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The paradox and potential of 'drunk support'

Teresa Malcolm | Nov. 16, 2011

GETTING WASTED: WHY COLLEGE STUDENTS DRINK TOO MUCH AND PARTY SO HARD
By Thomas Vander Ven
Published by New York University Press, $19.95

The negative consequences of students? binge drinking on U.S. college campuses have been documented and well-publicized: failing grades, vandalism, fights, injuries, sexual assault, illness, hospitalization and even death from alcohol poisoning. ?All these bad things happen and yet, students continue to chase the alcohol high,? writes sociologist Thomas Vander Ven, whose new book takes on the question: Why? With all the potential for trouble, why do they do it?

Vander Ven, an associate professor at Ohio University in Athens, sets out to explore that question in *Getting Wasted: Why College Students Drink Too Much and Party So Hard*, with the hope that understanding the group dynamics of student drinking might lead to fresh insights into mitigating the harms.

That partying is fun might seem to be an obvious answer, and indeed students do talk about the fun, but through interviews with students about their drinking, and conducting field research as a (sober) observer at bars, house parties and student festivals, Vander Ven uncovers a more layered and interesting sociological picture underneath that simple idea.

The rituals and excitement of drinking together can inspire lighthearted absurdism (like one student?s story of wheeling a friend along a street in a found broken office chair), ?liquid courage? to initiate a romantic encounter, and bonding with friends. Describing a field observation at a bar in which a group of drinkers joyously, loudly cheer a friend?s arrival, Vander Ven notes, ?For college drinkers, being wasted often draws a good measure of peer support. While anger, tears, arguments, and violence can emerge during a drinking episode, students also reported feeling demonstrably appreciated ? even celebrated ? by their codrinkers.?

These may be the expected upsides to lowered inhibitions, but students? stories often reflected the idea that the downsides have their own rewards.

?Collective intoxication creates a new world of possibilities,? Vander Ven writes. ?Let?s call it ?drunkworld.?

In drunkworld, people fall down, slur their words, break things, laugh uncontrollably, act crazy, flirt, hook up, get sick, pass out, fight, dance, sing, and get overly emotional. Think of collective intoxication as an interesting place to visit where taken-for-granted human abilities (e.g., motor skills) are challenged and everyday interactions take on a dramatic air.?

What may most reinforce group binge drinking is a phenomenon Vander Ven calls ?drunk support.? Students? stories indicate that codrinkers take care of each other when crises hit. That could mean offering moral support in after an emotional altercation, or intervening when a sexual predator is trying to take advantage of a friend, or cleaning up someone who has vomited, or offering physical backup when a fight escalates to violence.

What it rarely seems to include, Vander Ven notes, is stepping in to stop a friend from drinking to a hazardous level in the first place (more often, he reports, a group ?buzz check? leads to concluding that someone needs to drink *more*).

Drunk support continues to the morning after, when comrades will suffer hangovers together and reassure someone who is feeling regret over actions taken the night before. (?That wasn?t you last night; that was the alcohol. You were wasted!?)

It?s particularly this aspect of students? drinking culture, the author argues, that leads them to believe they are more responsible drinkers than they actually are, and ?creates the perception that they are protected from the crises related to intoxication.? In this way, he says, drunk support paradoxically ?reduces the risk of drinking-related harm while, at the same time, it perpetuates the behavior that produces risk.?

Vander Ven sees pushing students toward total alcohol abstinence as an ideal but unrealistic goal for most. Instead, he proposes institutional harnessing of drunk-support culture in a strategy of harm reduction ? enlisting drinking students themselves, particularly by training them to recognize and head off potential alcohol poisoning or sexual victimization. It?s an intriguing idea that could perhaps use more elaboration than *Getting Wasted* offers. But for those concerned about the issue, the book is worth a read to get students? perspectives on the binge-drinking culture, and provoke thought on how to address the problems that stem from it.

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