consuming five or more drinks for a man and four or more for a woman in about two hours. Of those drinkers, many end their sessions on gurneys: The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [estimates](#) that about 600,000 students a year are injured

due to their drinking, and about 700,000 are assaulted by a classmate in a drunken encounter. Some end up on slabs: About 1,800 students a year die as a consequence of alcohol intake.

The site [Compelled to Act](#), started by the grief-stricken father of a college-student daughter who died because of a drunken snowmobile accident, keeps a tally of alcohol-related death, including reports of students who perish due to alcohol overdoses, falls, and drownings. The typical opening weeks of school (except perhaps at Brigham Young University) result in stories like [this one](#) at the University of Maryland: In the first three weeks of the semester, 24 students were taken to the hospital for alcohol-related causes. Then police were called to an off-campus bar known for serving freshmen to investigate a stabbing involving underage students.

I don't believe any of these statistics will move in the right direction until binge drinking joins smoking, drunk driving, and domestic abuse as behaviors that were once typical and are now unacceptable. Reducing binge drinking is going to require education, enforcement, and a change in campus social culture. These days the weekend stretches over half the week and [front-loading](#) and [boot and rally](#) are major extracurricular activities. Puking in your hair, peeing in your pants, and engaging in dangerous behaviors have to stop being considered hilarious escapades or proud war stories and become a source of disgust and embarrassment.

As a parent with a daughter heading off to college next year, I've noted with dismay that in some college guidebooks almost as much space is devoted to alcohol as academics. School spirit is one thing, but according to [The Insider's Guide to the Colleges](#), when the University of Florida plays Florida State University, "Die-hard gator fans start drinking at 8 am. No joke." I guess I'm supposed to be reassured to read that at the University of Idaho, "Not everyone is an alcoholic."

"High-risk alcohol use is the one thing connected to all, and I mean *all*, the negative impacts in higher education," says [Peter Lake](#), director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University College of Law and author of [The Rights and Responsibilities of the Modern University](#). He cites the problems of early student attrition and perpetually disappointing graduation rates.

I've told my daughter that it's her responsibility to take steps to protect herself. ("I hear you! Stop!") [The biological reality](#) is that women do not metabolize alcohol the same way as men, and that means drink for drink women will get drunker faster. I tell her I know alcohol will be widely available (even though it's illegal for most college students) but that she'll have a good chance of knowing what's going on around her if she limits herself to no more than two drinks, sipped slowly—no shots!—and stays away from notorious punch bowls. If female college students start moderating their drinking as a way of looking out for their own self-interest—and looking out for your own self-interest should be a primary feminist principle—I hope their restraint trickles down to the men.

If I had a son, I would tell him that it's in his self-interest not to be the drunken frat boy who finds himself accused of raping a drunken classmate. Surely [this University of Richmond](#) student, acquitted in one of the extremely rare cases in which a campus rape accusation led to a criminal trial, would confirm that.

The federal government has taken steps to acknowledge the campus sexual assault problem by using the [pressure of Title IX](#), which prevents sex discrimination in education, to require schools to improve programs to protect students from sexual assault and to deal more effectively with it. (Occidental College students filed a Title IX [complaint against the school](#) after administrators

allowed a serial rapist to continue his studies.) **Educating students about rape**, teaching them that by definition a very drunk woman can't consent to sex, is crucial. Also important are **bystander** programs that instruct students in how to intervene to prevent sexual assault on drunk classmates and about the need to get dangerously intoxicated ones medical treatment.

But nothing is going to be as effective at preventing alcohol-facilitated assaults as a reduction in alcohol consumption. The 2009 campus sexual assault study, co-authored by Krebs, found campus alcohol education programs "seldom emphasize the important link" between women's voluntary alcohol and drug use "and becoming a victim of sexual assault." It goes on to say students must get the explicit message that limiting alcohol intake and avoiding drugs "are important sexual assault sex protection strategies." I think it would be beneficial for younger students to hear accounts of alcohol-facilitated sexual assault from female juniors and seniors who've lived through it.

Collective intoxication is intoxicating, one of the reasons that it's been so difficult to reduce the amount of binge drinking on campuses.

Of course, perpetrators should be caught and punished. But when you are dealing with intoxication and sex, there are the built-in complications of incomplete memories and differing interpretations of intent and consent. To establish if a driver is too drunk to be behind the wheel, all it takes is a quick test to see if his or her blood alcohol exceeds the legal limit. There isn't such clarity when it comes to alcohol and sex. According to "**Prosecuting Alcohol-Facilitated Sexual Assault**," a study by the National District Attorneys Association: "Generally, there is not a bright-line test for showing that the victim was too intoxicated to consent, thereby distinguishing sexual assault from drunken sex." Bringing these cases is, the study notes, "an extreme challenge." And college student victims rarely turn to law enforcement. Instead, often days later, they bring a complaint to campus authorities to adjudicate.

Some think changing the campus drinking culture requires lowering the drinking age from 21 years. **The Amethyst Initiative**, started by chancellors and presidents of universities and colleges, and the group **Choose Responsibility** both make the case that since most college drinking is illegal, that gives it the allure of the forbidden, encourages excess, and increases danger because students are reluctant to turn to the authorities when drinking gets out of hand. But changing the drinking age is a policy that's gotten little traction.

Lake says that administrators often take an overly simplistic approach to curbing alcohol consumption. In the 1990s that meant crackdowns, which he says sent a lot of drinking off campus, probably elevating the risks. He says binge drinking is so entrenched it requires a multifaceted approach that includes coercion, enforcement, and social engineering. For example, he says weekends often begin on Thursday because many colleges have few, if any, Friday classes. "In the alcohol wars, you can see where battlefields are and where booze has beaten the academy," he says. "The academic program has receded, and they've given up on Friday." He says a full day of classes should be scheduled on Friday, and it should be a standard day for tests and exams. He says since millennials (like young people forever) keep vampire hours, unless there are evening alternatives on campus, those purveying alcohol will win.

And who is it purveying alcohol? In some cases it's a type of serial predator who encourages his victim to keep pouring the means of her incapacitation down her own throat. Researchers such as Abbey and **David Lisak** have explored how these men use alcohol, instead of violence, to commit their crimes. Lake observes that these offenders can be campus leaders, charming and well liked—

something that comes in handy if they are accused of anything. “They work our mythology against us,” says Lake. “We would like to see our daughters hang out with nice boys in navy blue blazers.”

The three young women I spoke to who were victims of such men attended different colleges, but their stories are so distressingly similar that it sounds as if they were attacked by the same young man. In each case the woman lost track of how much she’d had to drink. Then a male classmate she knew took her by the hand and offered her an escort. Then she was raped by this “friend.” Only one, **Laura Dunn**, reported to authorities what happened, more than a year after the fact. In her case she was set upon by two classmates, and the university declined to take action against either one.

One of the rape victims was a senior who had been to a school-sponsored celebration where the wine flowed, then everyone went to a bar to continue the festivities. Her memories are fragmentary after that, but a male classmate came by. She remembers running down the street with him, then being in bed, then waking up the next day with her clothes inside out. She was sickened at herself for what she thought was cheating on her longtime boyfriend and confessed her infidelity to him. Ultimately that led to their breakup.

As she dealt with her shame and guilt, she talked to friends about that night, and the real story emerged. She was so intoxicated that her friends were worried about her when she stumbled out of the bar disoriented and without her shoes. They said they saw her being led away by the male classmate who was not drunk. She came to understand that she had been raped. “Since I realized it wasn’t my fault, I crawled out of a deep, dark hole,” she says. She also knew he’d done it before. “He had this reputation if you were going to be drunk around him, he was probably going to have sex with you.”

The young woman laments the whole campus landscape of alcohol-soaked hookup sex. “Women are encouraged to do it, which ignores all the risks for us,” she says. “You get embarrassed and ashamed, so you try to make light of it. Then women get violated and degraded, and they accept it. Who does this culture benefit? Alcohol predators. It doesn’t liberate anybody.”

I get what all the **beer bongs**, **flip cup**, **power hours**, even **butt chugging** is about. (OK, maybe not butt chugging.) It’s fun. In *Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party So Hard*, Ohio University sociologist Thomas Vander Ven got an inside look at what he calls “the shit show.” He writes, “To some university students, the decision to drink at college is a redundancy. To them, college means drinking.” Vander Ven documents the pleasure that group intoxication brings: the suppression of inhibitions and self-consciousness, the collective hilarity, the thrill of engaging in potentially perilous adventures, and the sense of camaraderie. Even nursing hangovers and regrets becomes a group endeavor, a mutual post-battle support group. Collective intoxication is intoxicating, one of the reasons that it’s been so difficult to reduce the amount of binge drinking on campuses.

I know many people will reflect on their own bacchanalian college experiences with nostalgia and say the excesses didn’t hurt them—at least what they’re able to remember. So I will present myself as an example that it’s possible to have fun without being drunk. I enjoy moderate drinking and have only been hung over three times in my life. I have never been so drunk that I browned out, blacked out, passed out, or puked from alcohol ingestion. Still, as a young person, I did my share of fun, crazy, silly, stupid, and ill-advised things. But at least I always knew that I was responsible for my behavior, not the alcohol.

Lake says that it is unrealistic to expect colleges will ever be great at catching and punishing sexual predators; that's simply not their core mission. Colleges are supposed to be places where young people learn to be responsible for themselves. Lake says, "The biggest change in going to college is that you have to understand safety begins with you. For better or worse, fair or not, just or not, the consequences will fall on your head." I'll drink (one drink) to that.

Emily Yoffe is a regular *Slate* contributor. She writes the Dear Prudence column. You can reach her at prudence@slate.com.