

## Drinking Age Battle Isn't Over Yet

National on Campus report

Those who think a national 21-year-old drinking age will become a fact by 1986 may soon have to think again. Though federal legislation seems bent on forcing the states into adopting higher drinking age laws by withholding 10% of their federal highway tax money if they don't, a number of observers think some states won't comply. They'll be forfeiting big bucks if they refuse -- a total of \$22 million for Wisconsin in the 1986 and 1987, for example -- but some analysis says the lost highway taxes will still be less than projected losses in taxes and fees associated with liquor sales.

For students, however, the point is justice, not money. Bob Bingaman, spokesman for the United States Student Association, says the law is patently wrong-headed and student associations across the country are gearing up to make their state legislatures understand that. "On a gut level, I think it's a civil right issue," he says. "How can you tell this age group, 'You can vote. You can sue and be sued. You can marry. You can serve in the military, but you can't drink!?' It's absurd!"

Bingaman says his group and others are considering a constitutional challenge to the law in court. The 25th Amendment reserves control of alcohol to the states, and critics see the coming battle over the drinking age as a states' rights issue.

At the U. of Texas-Austin, Rodney Schlosser, student body president, says he expects the battle to break there in January. "I don't want to let the whole world know about all our bullets before we shoot them," he says, but suggests the students' general plan of attack will include lobbying, educational efforts, and the drafting of positive, alternative legislation.

### DWI LAWS THE ANSWER?

Schlosser points to the fact that Minnesota's traffic fatalities increased four-fold after raising its drinking age to 19. Teens had no trouble getting liquor but took to the dangerous and boring privacy of their cars to drink it. It was only when Minnesota passed stiff driving-while-intoxicated or DWI laws that traffic fatalities began to decrease.

That's the kind of legislation Schlosser has in mind, and, in fact, the Texas Student Lobby has been on record behind tougher DWI laws for the last two years. "We would like to have positive DWI legislation ready to go in January so legislators can vote for something instead of just having to vote against the 21 year old law," he says. Schlosser expects no trouble in mobilizing massive student support for these efforts. The law, he says, has raised their consciousness more than any other issue in the last ten years because it directly touches their lives as defense spending and other issues don't.

At the U. of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, president of the student body Randy Curtis says they're trying to mobilize the support of private business in fighting the new law. Students have blanketed the supermarkets in town and all the bars on Water St. with petitions, and they're stumping for a public awareness club called "I am driving." Participating bar owners agree to provide free, non-alcoholic drinks to club members who, in turn, act as chauffeur for the drinking members of their group. Memberships cost nothing and participation, says Curtis, is high.



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## Editorial Page

Christmas is a special time of the year and just about everyone celebrates in one way or another, most through the use of alcohol or some other mind altering drug.

We've all heard the scare stories about the tragic deaths that take place on the roads and highways because someone who had too much to drink got behind the wheel of a car and tried to drive.

When people drink too much it not only affects them mentally, it also attacks them physically. A person may literally drink himself to death. Alcohol affects the heart, liver, kidneys and other organs. It destroys brain cells; every drink a person takes, whether he has a drinking problem or not, kills an average of 50,000 brain cells. These cells can be repaired or replaced.

There are no accurate statistics on the number of deaths related to alcohol. When a person drinks himself to death the doctor may put down the cause of death as heart failure, cerebral hemorrhage (stroke), liver failure, etc. This is done to "protect" the families. The doctors, technically, aren't lying; they just don't mention that these things were a direct result of alcohol abuse.

The number of deaths related to excessive drinking in the US alone is estimated at 50,000 to 200,000 a year.

So if you are planning to celebrate Christmas with a party or two and a few drinks, do so in moderation. Let's keep Christmas safe. Don't drink and drive, the roads are bad enough with the ice and the rest of us want to live.

Meanwhile two researchers at Boston U. are lending their support to the under 21-year olds. Research by Robert Smith and Ralph Hingson in the School of Behavioral Science suggests that raising the drinking age has no effect on overall traffic deaths or on the drinking habits of teenagers. "I think teenagers have been unfairly singled out," says Smith.

Smith and Hingson studied fatal crashes in the three-year period after Massachusetts raised its drinking age from 18 to 20 and compared those patterns with New York which did not raise its legal drinking age. They found New York fatalities declined almost as much as Massachusetts. Moreover there was no reduction among 16 and 17 year olds, the group primarily targeted by the new law.

### CONCLUSIONS FAULTY

The Boston researchers have serious reservations about the conclusions Congress drew from the study it looked at in drafting the 21 year old drinking age law. That study looked at statistics from nine states which raised their drinking ages, and found a 28% reduction in single-vehicle, night-time crashes (those most associated with alcohol). But the survey found only an 11% reduction in overall crashes -- a percentage statisticians say could be accounted for by chance variation. As Hingson puts it: "They have 'suggestive data' but not 'conclusive evidence.'"

The Smith-Hingson study included an opinion survey as well, and from the answers to those questions, they conclude that attacking teenage drunk driving through such punitive legislation may simply foster cynicism toward the legislative process and a disregard of law enforcement. At best, raising the drinking age to 21 would reduce fatal traffic crashes by 2%, or 1,500 lives a year.

Ironically, solid data exists to prove that mandatory seat-belt and airbag laws, which Congress has deferred until 1989, would reduce fatalities 15% to 30% or a minimum of 15,000 to 20,000 lives. Also, says Hingson, passive restraints do not require enforcement to be effective as do both higher-drinking-age and DWI laws. (CONTACT: Rbt. Smith & R. Hingson, School of Public Health, Boston U., 80 E. Concord St., Boston, MA 02118. Phone: 617/247-5814; Bob Bingaman, USSA, 2000 P 20036. Phone: 202/775-8943.)



## "OOPS"

It was the mistake of the Campus Update not to credit Kevin Moors or Tari Wheelwright for their fine work on doing the layout work for the paper by omitting their names from the credit listing. This mistake has been corrected.

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