

Four percent students drink daily; one-fifth frequent binge drinkers

LEXINGTON, KY.—Huddled in the corner of a small apartment, oblivious to the chaos around her is "Katie", a University of Kentucky nursing student. Psychedelic lights surround her, adding a tripping effect to the room. Gyrating bodies crash against each other seemingly at lightning speed. The smell of beer and sweat intertwine with cigarette smoke and fog from a huffing smoke machine in the back of the room.

Every once in a while, people come over to "Katie's Corner" to make sure the petite brunette is breathing. She has already had eight beers. A friend offers Katie another swig of his mixed drink—called a suicide.

"She does this every weekend," he said before finding his date on the dance floor. "She just uses it as a way to relax."

Katie is not alone.

Almost half of the college students in the United States are binge drinkers, according to a 1995 Harvard School of Public Health survey of 17,592 college students from 140 colleges nationwide.

Nearly four percent of the students drink daily. One-fifth of the students were frequent binge drinkers, which means they binge drink more than three times a week, the study reported.

After 20 minutes in the corner, Katie opens her eyes and wonders how she can get more alcohol. Grinning slowly, she goes to greet the guy she thinks brought her to the party. A few stumbles later, Katie bumps into an old friend from high school who she hasn't seen in two years.

He asks her to dance, and they stroll silently toward the gyrating masses. After a few twists and turns, Katie, who will turn 21 next year, manages to maneuver a plastic cup of Killian's Red from his hands and into her mouth.

A few more swallows, and her dancing becomes less rigid. The girl who originally sat in the

But Katie is a binge drinker. She can even recite the definition of her affliction.

"The consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one or more occasions," she reads from one of her health textbooks. "That's pretty accurate. Five [drinks] get me a good buzz going. I can relax then."

According to the nationwide Core Alcohol and drug survey of 56,000 college students, binge drinking contributes to a broad range of problems for college students including memory loss, trauma, date rape, vandalism and suicide.

The study says drinking is the No. 1 health concern on college campuses.

Dr. Tim Nolan, director of student mental health for the University Health Service, said student drinking is a complicated issue.

"Yes, one person may have experimented with alcohol—and this is perfectly natural in a college environment—but this experimentation often can lead that person into negative things like hurting themselves and others or having unprotected sex."

Alcohol also has been associated with missing classes and poor performance ratings on tests and projects. In the Core group's survey, college students who reported the lowest grade-point averages consumed an average of 11 alcohol beverages a week, while those who reported mostly A's had less than three drinks per week.

Nolan said most surveys he has read on binge drinking show that bingers are not just hurting themselves.

"They show very clearly that non-bingers are affected—they are harassed, abused to some extent," he said.

Tradition or trouble?

Alcohol abuse is hardly a new concept.

College always has been identified as a place for exploration. It serves as a haven for experiments with students' new-found freedom. Many of these experiments include alcohol.

"My parents drank and probably did a lot worse when they were college students," said Libby Morgan, a UK sophomore. "I don't get why experts in the health fields are still worried about the effects. I mean, who really cares?"

Nolan said sometimes experimentation is taken too far.

"Alcohol and even binge drinking are very difficult issues, because part of the way we learn is through experience," Nolan said. "Sometimes negative experiences with alcohol can lead to positive growth, but students need to know the difference between growth and self-

destruction."

UK Dean of students David Stockham said students need to know how to drink responsibly. He said he doesn't understand what drives a student to lose control.

"Incidents of binge drinking occur too frequently—it's the kind of drinking when someone sets out to get drunk and get drunk fast," Stockham said. "Usually, it ends up making them terribly sick."

UK Police Chief W.H. McComas said student alcohol abuse can lead to bigger problems.

He said that 90 percent of the incidents where officials deal with students involve alcohol.

"It is the drug of choice for students. It is the most abused substance in college," he said.

However, he said UK Police only give minor penalties.

If officers see a person consume a beverage, then they will arrest them, McComas said. However, if officers find someone drunk, then they normally will render assistance and then may issue a citation. But, McComas said, this usually isn't the case.

"If they are a jerk they will be arrested and given a citation," McComas said. "Officers take far more people home than they give citations."

What is being done?

University officials say they believe the national studies reflect campus behaviors.

"We've carefully reviewed studies from big schools, and we have copies of them," Stockham said. "We use them as our sources of information. We believe the patterns [associated with drinking] are similar."

UK has made several attempts to address these concerns.

In 1988, the UK revised portions of its Alcohol Policy.

The policies became more specific as to where and when drinking on campus is appropriate. Alcoholic beverages are not permitted in classrooms, laboratories, offices, residence halls, athletic events and all outdoor areas on campus.

Also, the policy says housing corporations that supervise on-campus greek chapter houses are supposed to establish rules that are consistent with local laws and regulations. Those house corporations also are responsible for ensuring compliance by residents.

In conjugation with the policy's opening statements to "promote alcohol education and counseling programs," Stockham said the university has encouraged student groups to create forums on related issues.

Also, the university offers a new short course with workshops and special speakers describing alcohol and its consequences. The program is called On-Campus Talk About Alcohol (OCTAA).

For students who believe they may have a drinking problems, Nolan suggested several options for seeking help on campus. He said students may go the University Health Services in either the student mental health wing or in the primary care facility. UK's Counseling and Testing Center can also help. Nolan added that the community has several sources, including help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Ala-non and Ala-teen.

The Morning After

Katie wakes up in a foreign bed in a dark room. The only sign of morning she can discern is the blinking red 9:48 on the alarm clock next to her. Katie's head pounds, her mouth feels dry. She leaves the sleeping man next to

her with as much silence as she can muster in her present state.

"I know I didn't have sex with him," Katie says a few hours later. "I still had all of my clothes on when I woke up and he did, too. We must have just passed out together."

Katie still does not know who the man she woke up with is or what happened between them.

After someone describes her state the night before to Katie, she says this is not the first time. She even admits that it "probably

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- W.H. McComas

is a problem," but it will "probably happen again."

Two weeks later, Katie is seeking help at a regional rehabilitation center following an overdose of sleeping pills and muscle relaxants.

She acknowledges that the drugs were definitely a problem.

But she still doesn't think that drinking on the weekend is "that big of a problem" for her.

"Drinking is just an easy way to forget all of the stuff that has happened in the course of the week—you know, grades and classes and family and stuff," she said. "It's not like I drink all of the time. I do it on the weekends only."

by Jennifer Smith
The Kentucky Kernel
University of Kentucky

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- Libby Morgan

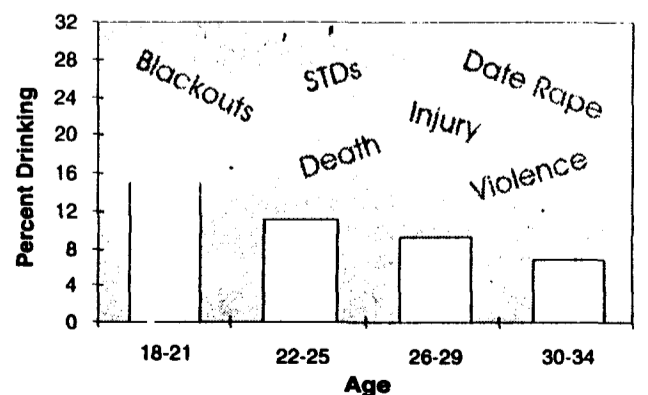
Katie said she is far from the average alcoholic. She has a 3.78 grade-point average, a boyfriend and a stable family life.

Heavy Drinking . . . Is It Really Worth It?

You may think heavy drinking is an acceptable part of the college experience. But have you considered the consequences? When you drink, you run the risk of doing something you'll regret later. When you're under the influence of alcohol, you're more likely to expose yourself to a sexually transmitted disease (STD) by having unprotected sex. You could get yourself into a situation you may not be able to handle—or get out of. Falling grades and dropping out become a reality because college students who drink the most get the lowest grades.

All students need to ask, "Is it really worth taking the kind of risk that could negatively affect the rest of my life?" For free materials and other resource information on alcohol and illicit drugs, call the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686.

Past Month Heavy Drinking* by Age, 1994



* Heavy drinking is defined as five or more drinks per day on each of five or more days in the past thirty days.

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