



Experts assess recent alcohol collaborative

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While various organizations and experts that focus on addressing underage drinking have praised Dartmouth's newly announced Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking, some question how the initiative will work with current campaigns to promote alcohol safety and whether the initiative's members possess the requisite experience needed to successfully address underage drinking on college campuses.

The College announced on May 2 that it would to collaborate with 13 other colleges and universities on a new initiative to address alcohol use on campuses across the country, The Dartmouth previously reported.

Various public health officials interviewed by The Dartmouth agree that the Collaborative represents a positive step in addressing on-campus alcohol issues. James Bryant, Mothers Against Drunk Driving's national program director, praised the Collaborative for using data to understand high-risk drinking.

"MADD has always advocated for implementing evidence-based strategies for reducing underage drinking," Bryant said.

Evaluating the existing best practices represents a practical approach to the issue, according to Donald Zeigler, director of prevention and healthy lifestyles at the American Medical Association and former deputy director of the "A Matter of Degree" program, which encourages collaboration between colleges and their communities.

"There's no magic bullet," Zeigler said. "You have to think about the whole context and the whole community."

Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and director of Hobart's Alcohol Education Project, said he favored the Collaborative's approach but questioned whether the institutions involved have launched any successful programs of their own. Several participating institutions — including Boston University and Cornell University — have experienced significant alcohol problems on their campuses and have not been able to successfully address them, Perkins said.

"The studies coming out of Cornell have been things that have not been working for them," he said.

It is important that the Collaborative involve schools that possess valuable information to share with each other, Perkins said.

"The bottom line is, has the school used a strategy that's produced reductions in high-risk drinking and related problems and has it been documented in some way?" Perkins said.

College President Jim Young Kim is not the first Dartmouth president to attempt to address dangerous drinking habits. In 2008, former College President James Wright signed Dartmouth onto the Amethyst Initiative — a letter signed by over 130 college and university presidents that advocates lowering the national drinking age from 21 to 18, The Dartmouth previously reported.

Despite different program focuses, the Amethyst Initiative and the Collaborative do not necessarily conflict with each other, according to Barrett Seaman, the president of Choose Responsibility, which launched the Amethyst Initiative.

“We’re hoping that this new Collaborative is going to be more open-minded and get a broader set of data,” he said.

Other experts disagree with the Amethyst Initiative’s main goal and applaud the Collaborative for working on programs that still acknowledge the current legal drinking age. The Collaborative is a “terrific step” toward investigating the alcohol consumption patterns on campuses, according to Toben Nelson, a professor at University of Minnesota’s School of Public Health who served as an evaluator of Harvard University’s School of Public Health’s College Alcohol Study. Nelson said he opposes the shift in drinking age proposed by the Amethyst Initiative.

“Moving toward 18 as the drinking age would be a disaster from a public policy perspective,” Nelson said.

Nelson contrasted the Collaborative with previous educational and judicial approaches that have not been successful.

“Colleges really have to be directly involved in the effort to improve the systems that operate on their campuses,” he said. “They really have to have a leadership role and the administration has to take responsibility and be accountable — I think this kind of approach really helps foster that leadership and that accountability.”

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