

## COLLEGES: DRINKING AGE 'NOT WORKING'

### Presidents say lowering from 21 may cut binges

BY STEPHEN KIEHL  
[SUN REPORTER]

Top university officials in Maryland — including the chancellor of the state university system and the president of the Johns Hopkins University — say the current drinking age of 21 “is not working” and has led to dangerous binges in which students have harmed themselves and others.

Six college and university presidents in Maryland are among more than 100 nationwide who have signed a statement calling for a public debate on rethinking the drinking age. It is a rare joint effort by the leaders of religious, liberal arts and large research universities to curb what they see as the top student-life issue on their campuses.

“Kids are going to drink whether it’s legal or illegal,” said Johns Hopkins President William R. Brody, who supports lowering the drinking age to 18. “We’d at least be able to have a more open dialogue with students about drinking as opposed to this sham where people don’t want to talk about it because it’s a violation of the law.”

The presidents of the University of Maryland, College Park; Towson University; the College of Notre Dame of Maryland; Goucher College; Washington College and the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute signed the statement, along with the presidents of Duke, Dartmouth and Ohio State University.

“How many times must we relearn the lessons of prohibition?” the statement says. “Adults under 21 are deemed capable of voting, signing contracts, serving on juries and enlisting in the military, but are told they are not mature enough to have a beer.”

Each state has the authority to set its own drinking age, but in 1984 Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which says that states with a drinking age lower than 21 will lose 10 percent of their federal highway money. After that

law passed, all 50 states raised their drinking age to 21.

The first step for the presidents, who are part of the so-called Amethyst Initiative, is to work for repeal of that law as part of next year’s transportation reauthorization bill. They see the challenge, given the passions ignited by the issue, but say they are desperate to confront the problem of drinking on and off college campuses.

“We have this law that in effect prevents any state from exploring new ways of addressing the issue,” said William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the Maryland state university system. “We have a crisis on our hands. We need some new ideas and new thinking.”

He said the debate should not be just about lowering the drinking age. It’s more important, he said, to focus on better alcohol abuse education on campuses or in driver education courses. But now, he said, new ideas can’t be tested because of the federal law.

Advocates of the 21-year-old drinking age say it has saved thousands of lives. They say lowering the age will pass the drinking problem down the line to high school students and that national surveys have found the public supports keeping the age at 21.

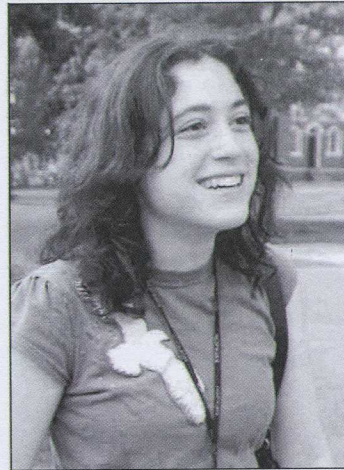
“Drunk driving used to be a part of American culture until someone stood up and said we need to make a change, and 25 years later ‘designated driver’ is a commonplace term in every household in America,” said Caroline Cash, executive director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving for Maryland and Delaware.

She said she was disappointed that the university presidents did not talk with MADD before signing the statement. She said she also questions their commitment to upholding the law.

“It gives me great pause to think of sending thousands of students onto a campus where the person who is most accountable doesn’t seem to be devoted to ensuring their health and safety,” Cash said.

But university presidents say that is at the center of their concerns. They are worried about the binge drinking that underage students engage in before they go out — the goal being to get drunk as quickly as possible before going to public places where they won’t be served.

“If they drink too much in the be-



“It’s almost like contraband,” says Jamie Hittman, 20, a Hopkins junior from Columbia.

B. TAYLOR [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER] ginning [of an evening], they can get alcohol poisoning,” said Baird Tipson, president of Washington College in Chestertown. “They’re really not aware of how their judgment is impaired. We hope they don’t get into a car. Or, if they’re a young woman, go to a fraternity party. It’s just not healthy.”

He said at least 90 percent of the disciplinary cases that have come before him — including physical and sexual assaults — involve alcohol. And because underage drinking is forbidden on college campuses, students do it off-campus. That means getting home can be a problem, the presidents said.

“A lot of young people feel that they are afraid of enforcement” on campus, said Sanford J. Ungar, president of Goucher College. “They tend to get in a car and go someplace else — and that’s very, very dangerous. I worry about it every weekend.”

Several students interviewed yesterday at Johns Hopkins said lowering the drinking age could reduce binge drinking. “I think alcohol is seen, a lot of times, as a forbidden thing, and people want it,” said Jamie Hittman, 20, a junior from Columbia. “It’s almost like contraband. Once you get it, you have to drink all of it.”

Katie Buckheit, 19 and also a junior, said if people were exposed to drinking at a younger age, they would be more mature about it. “Maybe I’m being idealistic, but in Europe you can drink once you can see the bar;”



she said. "I think we should maybe take a lesson from what other countries are doing."

But Laura Kranish, an 18-year-old sophomore from Silver Spring, said students would drink as much as they do no matter what the drinking age is.

Robert Caret, the president of Towson University, says he personally believes 18 is a more reasonable drinking age than 21, but he is not working toward that end. Rather, he said, he welcomes the discussion.

"Let's debate the age and look at the pros and cons," he said. Caret, like the other presidents, knows he

is treading on delicate ground. But the officials say they have seen too much tragedy and too many lives ruined to abide the current policies.

"I really think we've got to somehow be able to control it better because what we have done now is driven it underground, and we can't do anything about it," said Tipson, the Washington College president. "There are a lot of things we could do if it wasn't underground."

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*Sun reporter Sumathi Reddy contributed to this article.*

