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**Examining Which Factors Influence the Drinking Culture  
on College Campuses**

**Aaron Westbrook**

**Ed 400—Senior Research Project  
Ed Studies Program  
Trinity College  
Spring Semester 2009**

## **Introduction and Research Question:**

Every college has a drinking environment, but for many years now, college presidents throughout the United States encounter a serious problem on their campuses that seems to be uncontrollable - binge drinking. This abusive approach of consuming alcohol has had detrimental effects on college campuses across the country, sometimes proving fatal. College students are more likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking than other individuals of the same age; and the prevalence of such alcohol consumption on campus does not show any sign of decrease.<sup>1</sup> Contradictory to what many students would believe, this approach of consuming alcohol creates an extremely anti-social environment. This environment has created a culture of drinking at many colleges that needs to be altered. My research question is to determine which factors of a college social setting contribute to creating its drinking environment.

## **Significance and Literature Review:**

Drinking will always be apart of the college environment, but the unhealthy and sometimes fatal results of binge drinking need to be addressed. Just last Fall, the Trinity community was given a real eye opener into just how serious binge drinking is when one of its own students narrowly escaped death while at a fraternity party. My research will give a look at just how this issue of binge drinking may be addressed.

A current debate that is being headed by a group of college presidents around

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Substance Use, December 2006; 11(6): 417-429

the country surrounds the issue of the current drinking age; this group of presidents believe that lowering the drinking age to 18 will actually help promote responsible drinking in the long run, especially on college campuses. The main reason behind this belief lies behind research that shows the normative drinking behavior of college students; one which views binge drinking as acceptable is in fact not the case. By changing the attitude and stigma associated with alcohol by lowering the drinking age, the views of college students on the issue will be forced to change, seeing drinking what it is meant to be – a social event. The atmosphere at Trinity College surrounding drinking has been shaped by social structures, or in many cases the lack there of. After attending the college for four years, I have come to realize from talking to people from other NESCAC colleges and perspective students, Trinity has a reputation for being a “fun party school”, which I can honestly say it has earned. The party weekend at Trinity begins on a Thursday, and Tuesday night is there as a “stress” relief if needed. Throughout the different literature sources I have gather, I will present the information that exemplifies the dangers of binge drinking, with facts and figures, views of college students on alcohol consumption, and also provide a legitimate solution as to what can be done to change this detrimental approach of consuming alcohol.

Barrett Seaman in his book *“Binge”* examines the social scene of the American college campus, revealing the dire need for some sort of change surrounding the alcohol crisis on campuses. Essentially, Seaman wanted to find out how representative student life was today in comparison to when he attended Hamilton College in Clinton New York back in the 1960’s. His ethnographic approach to his

study gives a seemingly unbiased opinion to the subject matter at hand. Seaman goes into detail about different incidents that occurred on college campuses in the past where the consumption of alcohol lead to extremely dangerous circumstances or in some cases, proved to be fatal. Seaman breaks down the typical elements of a party night on a college campus, from the different kind of alcohol being consumed, to the way it is being consumed. Furthermore, he contrasts the main differences in the atmosphere and environment of college parties today to when he was in college during the sixties. It is not that Seaman was shocked by the fact that college kids were drinking alcohol, but more so the atmosphere that surrounded the culture of drinking. When focusing on the increase of binge drinking that has developed over the years, he looks at the different reasons why this increase and approach to drinking alcohol has become the norm on college campuses. His main findings found the presence of fraternities/sororities to be key institutional structures when it came to creating the normative view to acceptable drinking behavior. With this being the case, I do not expect to be surprised by my own findings when it comes to my observations and interviews, more so, I will use Seaman's book as a guide for what things to watch for and observe during my ethnographic process of this project.

Along with Seaman, Mantel Barbara's, "Drinking on Campus" outlines how binge drinking is not some new trend that has arose over the past ten or twenty years. Barbara goes on to explain how methods on tackling binge drinking on college campuses for underage students has been attempted to be tackle with no success. Increased resistance and no alcohol tolerance approaches on campuses

have proven to be unsuccessful. This is due to the fact that drinking is a part of college campuses throughout the country, and if college students, regardless of age, want to drink they'll drink. Lee Scrivo Karen outlines this point in her look at "Drinking on Campus". She goes on to suggest the notion as to why not lower the drinking age to 18 from 21, as the current law makes it seemingly impossible for college presidents to run their college. In essences, college presidents are being asked to maintain laws for two different subgroups of students in one community, those that are of the drinking age and those that are not. In addition, one psychology survey that was carried out focused on the social norms of college students. It found that college students actually overestimate several aspects of their peer's drinking, which include: frequency, quantity, and approval. Consequently, this promotes a larger increase in their alcohol consumption. A proposed solution stemming from the social norms approach discussed in the survey asserts that a solution for college students' problematic drinking is to provide students with accurate information concerning alcohol consumption. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that if the information is accepted, there will be a uniform reduction in on-campus alcohol consumption. College students and their peers believe the amount of alcohol they are consuming is "normal", when in fact this is not the case. This misconception, known as "normative drinking behavior", is a significant component of the larger problem of unhealthy binge drinking.

Coming from a different country where the drinking scene is completely different to what I have encountered here at college, the question has continually

been on my mind, "Why?" I hypothesizes that the environment and atmosphere provided by an establishment such as a pub creates a social drinking environment which promotes a social drinking culture. I plan for my own ethnographic observations to play a key role in determining this theory.

## **Methodology**

I took an ethnographic approach while studying three different colleges all of similar demographics: Trinity College, Wesleyan University and Connecticut College. While at each college, I observed students in drinking environments such as dorms, fraternities and pubs, and engaged in casual conversation anytime the situation presented itself. I conducted and transcribed eight interviews with Trinity students in a casual non-drinking environment. My interviews and field notes conducted over the span of four months were the most fruitful sources of information. Through this qualitative data, I made use of the first-hand accounts that were conveyed to me by the students sharing their opinions and perceptions regarding the drinking culture of each of their respective colleges.

Before each interview, I reiterated to the interviewees that I would use pseudonyms for their names in order to protect their confidentiality. In addition, I had them sign "Informal Consent" forms that restated these thoughts but also gave me permission to use their statements in my research project. The questions I asked each interviewee were consistent throughout all eight participants, but the interview being held was extremely informal and hence follow up questions were often asked in reference to something that was mentioned by the interviewee. The

four main questions I focused on were, Describe the different places people drink and party on campus? Tell me about a typical party night for you? What is your view of the drinking scene on campus? Describe what your ideal night out would be? The majority of the questions were very open-ended as I wanted to have the least amount of influence in the response that was given.

### **Data and Analysis**

As I mention before, every college has a drinking culture. The objective during my research was to observe and record different aspects of three different colleges drinking cultures, and to analyze the differences in these cultures. Throughout all of my findings, my main and most powerful conclusion stems from the underlying fact that; the social structure of a college campus along with its drinking policy plays the most pivotal role in creating the drinking culture in which its student body will be subjected to. My main focus was the drinking culture here at Trinity College, and hence the majority of my research revolved around conversations, interviews and observations I obtained from the Trinity student body.

While assessing all of my data, I was presented with three main themes:

1. Student perception—the way students view drinking and the difference between international students views and that of American students
2. Policy—the policy of colleges towards drinking on campus



3. Social Structure—which focuses on the social structures of a college and their role in creating a drinking atmosphere for that college.

### **Student Perception**

Similar to the literature presented by Hyunyi Cho referring to the “normative drinking behavior” of college students, which reveals the misperception of student acceptance towards alcohol consumption and their peers, many of my casual conversations with students reflected this view. One student whom I interviewed when asked about drinking on campus replied, *“On campus drinking is kind of ridiculous, it is uncontrollable and everywhere...”*

American vs. International: The most interesting information regarding student perception of drinking arose from the view international students had to college drinking in comparison to that of American students. Through my conversations and interviews, a common denominator arose—international students seemed to view drinking as a social event while American students engaged in drinking with the sole purpose of getting drunk. This cultural difference revolving around binge drinking is part of American drinking culture, hence, the application of playing drinking games to get drunk faster, funneling beers, taking shots, etc. One American student when asked how they drank mentioned, *“It varies, I guess; its like games or taking shots,”* in comparison to an international student who mentioned how he had to, *“adapt myself to this way of drinking...having games which we are not doing in Europe, cause there it’s usually drinking and talking to people...Here its more like funneling; get drunk as fast as you can.”* This “drink to get drunk” approach to

drinking is not exclusive to Trinity, or the other two colleges I observed, it is a culture construct of American society. One international student mentioned, *“I guess that’s how it works here in colleges; it’s not just Trinity... Everyone from my country, my friends at least, I know, they think the same way.”* I believe this approach to drinking is pre-constructed or formed by students before they enter college, and it is the environment of a college that acts as a catalyst for this kind of drinking to take place.

### **School Policies Towards Alcohol**

A very intricate part in determining the drinking environment of a college campus is the policy by which that college abides by. These policies may be strict, lenient or moderate. From my observations and examples given, here is a break down of the three college policies.

Trinity College: After my observations of on campus drinking and my interviews with students, I have concluded that Trinity’s policy towards alcohol consumption is extremely tolerant/lenient. My position as a Resident Assistant (RA) has also given me some insider knowledge behind the written policy of the school towards alcohol consumption on campus, and the unspoken policies carried out. In terms of enforcement, RA’s are told to turn a blind eye when students are seen drinking from plastic red cups that no doubt contain alcohol, and if students are caught with a beer can or alcohol bottle in hand, generally a verbal warning is the punishment issued. Although this is not the written policy procedure, this is the procedure that is carried out. In many cases, if an RA breaks up a party, only the

person(s) room that the party is in will be liable. The other students present at the party are generally asked to disperse with no repercussion.

Wesleyan: While observing and analyzing what kind of policy Wesleyan holds towards drinking on-campus, the best example stems from a global email that was sent out to the student body the beginning of April. The letter read, "Leading up to warmer weather, the WSA would like to remind students who are of age that they are allowed to drink outside on campus property, but there are restrictions and limitations...Be safe, have fun, and if you're of age, drink responsibly. Let's have a great spring!" I believe it is fair to say that Wesleyan has a pretty lenient policy towards drinking on-campus.

Connecticut College: Field notes--While talking to several senior students who were members of the Student Government Association (SGA), they elaborated on the policy changes the school administration had taken and why. The dynamics of the administration had changed as of two years ago due to new members, these members brought along with them a new outlook on the best methods in terms of dealing with student drinking. Students are allowed to register kegs for parties in their dorms, but because of the administration's new stricter policies, the process of registering a keg has greatly increased. One keg can be registered every 3 weeks, and only one keg is allowed on the North End and one on the South End of campus a night. Contracts are signed and any breach within the contract can lead to serious disciplinary repercussions. The new hassles and difficulties that are now attached to registering a keg for a party has cut down on the amount of keg parties on campus,

said one senior. No open containers of alcohol are allowed on campus, and I was informed, even if a campus safety officer suspected a student were drinking they would investigate the matter. Even before I arrived on campus I was stopped by school security at the front gate and denied access from entering unless I had a student from the school “call me in”. From the information provided, I conclude that Connecticut College holds a strict stance when it comes to drinking on campus. This may correlate with the dissatisfaction many of the students spoke about in regards the “nightlife” there on campus.

### **Social Structure**

The social structure of a college, and lack there of, plays a vital role in creating the drinking atmosphere for that college. The main social structures that played a factor in the three colleges I observed were: dorms, fraternities, pubs, student lounge, and outdoor areas. Here is a breakdown of the three colleges and their social structures.

Trinity: The full-time undergraduate student body consists of 2,240 students, 50% female, and 50% male. Trinity’s 100-acre campus is located directly in the capital city of Hartford, Connecticut. The nightlife on Trinity’s campus is dominated by Greek life, mainly the fraternities. Even though the college is located in the city, the majority of students when asked about the places they drink responded with answers that did not include venturing outside of the school grounds. From the eight interviews conducted with Trinity students, all students, when asked where they drink, responded with, “...the dorm rooms or fraternities.” When asked, “Why do you go to the frats?”, one student responded with, “*Because that’s the only social*

*scene on campus...*" This was a common thread throughout the interviews and also in my conversations with Trinity students.

*Fraternities:* Not all are welcome at the fraternities. This creates a characteristic of exclusivity, which the fraternities thrive on in terms of gaining popularity. Generally, the more exclusive a fraternity, the more popular it is. With this being said, there are only three fraternities on campus that students attend "late night"--the Trinity term for partying anytime after 11pm. The general rule of thumb is, female students can get into parties pretty easy, but male students have to know a brother who is part of that fraternity to come let them in. For example, my own experience this spring:

I arrive outside of [the fraternity] where I am stopped by one fraternity brother and one pledge. The pledge I know generally well as he had just spent a few days staying in my house over spring break down in Florida. I was informed I needed to call a brother to allow me access in. (Field notes, March 27<sup>th</sup>,2009)

Even though the person at the door had just stayed in my house, the rules apply for everyone. Only fraternity brothers have the authority to allow people in, and since my friend was a pledge (soon to be brother), he had no say in the matter. "Late night" takes place in the basements of the fraternities where free beer is served, music is played loudly and there is a lot of dancing. Out of the eight interviews conducted, all Trinity students mentioned the fraternities as the place they would attend after drinking in the dorm rooms. When in the fraternity, the line for beer is

always long, even though there are two or three brothers behind the bar serving at the same time. The majority of people mentioned that the fraternities were good resources to see people you do not generally get to see during the week. Some responded by saying they enjoyed dancing and the fact there was free beer available. Even though “late night” is a social gathering, the social setting in the fraternities does not produce an environment whatsoever to have an engaging conversation with someone.

The music being played is rather loud, and the hustle and bustle of people doesn't really cater to socializing...1a.m.—the lights are off at this stage and the volume of people has significantly increased. The dank atmosphere is extremely noticeable in my sober state; something I realize is lost in translation through the consumption of alcohol. (Field notes, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009)

Come 2:30am, people gradually leave and by 3:30am the music has stopped, the lights are on, and the basement is practically empty.

The frats can afford to be exclusive and still have a lot of people at their parties due to the basic principle of supply and demand. The social set up at Trinity College has created this demand due to the lack of alternative options on campus. As one student put it, *“I go with my friends cause it's what everyone else is doing but I also don't feel like there's very many other options...on campus on a Saturday night.”* The findings of Barrett Seaman and other researchers on the topic of what factors tend to create the normative drinking behaviors on college campuses -- the presence

of fraternities and sororities -- is crucial in order to grasp and understand the drinking culture here at Trinity.<sup>2</sup> "The principles of fraternities and sororities anathema to the principles institutions espouse, but alcohol abuse, sexism, racism, destruction of property, and rape are the kinds of problems frequently associated with the groups today".<sup>3</sup> Fraternity theme parties here at Trinity such as, "Golf pros & Tennis Ho's" or "Playboy" are examples of the sexism that is associated with fraternities. Even if students do not want to be associated with such establishments, there is a lack of alternatives on campus to venture out to. When I asked one female student why she went to the fraternities, she responded by saying, "Cause that's the only social scene on campus." With this being the case, some students feel as if, "you can't really get away from it even if you want to; you're just like drawn in and it completely encompasses you, even when you don't want to go out you're just pulled to go out cause it's the only thing to do...it's unavoidable." With this being the case, the students are the one's who perpetuated the college environment, even those who do not practically enjoy it.

Wesleyan; Wesleyan University is located just 17-miles outside of Hartford. The undergraduate class consists of 2,700 students. Similar to Trinity, Wesleyan is a small liberal arts college recognized academically throughout the nation. Wesleyan also has fraternities, however the fraternities at Wesleyan differ greatly than the fraternities at Trinity. Wesleyan, unlike Trinity, does not have the same exclusivity

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<sup>2</sup> Seaman, Barret. *Binge: What Your College Student Won't Tell You*:

<sup>3</sup> J.M.Maisel, "Social fraternities and sororities are not conducive to the educational process" *NASPA Journal*, 28, 8-12, 1990

factor associated with its Greek life culture, and as a result, the unwelcoming attitude one is greeted with at the entrance of the Trinity fraternities is a foreign notion to the fraternity culture at Wesleyan. Instead of being lead downstairs into a basement, the door you walk through to join the party leads you into a spacious living room area with a 40-ft ceiling that is a continual breath of fresh air. Beer is provided for free and on regular occasions, at least one of the fraternities will have a live band playing on one night of the weekend. Depending on the band, there may be a cover charge in order to cover the cost. While talking to students at Wesleyan about the places they drank, they too mentioned drinking in their dorms first before heading out to the frats. One student mentioned a bar that was located down the street, that some of the students may go out to because they knew the bouncer at the door which meant it was easier to get in if you were not twenty one.

While in one of the fraternities, a few of the fraternity brothers painted the picture of what a party would usually look like at their frat. They mentioned that there would be two or three kegs available for people to drink from, and generally the party begins in the living room area, and then relocates to the basement where they would continue to listen to music and dance. One of the brothers mentioned that another reason for having to move the party into the basement was due to the noise level and the fact the fraternities are not technically situated on campus and resident homes are in the immediate surrounding area. It was also mentioned how it would not be too uncommon for the cops to come break up a party if the noise level was extremely loud.



*Differences between Trinity and Wesleyan Frats:* After evaluating the fraternity scene at Wesleyan and at Trinity, it was clear to see that there are some extremely noticeable differences between the two. Although the fraternities at each school are resources for drinking, socializing and dancing, the structural set up of how these different aspects of college life are carried out hold the key for the make up and environment that is created. The dark, dank basement setting of Trinity's main late night fraternities in comparison to the spacious living room environment; the exclusivity of the fraternities here at Trinity in comparison to the fraternities at Wesleyan. The fraternities at Trinity rarely ever have to deal with Hartford police coming to break up a party. These are some of the different characteristics that help form the drinking culture of each individual school. It seems as if students drinking in the fraternities here at Trinity are in some sort of bubble, a bubble where they do not have to worry about the laws of the outside world. This sense of invincibility may play a role in the mindset students obtain when it comes to drinking in these environments, one that views the high consumption of alcohol as the norm.

Connecticut College: Situated on the coast of southern New England, Connecticut College is a highly selective private liberal arts college with 1900 students. The 750-acre arboretum campus overlooks the Long Island Sound with its student population divided between 40% male students and 60% female. Unlike Trinity and Wesleyan, Connecticut College does not have any fraternities on campus. Their main social drinking establishment that is provided by the school is that of an on-campus pub.

*Pub Scene:* Students work at the bar but adult hired management runs it. The pub seats 70 people comfortably and fits approx 100. The manager informed me that his goal is to take in \$250 a night, which would mean a solid 30 customers per night. On a busy night, like every Tuesday night which is dubbed “Senior Night”, it would not be too surprising for the till take to exceed \$900. Although the pub is provided by the school and is located directly in the center of campus, the national drinking age of 21 plays a major role in the dynamics of people who can avail of this resource. Nobody under the age of 21 is allowed into the pub, and this rule is strictly enforced. To even enter the pub, one must be let in from the student worker from the inside as the outer door is locked; then you are immediately asked for proof of age. Because of these restrictions, the majority of the student body cannot take advantage of this space provided and hence the Connecticut College student body has been forced to focus their drinking environment else where—the dorms.

*Dorm Structure:* All sophomore, junior, and senior dorms are singles, which drives the major parties to take place out in the halls. These hallway parties seem to be the main attraction for the student body that wish to go out drinking on campus. These hall parties generally consist of students congregating outside of their rooms while drinking alcohol and listening to music. When I asked some of the senior students at Connecticut College about the nightlife, the general response filtered towards the theme of dullness. This in turn was followed by explanations around the strictness and new policies enforced by the administration in regards to drinking on-campus, especially since the fall semester saw 26 students being brought to hospital due to alcohol related incidents. One senior student mentioned how he had noticed a

difference from his freshmen year to his senior year, in regards to the administration clamping down on alcohol consumption on campus. This change in policy was the main reason he saw responsible for the decline in the overall enjoyment of the nightlife around campus.

## **Conclusion**

The culture of drinking on college campuses will be most affected by the social structures and policies of each individual college. College students will continue to engage in binge drinking unless America as a whole can change the perception of college aged students in their approach to drinking alcohol. I believe that alcohol is used as a social lubricant in both American and international culture, but obviously the approach by the two when it comes to consuming alcohol, and the reason for it, is greatly different. I believe the best solution for changing this perception is by lowering the drinking age back to 18. The 135 college presidents currently part of the Amethyst Initiative whom seek to change federal law also see lowering the drinking age to be the best solution in terms of tackling binge drinking.

An additional solution that would “curb” binge drinking on college campuses, especially one such as Trinity that is dominated by the fraternity scene, is to create alternative venues for students to socialize late at night. From my own personal observations and interviews, these venues may come in the form of an on campus pub, or a student lounge where students may gather late at night past midnight and socialize over music or food. The environment that these venues create is crucial for the manner of socializing that will occur.

