

Parent Alcohol Orientation Sessions, 2016

Buchanan

I want to speak to you about high-risk behaviors from the perspective of three roles:

- Senior Associate Dean for Academic Advising;
- developmental psychologist who has been teaching and doing research on the role of parents in adolescent / emerging adult development for going on 30 years; and
- as a parent of three children in this age range – one who graduated from college not too long ago & two that are seniors in college this year (one here at WFU).

From each of the roles, I want to highlight briefly a perspective I have on college-age high-risk behavior and how you as parents can partner with us to reduce risk. My comments stem from the reality that its common in our culture for adults to think that college student drinking is inevitable and ok, a “rite of passage” or to think that parents do not have any influence. My goals are to two-fold: to encourage you not to trivialize college drinking, which is so often the source of other high-risk behavior, and to understand that even during college, there are things you can do to lower the chance of these high-risk behaviors

1) As Associate Dean

- a. From the perspective of an Associate Dean for Academic Advising, I am well aware that the illegal or excessive use of alcohol and other drugs, and the other risks that accompany high-risk substance use, constitute a major threat to our core mission: academic success!
- b. IN OUR OFFICE - When we see students in academic trouble, students in emotional and psychological distress, students who have been victimized in some way (e.g., sexual assault) ... it is not uncommon for substance use (and most commonly, alcohol) – to be a piece of the puzzle.
 - i. We have an amazing and talented student body and some of them manage to drink frequently or heavily and still succeed in the classroom and in their relationships. Although some students manage to “get away with it” and to be academically and personally successful, it’s a bit like playing Russian roulette to drink regularly or heavily. There is no predicting right now who can manage such drinking & make it through college successfully and who cannot. Some students are much more susceptible to the problems associated with drinking, including addiction, than others.

- ii. Another concern I have as AD is the potential impact of alcohol use (and especially overuse) on your developing child's brain. I'm sure you've heard that the brain is not fully mature until age 25. That's a little oversimplified, but the point is that your child's brain is still developing. When the brain is developing it is more easily affected by drugs and alcohol. In fact, research suggests that the young adult brain responds differently to alcohol than the fully adult brain. The adolescent or young adult brain appears to be less sensitive than the adult brain to the sedative effects of alcohol ... yet more sensitive than the fully adult brain to negative effects on brain areas involved with memory. The unfortunate result is that: "In young adulthood it might be easier to drink the brain to an impaired state without realizing it, and the brain might at the same time be more vulnerable to long-term cognitive damage." Clearly this has implications for both academic success and healthy development more generally.
- iii. High-risk substance use brings risk of other trauma, including sexual assault, that can be very disruptive to a student's wellbeing including their ability to focus on academics. Such trauma has a major impact on a student's ability to achieve their potential in the classroom.

iv. *High-risk drinking environment at WFU and other colleges is a reflection of a bigger culture that glorifies alcohol, and minimizes its harms. So if you happen to be in the camp that thinks alcohol is harmless, a rite of passage, an indicator of “growing up” or “maturity”, or a primary mechanism for socializing or reducing stress, I ask you to rethink this. Illegal and high-risk substance use is NOT inevitable ... and such views work against WFU’s (and my office’s) goals and mission, which at its core is academic success but also includes intellectual curiosity, development of character, health & wellbeing, and an inclusive community.*

2) From the perspective of a developmental psychologist who teaches on and researches parenting of adolescents and young adults, I want to say a couple of things about how you can help us with this. Research shows that parents do have influence in college students’ high-risk behaviors such as high-risk drinking. Most parents underestimate their influence, so I want you to know you matter.

a. Specifically research has shown that parents who model lower alcohol use, who express disapproval of alcohol use prior to age 21, and who talk to their children about this, have students who do less drinking & less heavy drinking.

b. So, ...

- i. First and foremost, I HOPE that you will clearly communicate values that discourage drinking – not JUST because it’s against the law, but because it puts your student at risk for other trauma, and it threatens your student’s success. 30% of college students perceive that their parents APPROVE of them drinking. PLEASE, if you disapprove – and I hope you do, at least after hearing what I’ve shared – make this clear to your child. Do NOT encourage drinking, implicitly or explicitly. Certainly do NOT supply alcohol, as some parents of first-year students do on move-in day. If you have done this in the past, it’s not too late to let your child know you are having second thoughts.
- ii. There are more & less effective ways to talk about this, and materials provided over the summer on our website & through Alcholedu (newstudents.wfu.edu/advice-for-new-parents/) provide guidance. Tonight’s panel will also address healthy communication. Ask questions, listen, remain calm, share your values. Talk, now & ongoing...
- iii. Encourage your child especially to stay engaged in Orientation activities this weekend, and not attend parties being hosted by returning students on Sunday night (they’ve been told the parties are closed to new students because of the conflict with Orientation programming) – reference Betsy’s recent Daily Deac blog.

- iv. Encourage your child to find healthy ways to have fun & relieve stress, and there are many options for this on our campus! Students work hard in the classroom, and believe that entitles them to “play hard” at other times, and “play hard” is often –sadly -- defined as drinking wildly or excessively. Your students do need to have balance in their lives, and they do need to “play” or to relax. But they need to learn how to relax and have fun in healthy ways. Getting drunk is not a healthy way to relieve stress.
- v. If you are notified that your student has been disciplined for alcohol or drug use, your reaction will be important: do NOT blow it off, blame it on the University, or minimize the seriousness of the behavior. DO listen to why they engaged in that behavior. Do let them know you love them despite mistakes, but that you expect them to learn from those mistakes & act differently moving forward.

3) Speaking to you as a Parent

- a. I think I can understand and relate to the bind you might feel as you send your child to college
 - i. You don't want to be unrealistic, naïve
 - ii. Tendency to think this is an inevitable – maybe even important – part of college life
- b. As a parent, I remind myself of the statistics telling me
 - i. Although unfortunately common, it is NOT inevitable
 - ii. Although I don't have control over my child's choices, I am one important influence, so it's important my child knows where I stand, and
 - iii. to a large extent this is a cultural matter; we can only change culture if we don't succumb to it, if we are willing to do our part as individuals and speak out against attitudes and behavior that assume college students can't make better choices