

What Students Think about Drinking and Alcohol Policies: Feedback on the #RethinkTheDrink Talkback Tour

In 2016, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse collaborated with a social media company on a project featuring events across Canada that were held to discuss binge-drinking culture with students. The #RethinkTheDrink Talkback Tour travelled to universities and colleges from St. John's to Victoria. #RethinkTheDrink was inspired by White Pine Pictures' documentary *Girls' Night Out*, itself based on the book *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol* (Johnston, 2013).

As part of the tour, participating male and female students were asked to provide feedback about alcohol-related issues by completing a paper questionnaire. This report summarizes that feedback.

Binge drinking

In Canada, 35% of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions had five drinks or more at least once in the past two weeks (American College Health Association, 2016).

Purpose

The university and college community needs to improve its understanding of students' attitudes toward alcohol-related issues so that it can tailor interventions to reduce alcohol-related harms within the community. To contribute to this understanding, the #RethinkTheDrink questionnaire sought information on the following themes:

- Attitudes toward alcohol use, drinking culture, and alcohol programs and policies
- Knowledge and awareness about alcohol

Results

Between February and December 2016, a total of 318 students from 18 colleges and universities across the country completed the questionnaire. Among those, 92.5% (n = 291) reported that they drink alcohol and 8.5% (n = 27) said they never drink alcohol.

Attitudes Toward Drinking

Drinking is a social activity. The most common reasons for drinking are to be social (66%) and to celebrate (59%). About one in three students report drinking to relax. However, drinking to feel exhilarated or drunk is also reported by 18% of students.



It is socially accepted to get drunk. Only 11% of students reported it was never okay to get drunk.¹ The most common reasons for getting drunk are to celebrate (74%), to bond with friends (46%) and to relieve stress or anxiety (27%).

The percentage of students who reported peer pressure is high. More than half of drinkers (53%) reported to have experienced at least one situation in which they felt pressured to drink alcohol more than they wanted to.

However, it was also common for students to report not drinking in situations when they normally would have (83%). The most common reasons for choosing not to drink were avoiding a hangover (35%), feeling unwell (25%) or needing to take a break – a night off – from drinking (22%).

Attitudes Toward Alcohol Programs and Policies

Students were asked about what might be appropriate alcohol policies for campuses organized into three broad categories: general control policies, security and policing policies, and education and prevention policies.

Generally, students seemed to favour less alcohol control. For example, a sizeable percentage strongly disagreed or disagreed with the following statements: the drinking age should be increased (66%) and increasing the price of alcohol on campus would decrease consumption (51%).

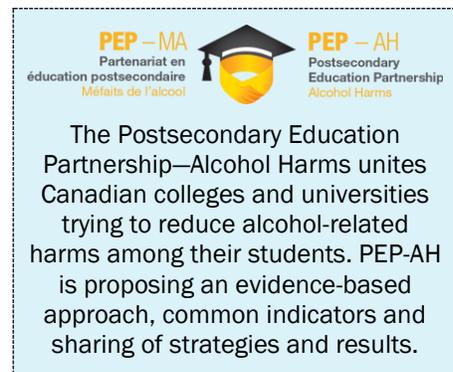
However, a majority of students endorsed aspects of campus security and enforcement. About three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: serving staff at campus functions should refuse intoxicated customers (79%); and campus police should conduct more spot checks for illegal alcohol use (e.g., drunk driving, public drunkenness, etc.) (67%).

Students attitudes about education around alcohol use and prevention measures for alcohol harms were also very positive, with 81% agreeing or strongly agreeing with more education programs on campus.

Students were asked about the kind of programs and policies that could curb binge drinking on campuses. Response options reflected the five strategic areas of the Postsecondary Education Partnership—Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH): health promotion, prevention and education, campus services, availability and marketing, pricing of alcohol and community action (Table 1).

Overall, students were more likely to recommend interventions in the areas of community action, campus services and education.

Large proportions of students expressed favourable opinions for safe transportation alternatives (87%), counselling (85%), emergency health services (77%) and alcohol education on campus (77%). Students were less likely to endorse interventions targeting the availability and the affordability of alcohol. However, a significant percentage of students (80%) strongly agreed or agreed that at campus events where alcohol is sold, lower-strength and non-alcoholic beverages should be available and inexpensive to purchase.



¹ When non-drinkers are included, the proportion of students saying it is never okay to get drunk raises to 14%.



Table 1: Students opinions about programs and policies to curb binge drinking (n = 318)

PEP-AH's Strategic Areas	Programs and Policies	Strongly agree or agree	Neither agree or disagree	Strongly disagree or disagree
Health Promotion, Prevention and Education	There should be more alcohol education on campus.	77.2%	16.8%	6.1%
	My university health services should provide counselling to help students reduce their alcohol use.	85.4%	12.1%	2.5%
Campus Services	My university administration should strengthen emergency health services to respond to medical emergencies related to alcohol.	76.5%	20%	3.5%
	Universities should limit advertising, marketing of alcohol, and sponsorship activities that promote alcohol on campus.	52.8%	33.5%	13.6%
Availability and Marketing	My university administration should exercise more control over alcohol use on campus.	40.6%	37.5%	21.9%
	There should be minimum prices for the sale of alcohol beverages on campus.	38.5%	43%	18.5%
Pricing of Alcohol	There should be a ban on price promotions, discount sales, and flat rates for unlimited drinking or other types of volume sales on campus (e.g., ladies' night).	30.4%	38.3%	31.3%
	At campus events where alcohol is sold, lower-strength and non-alcoholic beverages should be available and inexpensive to purchase.	79.7%	14.9%	5.4%
Community Action	There should be a Campus and Community working group established to address alcohol-related issues (e.g., disciplinary jurisdiction over off-campus disturbances; working with bars close to campus to ensure proper training & responsible training, etc.)	64.6%	27.2%	8.2%
	My university administration should encourage safe transportation alternatives (e.g., public transportation, pre-paid taxi).	87.3%	9.5%	3.2%

When asked what they believe would be the most effective interventions to reduce alcohol-related harms among students, education was ranked highest. One in four (25%) students reported that more alcohol education on campus would reduce harm. The second most popular response, given by 23% of students, was that university administration should encourage safe transportation alternatives (e.g., public transportation, pre-paid taxi).

Knowledge and Awareness about Alcohol

Among students, alcohol literacy is low. Three quarters of students (74%) have never heard about *Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines* (LRDGs). Nearly 40% of students did not know that a 12-ounce glass of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine and a 1.5-ounce glass of spirits/liquor contains the same amount of alcohol. According to one in four students (27%), a 1.5-ounce glass of spirits/liquor contains more alcohol than a standard drink of beer or wine.



Ready to Change?

The questionnaire captured a willingness among students to address binge drinking. When asked what they planned to do as a result of participating in the #RethinkTheDrink event, about a third (37%) said they will talk about binge drinking with their friends and another third (31%) indicated they plan to learn more about strategies for responsible drinking. Almost one quarter of students (22%) reported that the discussion led them to consider changing their drinking habits and drinking within Canada's LRDGs.

Data Limitations

- The data was derived from a convenience sample of students who attended a #RethinkTheDrink event. Therefore the results cannot be generalized to the broader postsecondary education student population.
- In accordance with colleges and universities ethics requirements, the anonymous questionnaire did not include socio-demographic questions. As such, it is not possible to know whether these results differ according to gender, age or year of study, for example.

Implications

Students drink, and they do so to celebrate and to be social, and the vast majority of them agreed that it is okay to get drunk. Unfortunately, data show that 55% of postsecondary students in Canada experience at least one negative alcohol-related consequence during a year (American College Health Association, 2016).

Results from this feedback highlight students' eagerness to learn more about alcohol-related issues and approaches to addressing them. This might not be surprising given their low level of awareness about basic issues such as the LRDGs and what is a standard drink. Three out of four students reported that there should be more alcohol education on campus. Moreover, students believed that across all alcohol programs and policies, alcohol education is the intervention that is the most likely to reduce alcohol-related harms. In that regard, there is no single solution for colleges and universities determined to focus on health education, promotion and prevention. The results highlight the need for a multi-pronged, collective response. PEP-AH, which currently comprises 35 colleges and universities across eight provinces, is committed to developing, implementing and sharing new strategies and initiatives, and dedicated to measuring results to learn from collective experiences. Universities and colleges are encouraged to join PEP-AH and help reduce alcohol-related harms among students.

To Learn More

Use the [Information Request](#) page to ask to be added to PEP-AH distribution list.

Join the conversation online to help create a healthier society, free of the harms of substance use, by following @CCSACanada.



References

- American College Health Association. (2016) *National College Health Assessment II: Canadian Reference Group, Executive Summary, Spring 2016*. Hanover, Md.: Author.
- Dowsett Johnston, A. (2013). *Drink: The intimate relationship between women and alcohol*. Toronto, Ont.: Harper Collins.
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