Should the Drinking Age be Changed to 18?
Implications of the Amethyst Initiative

In 1984, Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which imposed a penalty of 10% of a state's federal highway appropriation on any state setting its drinking age lower than 21. In July 2008, a coalition of 120 college and university administrators endorsed what is called The Amethyst Initiative, which is designed to open a dialog on the wisdom of changing the drinking age to 18. These educators indicated that their goal was not to make alcohol more freely available to young people but rather to open up a discussion about the implications of the current law. These leaders in higher education argue that the current law is not preventing alcohol abuse by college age young people and that a dangerous culture of binge drinking has developed on college campuses. Their position, as stated on their website is, “The Amethyst Initiative supports informed and unimpeded debate on the 21 year-old drinking age. Amethyst Initiative presidents and chancellors call upon elected officials to weigh all the consequences of current alcohol policies and to invite new ideas on how best to prepare young adults to make responsible decisions about alcohol use.”

The educators argue that the current law is not obeyed by most students. Many drink illegally and use illegal IDs to circumvent the age restrictions that are seen by them to be unreasonable. This encourages impressionable young people to view laws in a way that may encourage ethical compromise in other situations. Another problem is that the prohibition on alcohol does not provide a means for an appropriate socialization of drinking behavior. The frequent result is clandestine binge drinking and the encouragement of risk taking in association with drinking. Such risk taking may lead to
other types of risk such as driving while intoxicated and inappropriate decision making related to sexual activities.

Critics of the Amethyst Initiative present their own arguments. Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD) cites a decline in deaths and injuries due to drunk driving by youth under 21 as strong support for continuing the ban. This group estimates that 25,000 lives have been saved by the minimum legal drinking age. Another critic notes that a flaw in the logic is that it is “built on the mistaken belief that college students binge drink because alcohol is illegal. …For a lot of young people, drinking to intoxication is kind of the point.2”

Whatever the outcome of this initiative, named because of the Greek legend that wearing an amethyst ring would prevent drunkenness, it is clear that it is important to have the discussion about drinking by young people both on and off campus. Alcohol abuse by young people continues to grow and there are many serious consequences paid in lives as well as wasted opportunities for irresponsible use.

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1  http://www.amethystinitiative.org

2: The Cornell Daily Sun, September 19, 2008