

# To Drink or Not to Drink: Five Things to Communicate to Transitioning College Students

By Derek Melleby

INITIATIVE

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*The Wall Street Journal* recently reported on new statistics concerning college student drinking. It appears that the abuse of alcohol could be on the decline. According to the article in *The Wall Street Journal*: "About 37% of college students engage in binge drinking, defined as consuming five or more drinks in a row during the preceding two weeks, according to 2009 data from a long-term study at the University of Michigan. That is down about 3% from 2008 levels, but still higher than high-school seniors and young adults who don't attend college." The colleges that have been able to curtail binge drinking on campus are those that are providing non-drinking, entertaining events for students. More and more students seem to be craving an alternative to the "party scene."

Many students that you know and love are either on college campuses right now or plan to head to college next fall. Some students may be nervous about the college cultural expectations to "go wild," and have questions about how to resist the temptations that lie ahead. As you engage in conversations with college-bound students, here are five things to be sure to communicate:

**You don't have to drink to meet people and have a good time.** As students arrive on campus, they are faced with the challenge of making friends. The cultural pressure to drink at social gatherings can be intense. Often, students admit to engaging in behavior that they would classify as "out-of-character" in order to "fit in." But know this: studies reveal that the first two weeks of college are critical to finding healthy, supportive community. Students should think through how they will be intentional about finding good community before they arrive on campus. In fact, youth workers and parents can play an important role by making connections for them before they arrive on campus. Be sure to visit college and community websites to see what clubs, organizations and churches are available and of interest. Send emails and make phone calls ahead of time. Having a community to plug into right away makes all the difference in the world as students transition to college.

**It is possible to go to college and not abuse alcohol.** A few years ago I had a conversation with a college student that has stuck with me. She explained to me that she didn't intend to drink in college, but when she arrived on campus it was assumed; it is "what college students are supposed to do." She added, "I just thought everybody drank. I didn't know how to say no." A recent study by the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary found that the majority of students were not ready for the pressure to engage in risk behaviors, like binge drinking, especially during the first two weeks of school. According to the study, "few students are prepared for the intensity of the first two weeks and the perfect storm of loneliness, the search for new friends, being completely on their own for the first time, and the sudden availability of a lot of partying." Youth workers and parents can help by having meaningful, open conversations about the struggles that many students face as they transition to college. Paint a realistic picture of what's ahead and listen to students as they share their expectations for the social scene on campus. Consider hosting a panel discussion with college students exploring the challenges students face and how they were or were not able to handle them.

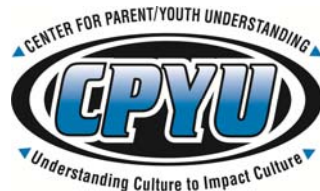
**Many students involved in the "party scene" don't want to be.** I think there are two misconceptions about the abuse of drinking on college campuses. The first, men-

tioned above, is the assumption that “everybody” drinks in college. As the article from the *Wall Street Journal* revealed, it may not be as “bad” as we think it is. The second misconception is that students actually enjoy binge drinking. I’m not sure they do. In my experience working with college students, I have found many frequent “partyers” to be frustrated, dissatisfied and often hurt by being a part of that culture. Students long for deeper friendships and safer environments. Encourage students you know to take the lead and to be counter-cultural by building lasting friendships and participating in Gospel-centered communities of grace. Assure them that there are many students who desire to be a part of something different than what most students often celebrate as the norm.

**Make no mistake, binge drinking in college does lead to “risky sexual behavior, lower grades and a rise in violent crime, accidental injury and death,”** according to a long-term study by the University of Michigan. While it does appear that binge drinking by students is decreasing, we should still remind students of the risks involved. We must be willing to challenge the culture myth that college is a time for students “to do whatever they want before entering the real world.” The reality is that the years between 18-25 are formative. Decisions are made during this time that give shape to the rest of life. A series of bad decisions can have lasting consequences.

**The people with whom you surround yourself is one of the most important decisions you make.** The book of Proverbs puts it like this: “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20). The transition to college is not an easy one. But it can be made easier if students understand the importance of being surrounded by a good cast of characters. As a parent or youth worker, be sure to cast a vision concerning the value of good community and help students make healthy community connections before they arrive on campus.

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