

**ECONOMICS OF PREVENTION:  
THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF ALCOHOL USE ON COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance abuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 21 public and private colleges and universities in Missouri. Campus conduct officials, law enforcement, and campus prevention professionals take part in local coalitions and the statewide PIP coalition. The unique composition brings together different perspectives on prevention efforts.

**INTRODUCTION TO ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE**

Alcohol and substance use are behaviors common among college students. Over half (73.5%) of 18 to 20 year olds Missouri college students reported having consumed alcohol in the past month (4). This number is even higher among those aged 21 or older (1). While it is well documented that the most at risk group - especially among student populations - is those that binge drink (consuming 5 or more drinks in a 2 hour period), the majority of drinkers on college campuses consume alcohol in moderation and do not binge drink (6). Unfortunately the majority of accidents and harms occur among this group of drinkers, as they are considerably more numerous than binge drinkers. Collectively it is both binge and non-binge drinkers who attribute to the cost and consequences of alcohol use at colleges and universities.

**CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHICS OF DRINKERS AND DRUG USERS**

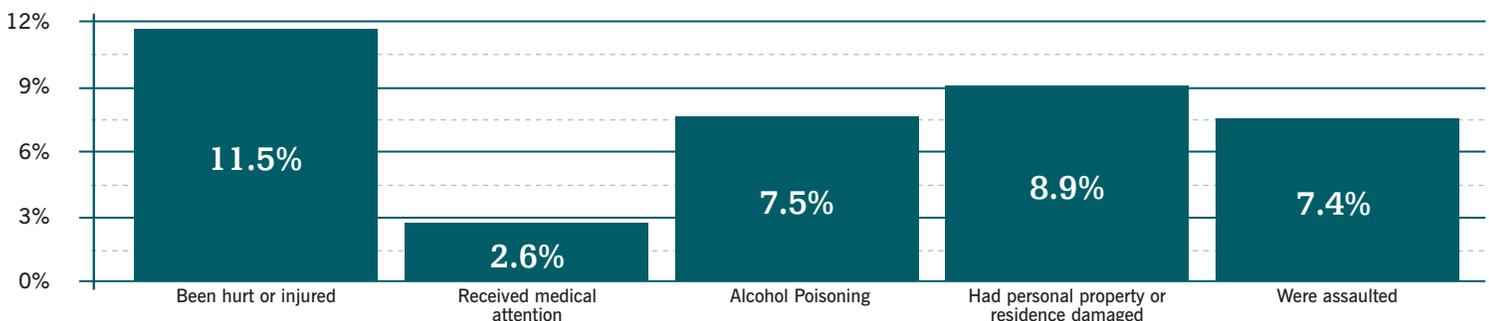
Of the 21 member campuses in the PIP coalition, more than 3 in 4 of their college students reported themselves as drinkers, which is indicative of nationwide numbers

for colleges and universities (4). While only 47% of these respondents were of legal drinking age, it is apparent that alcohol use is a common behavior among institutions of higher education, regardless of student age or other demographic characteristics (4).

**HOW DRINKING COSTS MONEY**

Each year, alcohol is a contributing factor in over 500,000 injuries, 600,000 assaults, and over 1,500 deaths of college students (5). These implications are only a fraction of the consequences of alcohol and substance use on campuses. More common problems and consequences of such behavior are property damage, vandalism, health problems, and sexual violence all of which incur an expense to colleges and universities (4). Even when accounting for these cost and consequences, the complete impact of substance use is not fully captured by data alone. While it is apparent that drug and alcohol abuse results in tremendous financial burdens on universities and communities, the best approach to reduce these costs is reducing the frequency and severity of these behaviors through prevention based programming.

**Self-Reported Consequences of Drinking Among Missouri College Students (MCHBS 2013)**



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## HOW MUCH PREVENTION COSTS AND WHY IT SAVES MONEY

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Understanding the cost of substance use to the state serves to help assess the impact of consumption. While the initial cost of implementing a wide-scale prevention program on a college or university campus may serve as a deterrent, the costs of such programming are relatively minor when compared to the expense of alcohol and substance use incurred by a college or university. For every \$1 spent on prevention programming, returned benefits and savings average over 100% of invested cost (2). For more effective programming, returned benefits and savings can account for over 1000% of investment (2) (3). This does not even begin to account for incalculable effects of prevention programming on an individual's health and wellbeing.

## RETENTION AMONG STUDENTS

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More directly, one of the more serious and long term consequences as it becomes associated with direct cost to a college or university is retention. Increased alcohol use on campuses has been shown to have a direct effect on student retention (8). Retention not only helps maintain revenue that would otherwise be lost, but reduces the loss of the most productive and successful students, as well as helping to sustain a larger alumni base (8). While alcohol use obviously has strong long term implications for colleges and universities, even short term costs associated with student retention can be staggering. Considering the average undergraduate student population among the University of Missouri System (13,187) and the average cost of tuition and fees alone (\$7,415), a loss of only 0.05% of an undergraduate class could directly contribute to a loss of revenue in excess of \$400,000. Taking into account the rate of Missouri college students that reported alcohol abuse/dependency (3.2%) and that other revenue sources (books, room and board, out of state tuition, etc.) were excluded, this is an extremely conservative estimate that serves to highlight why alcohol abuse

incurs an extreme expense to a college or university and why prevention programming is both important and financially prudent. A further examination of alcohol and retention will be examined in the coming months in another Volume 2 brief.

## BENEFITS OF PREVENTION

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Employing alcohol and drug prevention programs on campus, apart from reducing the risks and consequences of these behaviors, provides a cost-effective incentive for colleges and universities. Effective prevention programs can, on average, return over \$2.00 for every dollar spent by reducing accidents, injuries, crime, and health costs on campus (2). Apart from contributing to safer campuses by reducing risky behavior and helping to contribute to an atmosphere more conducive to learning, prevention programs can help to reduce costs incurred by colleges and universities as a result of these behaviors. This does not begin to account for any reasonable gains in student success and wellbeing. While the economic incentive of prevention programs is thus apparent, they are merely a secondary benefit to a college or university that can provide a healthier and safer academic experience to its students.

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### Citations

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