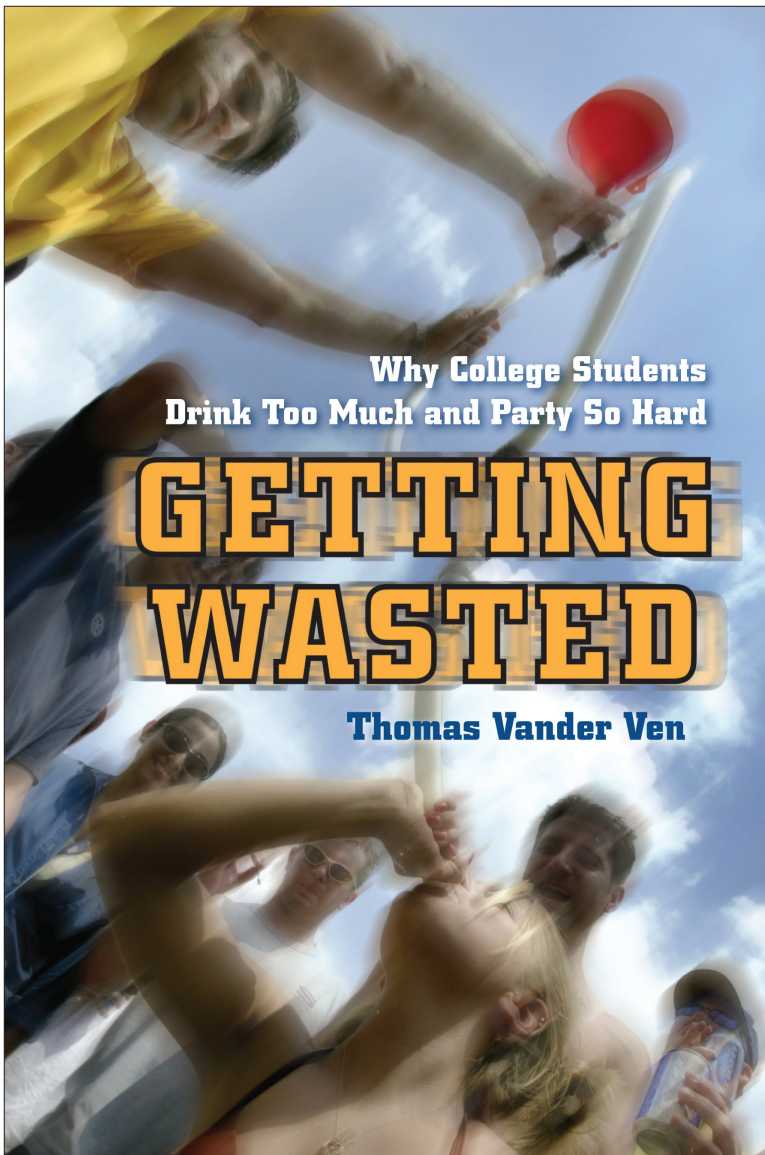


# Getting Wasted

Why College Students Drink Too Much  
and Party So Hard

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Most American college campuses are home to a vibrant drinking scene where students frequently get wasted, train-wrecked, obliterated, hammered, destroyed, and decimated. The terms that university students most commonly use to describe severe alcohol intoxication share a common theme: destruction, and even after repeated embarrassing, physically unpleasant, and even violent drinking episodes, students continue to go out drinking together. In *Getting Wasted*, Thomas Vander Ven provides a unique answer to the perennial question of why college students drink.

Vander Ven argues that college students rely on "drunk support:" contrary to most accounts of alcohol abuse as being a solitary problem of one person drinking to excess, the college drinking scene is very much a social one where students support one another through nights of drinking games, rituals and rites of passage. Drawing on over 400 student accounts, 25 intensive interviews, and one hundred hours of field research, Vander Ven sheds light on the extremely social nature of college drinking. Giving voice to college drinkers as they speak in graphic and revealing terms about the complexity of the drinking scene, Vander Ven argues that college students continue to drink heavily, even after experiencing repeated bad experiences, because of the social support that they give to one another and due to the creative ways in which they reframe and recast violent, embarrassing, and regretful drunken behaviors. Provocatively, *Getting Wasted* shows that college itself, closed and seemingly secure, encourages these drinking patterns and is one more example of the dark side of campus life.

229 PAGES

PAPER • 978-0-8147-8832-5

## THIS IS THE SHIT SHOW!

*An Introduction to College Drinking*

*pages 1-19*

---

### SUMMARY

This chapter opens with a description of the colorful terminology used by college students to describe their drinking, including wasted, obliterated, and hammered, with some reflection on what the use of those terms implies. Then the concept of “the Shit Show” is introduced: a term students use to describe the chaos of intensive drinking. College binge drinking is defined and the controversy around how to deal with it is laid out. While college drinking has been looked at on an individual level, few have studied its social aspects. The chapter also includes “A Very Brief History of American College Drinking.” The origins of student drinking are traced from the early days when academic was more a formality than a necessity for the wealthy students of the time, through the modern era with the influence of fraternity culture and movies upon student drinking. The chapter concludes with a description of how the schools in the study were chosen, and how the nature of the study allows college drinkers to tell their own stories, so that how students define and manage their experiences can emerge.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did the Amethyst Initiative advocate for a lowering of the drinking age?
- Why did groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) oppose the move? What do the statistics say?
- How has college drinking evolved over the years? What organizations and cultural influences have encouraged or discouraged it?
- What is your campus’ drinking culture like? What groups/trends/cultures/initiatives may have shaped it to be that way?

# GETTING WASTED

## *The Intoxication Process*

pages 20-49

---

### SUMMARY

In Chapter 2, Vander Ven establishes that drunkenness is an “arc,” not simply a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) number. The concept of “symbolic interactionalism” is introduced and used to explain the idea that society and social experiences are created through human interaction. This approach is then used to break down the process of getting wasted, beginning with the decision to drink. Various motivations and justifications are listed and explored, such as College is Synonymous with Drinking, “It’s My Birthday!” and School’s Out. Students employ reasoning that makes the decision to drink seem natural to the situation. Vander Ven then goes on to explore how students will consume alcohol. He highlights how students will dodge social controls like university Residence Advisors (RAs) to get alcohol into dorms, and the practices of pregaming and playing drinking games. He concludes by discussing strategies that students will use to try (and sometimes fail) to manage their intoxication. While there are many risks involved with drinking, students perceive many benefits as well, such as increased comfort in social situations.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the reasons students cite to justify their drinking? How are these reasons socially constructed? How do they intersect and overlap?
- How do drinking games impact alcohol consumption and socialization? How are playing to get drunk and playing to win different?
- What is “pregaming?” What purpose does it serve? What other rituals/practices do students engage in before going out to drink and why?

## BEING WASTED

*Fun, Adventure, and Transformation in the World of College Drinking*  
pages 50-78

---

### SUMMARY

Chapter 3 explores how students perceive drunkenness as a pleasant experience. The chapter begins by discussing how drinkers practice “positive peer confirmation” by simply being happy they have fellow drinkers around. It then goes on to examine how alcohol, often called a “social lubricant” or “liquid courage,” is perceived to create a separate, unique self: the “intoxicated self.” Connected to the concepts of self and identity, the intoxicated self can feel freed from social expectations and anxieties. Student drinkers will engage in behaviors, like dancing, that they might be hesitant to do otherwise. This can lead to drinkers feeling empowered, but can also lead to disruptive or dangerous behavior. Sexual victimization is statistically linked to alcohol use, for example. However, Vander Ven focuses on positive experiences in this chapter, and looks at how drinking leads to laughter and comedy, examining how the varied theories for why people laugh interact with drinking. The chapter concludes by suggesting that fun, separate from laughter, arises because the “drunk world” is unpredictable and adventurous, allowing college drinkers to step out of social constraints.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ How does race impact the college drinking experience? Do people of different racial backgrounds have different expectations put on their college drinking?
- ➔ Do students perform certain actions because they are drunk or because they have the excuse of being drunk? How do the two differ?
- ➔ Why do humans laugh? How are the theories given connected to drinking?

## WHEN EVERYTHING FALLS APART

*Meeting the Challenges of the College Drinking Scene*

pages 79-119

---

### SUMMARY

Chapter 4 outlines the various crises students may face while drinking, and how drinkers respond to them in ways that build social standing and connections. The concept of a “drinking crisis,” a negative outcome related to alcohol, is introduced. The drinking crises discussed are getting sick & vomiting, getting caught by RAs or police, getting into arguments, getting into fights, and sexual assault. Students run many risks by drinking, but they also can receive social rewards. Overcoming complications caused by alcohol can unite drinkers, as they develop and exercise “drunk support” for one another. Drunk support can include protection, nurturing, counseling, and even physical assistance in fights. Being a “good friend” to a drunk companion can build the perception that one is a more mature adult, capable of exercising these valuable skills and can be relied on. Alcohol is still risky, however, and can increase irritation and the risk that the drinker will endanger social relations (friendships, romantic relations) by being less concerned with their words and actions. The chapter addresses how nondrinkers and even those assisting their fellow drinkers can be irritated and alienated by drinking behavior, but students still take these risks together.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What skills does the author posit college drinkers may be learning in the course of their drinking episodes? Does practicing “drunk support” teach life skills? If so, which?
- How is the drunk experience gendered? What different expectations, allowances, and dangers occur for different genders?
- What risks do students run while practicing “drunk support?”

## THE MORNING AFTER

*Hangovers and Regrets**pages 120-152*

---

**SUMMARY**

The chapter makes clear that the effects of drinking persist after the night out. Students will feel physical effects (e.g. hangovers) as well as mental and social ones (e.g. embarrassment, shame, and regret). Students deny their hangovers, treat them with folk remedies or painkillers, talk down their impact, or re-frame them as a marker of a successful night out, the payment for the fun had the night before. However, as the chapter goes on to show, the mental and social ramifications must be tackled differently. Being carefree the night before leads to students becoming highly self-critical once more when they sober up. The actions they felt free to engage in the night before are newly perceived as regrettable. Students grapple with shame, which they worry has disconnected them from the larger peer network and social scene that they engage in. The chapter goes on to elaborate on how friends may negate the shame a drinker feels by helping them blame the alcohol or frame their actions as humorous, encouraging them to partake again. The chapter also makes note of the fact that many college drinkers age out of their binge drinking behavior as they become adults with stronger ties and responsibilities, while adult alcoholics usually don't have the social support that college students do.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- How do students manage hangovers? How does this compare/contrast to how they manage the social consequences of their actions?
- How do college binge drinkers compare to adult alcoholics as presented in the text?
- How is alcohol consumption linked to body-image/weight-gain issues and fears?

## USING DRUNK SUPPORT

*Responding to the Persistence of Heavy Drinking*

*pages 153-182*

---

### SUMMARY

The final chapter begins by looking at those students who don't drink in college, a significant minority. There are two types of nondrinkers presented: abstainers, who avoid drinking entirely and desistors who used to binge drink but ceased. The first group often practice abstinence as a result of their upbringing, including religious affiliation. The latter group has been insufficiently studied, but sometimes are the result of one bad drinking experience. The chapter then moves onto a full theory of why college students drink, and how the structure of drunk support could be used to fight college binge drinking. Vander Ven proposes that students have created a drinking culture where they believe they are protected from the consequences, even when evidence shows otherwise. Existing attempts to reduce college drinking have had little success, particularly among the demographics with the highest level of drinking. Vander Ven instead proposes that drunk support be utilized to help reduce the dangers of college drinking. Through a harm-reduction approach, students can get "in on the act" and feel they have a measure of authority and investment in limiting the excesses of drinking. Energizing students to get them involved may be more successful. The chapter concludes with a direct request for college drinkers to take care of one another.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What reasons do students who abstain from drinking give for their choice? How are these reasons difficult to build anti-binge drinking policies from?
- What is the proposition for why students continue to binge drink? What assumptions does it utilize and rely on?
- What is harm reduction? How might it be a more effective strategy for alcohol safety than previous approaches?

### METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

*pages 183-190*

The appendix provides a description of how the author conducted his research and interviews. The details of the survey method, interview process, and procedures to protect anonymity are outlined. Additionally, some notes about the trustworthiness of the responses, and why some concerns may not have been shared.

## Questions for Reflection:

---

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Think about why you do or do not drink. Think about what Vander Ven's research says about who does or does not drink and why. Do you fit his categories (i.e. abstain and abstained in high school or drink and are an athlete)? Why might these categories evolve the way they do?
- Think about what risk-taking behaviors, including but not limited to drinking, you and your social circles (friends, clubs, classmates, etc.) might engage in. What are the potential dangers or hazards and how do you manage them? If/when things go wrong, how do you cope? If you persist with the risky behavior, what reasoning do you use?
- Getting Wasted makes much of the adult roles that college students can take on through drinking together, but what about outside of drinking situations? Could students learn these skills outside of drinking culture? Do students have other opportunities to practice these adult roles, or different ones? What are they?
- As explained in the Methodological Appendix, the survey primarily received responses discussing a white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class background. Why were these students the most visible college drinkers? What norms of the drinking scene does this indicate? What might be different about the drinking habits of students with different identities and backgrounds from the above?
- Consider the history of college drinking as presented in the text. Is it possible to ever divorce alcohol from the college culture? Or are the two too closely linked?
- What other perceived benefits of college drinking might exist that the author's research did not uncover? Can you think of any other ways that drunk support emerges?
- What advice would you give a new college student regarding alcohol use and safety after reading this text?



## Supplemental Assignments:

---

### SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

- Look for news stories about high-profile incidents of student binge drinking (not just alcohol-related deaths). If the articles provide enough information, try to identify the various social mechanisms at work. Were the individuals involved athletes or in a Greek organization? Were they drinking alone or in groups? Hypothesize about what elements of drunk support may have been involved.
- What is the alcohol policy at your school? What is the school and local community's view on underage drinking? What reasoning, if any, is given for the chosen rules? What are the punishments, including follow-ups like mandatory education programs? And how is the policy enforced in practice? Review the policy in light of the information in the text. What recommendations would you make to amend the policy?
- Look at the Methodological Appendix and reflect on how the survey used for the book was designed. Think about the questions you still have and that the author leaves open. Design a hypothetical survey that could address these questions, while keeping in mind the importance of student anonymity and privacy. Compare survey designs with classmates.