

# Amethyst Initiative

The Amethyst Initiative was originated in June 2008 by John McCardell, former president of Middlebury College in Vermont and founder of Choose Responsibility, a non-profit organization devoted to stimulate informed and dispassionate public discussion about the presence of alcohol in American culture, and to consider policies that will effectively empower young adults ages 18 to 20 to make mature decisions about the place of alcohol in their own lives. While preparing to speak at a meeting of the Annapolis Group (a group of about 120 liberal arts colleges), McCardell contacted several Annapolis presidents, who were also long-time friends, to solicit their thoughts on the 21 year-old drinking age. The group unanimously decided to reopen the public debate over lowering the drinking age to 18.

## ***Why Amethyst?***

The word Amethyst is derived from the Ancient Greek words meaning “not” (a-) and “intoxicated” (methustos). According to Greek mythology, Amethyst was a young girl who incurred the wrath of the God Dionysus after he became intoxicated with red wine. Amethyst cried to Goddess Diana for help. Diana immediately turned the girl into a white stone. Upon discovering what had happened, Dionysus wept and, as his tears fell into his goblet, the wine spilled over the white rock, turning it purple. The purple gemstone amethyst was widely believed to be an antidote to the negative effects of intoxication. In Ancient Greece, drinking vessels and jewelry were often made of amethyst and used during feasts and celebrations to ward off drunkenness and to promote moderation (<http://www.amethystinitiative.org>).

## ***What's the problem with lowering the drinking age?***

It is logical to surmise that lowering the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) would only move the problem from colleges to high school campuses, where many students turn 18 during their senior year. If the legal age becomes 18, that means the 17, 16 and perhaps 15 year-olds who do not have friends over 21 to buy alcohol would probably be able to obtain it through 18 year-old peers. When the national legal drinking age was 18 (before 1984), the binge drinking rate among 12th graders was 41 percent; today it is 21 percent (David Rosenbloom, Join Together).

“I remember college campuses when we had 18 year-old drinking ages, and I honestly believe we’ve made some progress. To just shift it back down to the high schools makes no sense at all.”

-Donna Shalala,

University of Miami President

## ***Support and Opposition to the Amethyst Initiative***

Currently, 135 University Presidents and Chancellors throughout the United States have shown their support for the Amethyst Initiative, which represents less than four percent of all universities. Among the supporters, seven California colleges have signed the Initiative including:

- Dominican University of California
- Fielding Graduate Institute
- Occidental College
- Pomona College
- Santa Clara University
- Whittier College
- Chapman University

"The chancellors and I have come to the unanimous conclusion that, as leaders of the University of California, we do not intend to sign the statement [in support of the initiative]. Neither I nor my campus colleagues believe there is a compelling reason to change present law."

-Mark Yudof,

University of California President

Organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving have voiced their strong opposition as well as the president of the University of California system.

## ***They're adults, why shouldn't they be able to drink?***

History and a comprehensive review of research provides evidence that a drinking age of 21 has led to less drinking, fewer injuries, and fewer deaths.

- In 2007, California drivers between the ages of 18 and 20 who had been drinking alcohol caused 94 fatal traffic collisions and 1,854 injury collisions.
- California Highway Patrol (CHP) statistics show that in 2007, 2,171 people ages 18 to 20 were involved in a fatal or injury traffic collision in which one driver had been drinking alcohol.
- According to the CHP, in 2007, 43 people between the ages of 18 to 20 were killed in an alcohol-related traffic collision while 3,554 more were injured.
- One Michigan study found that after the MLDA was reduced to age 18, crashes involving drinking drivers increased by 35 percent. The number of nighttime single-vehicle crashes involving young men increased by 17 percent (Source-Preventing Highway Crashes by Raising the Legal Minimum Age for Drinking: An Empirical Confirmation. AC Wagenaar, University of Michigan - Journal of Safety Research, 1982 - <http://www.sambuca.umdl.umich.edu>).
- In 1978, Michigan raised the MLDA back to age 21 because of the costly and tragic results (Source-Preventing Highway Crashes by Raising the Legal Minimum Age for Drinking: An Empirical Confirmation. AC Wagenaar, University of Michigan - Journal of Safety Research, 1982 - <http://www.sambuca.umdl.umich.edu>).
- California will likely experience consequences similar to the State of Michigan if the MLDA is lowered from 21 to 18. In 1972, Michigan lowered the MLDA from 21 to 18 and alcohol-related fatalities and injuries increased (Source-Preventing Highway Crashes by Raising the Legal Minimum Age for Drinking: An Empirical Confirmation. AC Wagenaar, University of Michigan - Journal of Safety Research, 1982 - <http://www.sambuca.umdl.umich.edu>).

The brain does not fully develop until the age of 21 or even to the age of 25. Brain development in adolescence and into young adulthood can be impaired by heavy alcohol use. The hippocampus within the brain, responsible for learning and memory, has been found to be as much as 10 percent smaller in teens who abused alcohol than those of teens who did not abuse alcohol (Dr. John Nelson, former President, American Medical Association).

Binge drinking, which is defined as having five or more drinks on one occasion within a two hour span, can compromise a young person's decision-making abilities. This can result in dangerous behaviors such as unwanted or unsafe sexual activity, drunk driving, violence, or illegal drug use.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), early alcohol use, independent of other risk factors, strongly predicts the development of alcohol dependence. Of all people who ever meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol dependence in their lifetime, nearly half do so by age 21 and two-thirds by age 25.

### ***What the current law has achieved***

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Since passage of the federal law in 1984, when President Reagan signed the Uniform Drinking Age Act which posed a loss of federal transportation funding if states did not return the MLDA to 21, the number of young drivers involved in alcohol-related incidents has decreased as follows:

- Traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years of age have dropped by 13 percent (Source- NHTSA).
- Approximately 900 lives have been saved per year nationwide (Source-NHTSA).
- An estimated 22,000 lives have been saved by the MLDA of 21 since it was signed into law in 1984 (Source-FTC).
- Twenty-five percent fewer high school seniors drink today than in 1984 (Source-FTC).
- Teen binge drinking has been reduced. Fifteen percent fewer high school seniors engage in binge drinking today than in 1984 (Source-FTC).
- Between 1982 and 2003, alcohol-related fatal crashes involving teen drivers (ages 15 to 20) have dropped by more than half—from 22 per 100,000 licensed drivers in 1982 to fewer than 10 per 100,000 licensed drivers in 2003 (Source-FTC).
- Seventy-two percent of adults think lowering the drinking age will make alcohol more accessible to kids (Source-Nationwide Insurance National Survey 2008).

The current 21 year-old drinking age is an essential component of a comprehensive strategy to advance safety, healthy lifestyles, and address the negative consequences of youth using alcohol. The debate regarding the effects of the 21 year-old drinking age has already occurred in the scientific literature and the results have found that the current MLDA significantly reduces the many negative consequences related to alcohol use.