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Bid to Reconsider Drinking Age Taps Unlikely Supporters

College Presidents
Say Current Laws
Lead to More Abuse

By **JOHN HECHINGER**
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A new campaign highlighting campus alcohol abuse won heavyweight support this week as top college presidents signed a statement urging consideration of lowering the drinking age, but the effort is already encountering a powerful backlash.

More than 100 college presidents, including leaders at Dartmouth, Duke and Middlebury, have joined the month-old Amethyst Initiative, which argues that "the 21-year-old drinking age is not working" and "has created a culture of dangerous binge drinking."

John McCardell, a history professor and former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, is leading the effort. His group, Choose Responsibility, a nonprofit unaffiliated with the college, has received financial backing from money manager Julian Robertson. Mr. McCardell says he receives no money from the alcohol industry.

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He argues current laws drive drinking underground, causing more problems than they solve. "The law is out of step with reality," he says. "The law is so obviously unjust and discriminatory. It ought to at least be the subject of debate."

But he and the college presidents are taking on powerful constituencies, including some of their colleagues, the top government traffic-safety agency, the insurance industry and public-health authorities, all of which say the higher drinking age saves lives. Even representatives of the alcohol industry say they support current laws.

Laura Dean-Mooney, president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, says she is alarmed by the initiative. The mother of a 17-year-old high-school senior, she says she wouldn't want her child to go to a school whose presidents had signed the statement, saying it sent the message, "It's OK to drink underage."

The debate dates to 1984, when Congress imposed a penalty of 10% of a state's federal highway funds on any state that set its drinking age lower than 21. With billions of dollars at stake, states complied.

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There is broad consensus that the higher drinking age has reduced driving fatalities. Since the law's passage, the number of 16- to 20-year-old drunken drivers killed annually has fallen by half, to about 800, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates the law saves about 900 lives a year, equal to about 17,000 people since all states adopted the law in 1988.

"I'm aware of no legitimate debate" about the fact that lowering the drinking age saves lives, says Henry Wechsler, the retired director of the College Alcohol Study at the Harvard School of Public Health. He says college presidents are mounting this campaign largely because enforcing rules on alcohol is a nuisance.

Harvard researchers found that as many as 44% of students reported binge drinking, defined as consuming four or five drinks in an evening, at least once in the previous two weeks.

One supporter of the initiative to revisit the drinking age, William G. Durden, president of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, says the current laws make it difficult to counsel underage students on how to drink responsibly. "It frustrates me to no end," says Mr. Durden, who helped draft the Amethyst statement. "We're not for drinking. We want to break the cycle."

Elizabeth Pogust, a 21-year-old senior at Middlebury, says she felt pressured to drink as a freshman. Classmates would quaff alcohol in their rooms before roaming the campus on weekends, she recalls. As they got older, she says, she and her peers learned their lessons. "I've noticed a definite change in my attitude once it was no longer forbidden," she says.

Moonie Shin, a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says colleges should crack down, not seek to ease rules on drinking. "I feel that college presidents are looking for the easy way out and not dealing with the situation," says Ms. Shin.



In the early 1990s, the University of Rhode Island, the state's flagship college, had such notoriety for drinking that wags said that its initials, URI, stood for

"You are high." The campus made Princeton Review's list of top party schools.

Robert L. Carothers, who became president of the university in 1991, eliminated all drinking at

university functions, even among faculty. The university stepped up enforcement, helping spur the shutdown of half of the school's 18 fraternities.

The Rhode Island school secured \$8 million in grants to study ways to stop drinking. The school worked with local authorities to ban businesses that ran "pub crawls" that ferried students from one bar to another. It supported a local ordinance that places a big orange sticker on off-campus houses that have been visited by police because of unruly parties. After three violations, landlords are required to terminate leases. The school also pushed for a law that requires beer kegs to be registered, so those who sold to underage students could be tracked and punished.

The University of Rhode Island is no longer on the list of party schools. "To the degree it gives impetus to the idea that colleges and undergraduates should ignore the law and the science, it's a destructive thing to do," Dr. Carothers says of the effort to reconsider the drinking age.

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