

College binge drinking worries many parents

Associated Press

Baton Rouge, La. – The bars line each side of Louisiana State University’s campus, offering free shots and other drink specials. So many choices, but Rebekah Monson knows the secret – drink fast and move on.

As college students head back to school, an American Medical Association survey released Wednesday shows binge drinking is among their parents’ top concerns: 95 percent said excessive drinking is a serious threat to their children and 85 percent said easy access to alcohol in college communities contributes to the problem.

“We can no longer treat binge drinking as a rite of passage. It’s a major health threat not only to binge drinkers but also to the people around them.” said Dr. J. Edward Hill, AMA’s chairman elect.

Binge drinking often is described as four drinks within an hour for a female or five drinks in an hour for a male. An estimated 44 percent of college students admit to binge drinking, and nearly one-fourth of those binge frequently.

College students don’t seem dissuaded by drinking-related deaths, including several fatalities during the last school year.

Adrian Heideman, a Chico State freshman, died after slugging down a bottle of brandy at a fraternity party last October. A UC Davis student, David Thornton, died after a drinking ritual on his 21st birthday in April 2000.

In a similar case, a University of Michigan student celebrating his 21st birthday died after downing his 20th shot in 10 minutes. An Old Dominion University student choked to death on his own vomit during a pledge-week drinking binge. A Colgate University student is facing four years in prison after crashing into a tree during a night of drinking, killing four students.

“Most students get here and think, ‘Oh, it’s freedom. I can do whatever I want without mom and dad finding out,’ ” said Kelly Hill, a junior at Michigan. “A lot of them don’t know what their limits are.”

LSU is the nation’s No. 2 party school behind the University of Tennessee, according to an annual list released last week by The Princeton Review. School officials hope to rid themselves of the image, particularly after the August 1997 death of a freshman who celebrated his acceptance into a fraternity with a night of drinking.

The stereotype is hard to shake because Louisiana fosters its fun-loving image to attract tourists. The state’s legal drinking age was raised from 18 to 21 only in 1995 – a law the Louisiana Supreme Court declared unconstitutional before it reversed itself.

Tailgating before LSU football games, Mardi Gras parades and crawfish boils typically involve beer. Students remember professors holding class in bars when the drinking age was 18 only a few years ago.

LSU is among 10 colleges nationwide participating in a \$17.5 million AMA-led initiative to curb binge drinking that started in 1996 with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Efforts include eliminating alcohol-industry sponsorships of athletics, mandating parental notification if underage students are caught with alcohol, increasing alcohol-free social events on campus and encouraging tavern owners to eliminate drink specials geared toward students.

The AMA telephone survey of 801 people 21 and older included 342 parents of college or college-bound high school students, a random sample considered nationally representative. It has a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

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