

Individual attitudes toward heavy alcohol use is key predictor of college student drinking

May 27 2022



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Personal attitudes toward heavy alcohol consumption may be a better predictor of heavy drinking among college students than external factors

such as peer pressure and a desire to conform, according to a Rutgers study.

Historically, research into college student [drinking](#) has focused on "normative" elements—such as how other people view or encourage one's drinking—as forecasters of individual consumption habits. Angelo M. DiBello, an assistant professor at the Rutgers Center of Alcohol & Substance Use Studies in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, wanted to flip that narrative to determine if individual attitudes toward heavy drinking might help identify—and eventually mitigate—dangerous behaviors.

"Instead of focusing on what other people think about drinking, or what we think other people think, I wanted to directly measure an individual's own attitudes toward heavy alcohol use to see if they were predictors of risky drinking," DiBello said.

DiBello, the lead author of the study published in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, surveyed 374 [college students](#) (54% of them male) who had violated campus alcohol policies and received a brief intervention.

Students were asked to rate their attitudes toward heavy drinking as either unenjoyable or enjoyable, bad or good, harmful or beneficial, foolish or wise and unpleasant or pleasant. Responses were then averaged and compared to questions about peer drinking, drinking motivations (such as to socialize or to forget about problems) and whether [alcohol consumption](#) was part of their identity.

What the researchers found was that in nearly every model they ran, individual attitudes toward heavy drinking—defined in the study as five or more drinks per sitting for men and four or more drinks for women—was a significant determinant of binge-drinking frequency and

alcohol-related problems.

Given these results, DiBello said he plans to target binge and heavy drinking by focusing more on individual interventions—such as highlighting the negative consequences of heavy alcohol use—rather than systemic approaches that encourage abstinence or target alcohol availability.

"A key motivation for this research is understanding how we can fix college student drinking," said DiBello. "In many places, drinking is glorified in the college culture. It's ubiquitous."

DiBello said about 80% of students will drink in their lifetime, 53% report having drunk in the last month and 33% report [heavy drinking](#) in the last month. "But if you look at trends over the last couple of decades, these statistics have stayed pretty much the same," he said. "We haven't made much of a dent in the problem."

"What my research is trying to show is that we really need to focus less on external factors and more on internal feelings and attitudes toward [alcohol](#)," DiBello said. "Peer pressure, or perceptions of others approval, plays a role, but when all things are equal, we're seeing that it's not as predictive of [college student](#) drinking as once thought."

More information: Angelo M. DiBello et al, Attitude toward heavy drinking as a key longitudinal predictor of alcohol consumption and problems, *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/acer.14800](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.14800)

Provided by Rutgers University

Citation: Individual attitudes toward heavy alcohol use is key predictor of college student drinking (2022, May 27) retrieved 2 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-05-individual-attitudes-heavy-alcohol-key.html>

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