

THE COLLEGE DRINKING PROBLEM

Separating the wild oats
from the chaff

The bars near the University of Virginia were packed on graduation day, seniors in billowing black gowns drinking away their final few hours before entering the real world. It was 7 a.m. ¶ Waiters and bartenders, many of whom had worked until the Saturday night shift ended a few hours earlier, shuttled pitchers of Bloody Marys, mimosas and manmosas (beer, vodka and orange juice) and poured round after round of shots: cinnamon fireballs, Southern Comfort with lime, and straight tequila. ¶ “Sweet Caroline” blared as sorority sisters in flip-flops danced and sipped mixed drinks at the Virginian. At the Biltmore, the bouncer waved in anyone wearing commencement garb. The Pigeon Hole put out a chalkboard sign that originally read “Graduate in style!” but someone had crossed out “in style” and written “under the influence!”

BY JENNA JOHNSON / PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES WORRELL

At Trinity Irish Pub, students crammed onto a balcony that provided the perfect spot to look for friends and snap photos. Below, dozens more gathered on a patio, drinking on who-knows-whose bill.

"Our tab is already \$400!" one student excitedly announced from atop a black metal chair at about 8:20 a.m., with another solid hour left before they were due at the ceremony. One of his friends smirked: "It's not \$500 yet?"

A 21-year-old double-major wearing a wrinkled blue button-down under his black gown defended this scene as he drank a mimosa from a plastic cup. Soon his other hand was filled with a cheap shot of vodka, bringing him to at least half a dozen drinks in less than two hours — not that he was counting.

"All of us have jobs. All of us have real majors. None of us got majors like psychology," he said. "This is out of character, even for us. We are getting it out of our systems now, and then we will go into the real world."

But, would his parents approve of him stumbling through this symbolic day?

"I told my parents what I was doing, and they were like, 'YOLO,'" he said with a laugh. He paused before seriously requesting that his name and identifying characteristics not appear in any article a future employer might read.

"YOLO" — you only live once — is often uttered by college students as they shrug and do something they normally wouldn't do, such as drinking until they black out, experimenting with drugs or trying a new sexual experience.

This fall's freshmen likely will find that the higher education tradition of excessive alcohol consumption is alive and well, but there are new variables: Energy drink mixers keep students awake and drinking longer. A historically high number of students legally take prescribed antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs, which can be dangerous when mixed with booze.

Today's college students, who were mostly born in the early 1990s, have cellphone cameras and social media accounts that allow for the sharing of every embarrassing turn of a disastrous night. That can lead to a painful tar-

nishing of reputations or the celebration of reckless behavior. And news of the latest drinking trends spreads quickly on the Web. Those trends have colored perceptions of college students, but are they that much wilder than their parents were?

The scholarly standard for "too much" was long ago set at five drinks or more at least once in a two-week period. For three decades, that national binge drinking rate has hovered around 40 percent.

But college officials — the ones tasked with making sure students don't hurt themselves or others — aren't

necessarily worried about the bulk of those students. They are concerned about the students who go out every night of the week or have dozens of drinks each month, those who occasionally drink heavily but with a lower tolerance. They worry about the black-out drunks. The violent drunks. Those who turn to alcohol and drugs instead of seeking counseling.

Alcohol is a common theme in nearly all student problems, including faltering grades, fights, injuries, suicide attempts, mental-health issues and sexual assaults. A serious drinking problem could go undiagnosed for years in an



environment where heavy drinking is considered the norm. These students face a more difficult path to graduation, as they are more likely to skip class, get in trouble or not study. And if they do graduate, the transition to a working world with set hours can be difficult.

"A lot of students do grow out of it," said Susan Bruce, director of the U-Va. Center for Alcohol and Substance Education, "but there's really no way to predict which ones will and which ones won't."

U-Va. has tracked student drinking rates since the 1960s. The heaviest drinking was back in the 1970s and '80s, when parents of today's students would have been enrolled, Bruce said. The rate is now in line with national averages.

U-Va. has seen subtle growth at the two poles: students who don't or hardly drink, and those who are extreme drinkers. This trend is playing out at other universities, prompting a shift in educational messaging.

Colleges have been under pressure to keep students safe since the early 1980s, when the national drinking age was increased to 21, making it illegal for half of the undergraduate population to drink. Many schools shut down campus pubs and forbid alcohol in dorms and sorority and fraternity houses.

Lawsuits and deaths pushed some schools to crack down. Students are now routinely patrolled, busted and punished by local police, campus police, "party patrol" crews that roam student neighborhoods, school judicial boards and even parents, who at a growing number of schools are now contacted when their child has any alcohol infraction. As a result, parties moved off campus.

In 2008, 130 college presidents voiced support for the Amethyst Initiative, which stated that a legal drinking age of 21 has created "a culture of dangerous, clandestine 'binge-drinking' — often conducted off-campus."

In recent years, some administrators have adopted this attitude: If students are going to drink, let them do it safely. More schools have amnesty policies for students who seek help for a friend who might have alcohol poisoning. Some schools have reopened campus pubs,

serve wine in the dining halls or allow over-21 students to drink in on-campus apartments.

At U-Va., it has been difficult for several waves of administrators to chip away at drinking traditions. At the annual Foxfield horse races, students start drinking in the morning and go all day. At the historic Lawn, students get bombed, strip and streak naked. And there's the "fourth-year fifth," when some fourth-year students try to finish a fifth before kickoff at the final home football game. In 1997, a senior honors student died after drinking heavily and falling down stairs.

"This is a very dangerous decision," U-Va. President Teresa Sullivan wrote in a letter to students. "A fifth of 80-



College students have cellphone cameras for sharing every embarrassing turn of a disastrous night.

proof liquor (17 drinks) can kill you."

U-Va. alcohol educators have suggested ways to make the tradition safer, such as splitting a bottle between friends, subbing in wine or spreading the drinking across a weekend. But the tradition continues.

It doesn't help that U-Va. is frequently named one of the top party schools in the nation. Incoming students arrive with the notion that everyone drinks heavily, and some older students feel a responsibility to keep the reputation going.

At a formal awards ceremony during graduation weekend, a top senior leader gave this shout-out: "Thank you, Forbes, ABC, BuzzFeed, Playboy and the

other publications that spotlighted our school's achievements in your rankings." He was interrupted by laughter and applause, then continued: "You reassured us that we're the best school in the world."

The cozy first floor of the modular house was jammed with undergraduates, at least 100 at any one time, dramatically upping the indoor temperature from the crisp night outside, where a dozen smokers chose to hang out. Pop and house music blared.

A feisty young woman guarded the door and interrogated every person who tried to enter. She let in close friends, sorta-friends, fellow seniors and younger students who were in a religious retreat group one of her roommates led.

"We decided to go big," explained another one of the hostesses, wearing a black spaghetti-strap top with her cellphone tucked into her cleavage.

In one corner, seniors sipped Natty Light and talked about what they wanted to do before graduation. A couple of women tried to get everyone dancing. One guy alternated swigs of orange soda and vodka. A communal bottle of Wild Turkey made its way through the horde.

Most of the crowd was binge drinking but mostly on light beer and over hours. They would go to sleep — not pass out — get up the next morning and go about working and studying. But a couple of guys appeared bombed, including a stumbling senior who gave a lengthy interview to a reporter, then e-mailed the next afternoon. "I was speaking with you last night, and I have no recollection of it whatsoever," he wrote.

One woman didn't drink at all. She never does, as alcohol has hurt her family.

This party could be on any campus. On that Friday night in April, it was at Boston College, a Jesuit school that allows of-age seniors to host parties on Friday and Saturday nights in their on-campus modular houses (known as "The Mods"), which went up in the '70s as temporary housing for baby boomers.

The seniors must register parties and create a plan for what kind of alcohol they will serve, along with nonalcoholic beverages and food. Hosts must agree not to serve underage students, but younger students often sneak in, several students said. And it's not as if the dorms are lacking alcohol, despite strict rules against it.

Like many schools, Boston College has upped the alcohol education it offers students, along with limiting access to alcohol, focusing attention on students' making healthy decisions, offering alcohol-free events and packing students' schedules.

"If they're under 21, it's always a risky choice to make, because there are consequences. But if that's a choice they are going to make, we want to give them some tools for doing it safely," said Robyn Priest, associate director of BC's office of health promotion.

Even if students find alcohol tedious or boring, the message usually sticks. And those messages are reiterated over time.

Outside the Mods that Friday night, Chestnut Hill swarmed with students searching for alcohol or stumbling home from having had too much. Cabs hovered near the entrance. The sound of women shouting "woooooo!" floated from an open dorm window.

A pack of guys poured out of one of the sophomore halls. One was frantically texting, as his friend impatiently asked: "Do you know of a party?" Another clarified: "Do you know of even a hint of a party?"

Inside Mod 15A, the party continued.

"See how it's really hot and super crowded? That's a Mod party," said a senior in jeans and a T-shirt. And this crowd is nothing, he explained, yelling and cracking open a beer. The previous weekend another group of women hosted a party in their Mod that attracted so many people, who danced so hard, that the floor sagged and needed repair.

These students said they don't think their drinking is any heavier or lighter than that at other colleges. Students drink — sometimes too much — but it's not a big deal, they said.

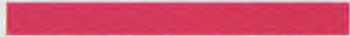
"It's work hard, play hard," said a 22-year-old senior. "I've had marathon

weeks with seven nights straight, and I've had weeks where I drink one night."

Just after 1 a.m., the music cut out. "Sorry, guys," one of the hosts yelled, "party is over."

Some students chug the rest of their drinks; others take them for the walk home. There's a debate over whether they could get to the local dive bar before last call. Many students make their way — some swaying, arms around each other — to a dining hall that serves greasy late-night food, a service schools have begun to offer to get sustenance in the stomachs of imbibing students.

The students who threw the party begin picking up beer cans, putting furniture back into place — and de-tagging unflattering photos on Facebook.



Frostburg is making strides to reduce the problem, and with that comes academic achievement.

Within 30 minutes of new-student orientation kicking off at Frostburg State University on a Sunday morning in June, the school's top leader had the microphone and was talking about alcohol. He warned the group sitting before him — mostly 18-year-olds with their parents — not to get caught up in the "college effect," the idea presented in movies and on sitcoms that going to college means drinking.

"Beyond the tragedies, what concerns me most is the loss of human potential," said President Jonathan C. Gibraltar, who has led the public university in Western Maryland since 2006.

He paused before continuing: "Please think about that this summer. Don't let yourselves get caught up in that world of excessive, high-risk drinking and change the story of what is possible for you at Frostburg State University."

Frostburg used to be a major party school, a reputation coupled with tragedy. A freshman died of alcohol poisoning in 1996 after drinking at an unaffiliated fraternity's party. Seven students were charged. Early in Gibraltar's presidency, a student punched a neighbor outside a frat party, nearly killing the man. And over the years, several students have been hospitalized after drinking too much.

Gibraltar is convinced that administrators can change the drinking culture — and that they must. "There's this impression that there's nothing you can do about it, and that's just wrong," he said.

Gibraltar wants to change the "college effect." In high school, college-bound students are less likely to drink than students who don't plan to continue their education. But during freshman year, students who already drink start to drink more, and students who never drank are likely to start. The drinking rates of those people in college are much higher than those not enrolled.

Gibraltar's wife is an alcohol educator, and he has been closely involved with national initiatives, including one recently launched by Dartmouth College that treats college drinking as a public health epidemic.

Gibraltar has made reducing high-risk drinking a priority at Frostburg. He's confident the university is making strides, as the percentage of students who binge-drink fell from 54 percent in 2006 to 41 percent last year. With that comes academic achievements: a slowly increasing retention rate, incoming students with higher academic credentials and fewer discipline problems.

Frostburg has worked to create an environment where there are many more things to do than drink. The business school now offers a full slate of Friday classes to discourage Thursday-night drinking. And the university often hosts alcohol-free dance parties that attract hundreds.



The university gave money to the local police force for an extra officer to patrol student neighborhoods on popular party nights. Once a month, Frostburg officials meet with police and representatives from bars and liquor stores. The school will pay for employee training and have students design the bars' menus in exchange for closely following the law, limiting drink specials and promoting healthy drinking habits.

All incoming students are required to pass an online class that teaches that most college students don't drink like characters in the movies. Officials urge parents to talk with their children about

drinking before move-in day. That education continues into the fall and is often led by students. Student leaders, including those of fraternities and sororities, are required to receive the same training bartenders receive so they can spot problems at parties.

Frostburg maintains zero tolerance for underage drinking. A first offense results in more alcohol education and a letter to parents, which school officials say has lessened the number of further, more serious offenses.

During orientation, dean of students Jesse M. Ketterman Jr. sternly warned: "We deal with behavior on and off

campus. It doesn't matter if you do it on campus or off; we will find out about it."

But, sure enough, during every orientation, at least a few incoming freshmen ask older students to buy them beer or recommend parties.

"The people who ask about alcohol at [orientation] aren't going to be here in a year," said Andy Krehbiel, a rising senior and fraternity member who works in the student center.

The cultural changes have not been easy or popular, Gibraltar said. Even so, there are still tragedies, including one student fatally stabbed by another at an off-campus party in 2011.

"We're only as good as our last weekend," Gibraltar said. "I never go to bed at night thinking: 'Thank goodness. We finally solved this problem.'"

The video starts with the sound of a marching band and quickly cuts to two supposed University of Michigan undergrads standing on a balcony in Ann Arbor in sunglasses.

"Hey, guys, I'm Liza," says the young woman wearing jeans shorts and a Michigan T-shirt, cropped to show her toned abs. A guy in a black tank top and backward cap next to her introduces himself as Justin.

"Welcome to Welcome Week 2012," she says.

"We're going to show you how we work hard," Justin explains.

"And play harder," Liza says.

As Wiz Khalifa's song "Work Hard, Play Hard" pulses, the screen fills with photos that look as if they belong in an admissions brochure: the Michigan stadium, the bell tower, ivy-covered buildings and a banner exclaiming, "Welcome to Michigan!!"

The refrain hits — Work! Work! Work! Work! — and the screen turns into a montage of party scenes. A massive house party. A guy wearing a glow necklace brandishing two bottles of hard liquor. Students toasting a shot to the best week of their lives. Women shaking it. Every few seconds, someone shouts an expletive.

As the lyrics become even more unpublishable, the footage gets wilder. Students dancing in a shower of hose

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water. Guys standing on a balcony and pouring a stream of alcohol into the open mouth of a guy below. Marijuana. Stacks of cash. Kissing. Fighting. Dancing. Chugging. Shotgunning. Funneling. And more dancing.

This is an "I'm Shmacked" video, the creation of two 20-somethings who launched a production company in college. Shmacked, according to Urban Dictionary, means "to become intoxicated to the point of not even being able to stand up, know what's going on, or correctly pronounce any word."

The team travels from school to school, often at the request of students, and records the most outrageous scenes it can find (with this disclaimer: "No alcohol or illegal substance is used during the filming, just prop"). The videos get millions of page views and help to define today's college drinking culture.

It's not the image that most universities want these days, especially as they pump thousands of dollars into alcohol

education and branding efforts focused on academics, not keg stands.

"It is important to emphasize that it paints a picture of only a small portion of our student population," said Kelly Cunningham, a University of Michigan spokeswoman. "We have many students at UM who choose not to drink, or when they choose to drink, drink moderately."

The University of Virginia graduates had to line up for the ceremony at 9:30 a.m. In the final minutes, they finished off their drinks and closed out their tabs.

On the porch of a fraternity house, three guys popped open champagne, then raced to finish first. The Vitamin C song "Graduation" blared:


*Can we survive it out there?
Can we make it somehow?
I guess I thought that this
would never end. And suddenly
it's like we're women and men.*

*Will the past be a shadow that
will follow us around?*

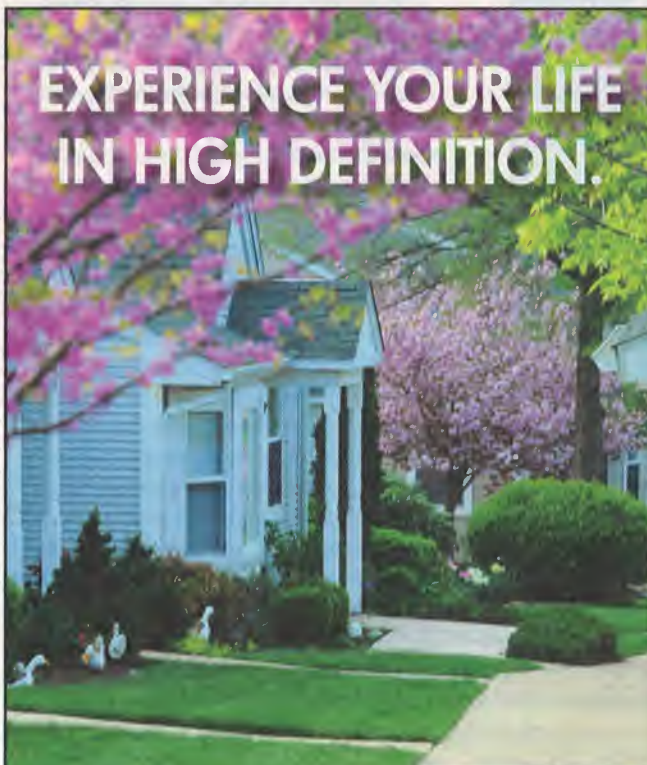
*Will these memories fade
when I leave this town?*

Around the university's most historic building, the Rotunda, thousands of graduates lined up in matching robes and caps. "I'm scared!" one guy dramatically said as he dragged himself toward the ceremony. Most walked confidently. A few pinballed. A couple slipped on the wet grass.

The ceremony began. Speakers shared inspirational thoughts. A business student sipped an oversize can of Bud Light. An engineering student sprinted out of the crowd, looking ill. Everyone sang the school song.

They moved their tassels. And then they marched into the real world. 

Jenna Johnson is a Washington Post staff writer. To comment on this story, e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.



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