



The U.S. Department of Education's

**HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
CENTER**

for Alcohol,  
Drug Abuse, and  
Violence Prevention

## PREVENTION UPDATE

### Pregaming: A High-Risk Behavior

“Pregaming” or “pre-loading” is what college students call the practice of drinking alcohol in a private setting prior to attending an organized event or social activity where alcohol might or might not be served.

[According to one student](#), “Pregames are usually a fun part of the night because you’re just with a few close friends before you go out and meet up with a lot more people and can’t chat and laugh with your close friends as much.” But the downside to pre-gaming is that it can lead to higher levels of intoxication as students often continue drinking once they arrive at a party, putting them at risk for a host of alcohol-related problems, including alcohol-impaired driving, unwanted sex, or injury. For example, [at Brockport College, nearly 31 percent of students](#) said they drink three or more alcoholic beverages within 30 minutes to an hour of going out. This pre-gaming gives the average student a blood alcohol level of at least .06 percent before they even leave their home.

News reports of drunken students showing up to attend parties, on-campus socials, and sporting events are increasingly common. In one such incident on April 25, 2010, during the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s Blackout Party weekend where no alcohol is permitted, 12 students were hospitalized for alcohol poisoning. [According to WWLP-TV22News](#), police said that those hospitalized probably drank heavily before coming to the on-campus party at the Mullins Center. One student said: “If the school hosts it and there’s no alcohol, kids will just drink that much more before they go in. It happens all the time.”

#### What Science Tells Us

While there has been little published research to date on the pre-gaming behavior of students, there is an increasing interest among researchers to both understand the behavior and identify ways to intervene to reduce associated problems. [One study](#) of over 300 college students referred for alcohol violations at a private liberal arts university in the Northeast found that 31 percent had engaged in pre-gaming on the night of their referral incident. Those students reported a greater frequency of both drinking and pre-gaming in the past month and pre-gaming was associated with higher estimated blood alcohol concentration on the night of the referral. A focus group study on extent and nature of pre-gaming among undergraduate college students in Pennsylvania found that pre-gaming usually, but not always, meant high-risk drinking. Students who pre-gamed reported an average of 4.9 drinks during their most recent session. [The researchers pointed out](#) that “drinking prior to a planned event is nothing new, but pre-gaming is different from the pre-event drinking of past generations, which involved having just a drink or 2 before a social event. In contrast, most of our focus group participants described pre-gaming episodes where the whole point was to do shots of distilled spirits in order to get drunk as quickly as possible, or at least to set the stage for becoming intoxicated later.” [Another recent study found](#) that specific reasons for pre-gaming identified by students included saving money and obtaining alcohol when under age 21.

#### Penn State Addresses the Pregaming Phenomenon

Presidential Leadership Academy students at the Pennsylvania State University researched the topic of high-risk college drinking and presented their findings and proposals in a [report on the pre-gaming phenomenon](#) to a panel of Penn State administrators and professors in May 2010. Their policy recommendations stemmed



from a review of the research literature, interviews with campus and community officials, and campus observations. They called for a dry residence halls policy to address the venue where pre-gaming occurs and increasing the frequency of over-age-18 nonalcoholic events downtown in order to change “the cultural perception of alcohol as the center of an event.”

They recommended that Penn State adopt a blanket policy for its on-campus residence halls and make all of these facilities “dry” so that absolutely no alcohol will be tolerated within the residence hall for any reason, regardless of age of the students. The current policy permits students over the age of 21 to have alcohol. But, a policy alone is not sufficient. What is needed is a program to provide “positive reinforcement, by which large groups of students (i.e., residence halls) are collectively rewarded for compliant behavior with the proposed alcohol policy. This policy seeks to enforce standards throughout peer groups and the student community by creating a sense of mutual respect among peers.” Rewards could include such things as Penn State baseball tickets.

They said that addressing the lack of nonalcohol-related entertainment in downtown State College must be a joint community and university goal to establish more events at bars and taverns downtown where those under the age of 21 are admitted. The university should reach out to interested bar and tavern owners in State College to establish a dialogue with the specific goal of increasing social offerings available to those under the legal drinking age. According to the students, under-21 events would draw students away from unsafe drinking environments and “may also provide a disincentive to the practice of pre-gaming.”

### **Colleges Struggle With Pregaming**

Colleges and universities concerned with the risks that pre-party drinking poses for students have struggled with ways to respond. One way is to ban special events where there is the likelihood that such pre-gaming will take place, especially if there have been problems in the past. For example, in 2006 Brandeis University banned its fall bash called Modfest in the aftermath of problems with intoxicated students during the 2005 event. According to the [Boston Globe](#), it banned the event because some underage students became dangerously intoxicated from the alcohol they consumed not at the party, but before they arrived at the event.

Colleges have attempted other approaches, from turning away the most visibly intoxicated students at the door to making food available at parties. According to the *Globe* article, Brown University focused on more enforcement. A committee created after a number of alcohol-related incidents at a campus dance suggested using professional security to oversee admission at parties and ban visibly drunk students and called for more monitoring in residence halls at peak pre-gaming times on weekends.

But there are no easy solutions to this problem. A [2006 study](#) in the *Journal of American College Health* (January/February 2010) pointed out that pre-gaming presents a growing challenge for campus officials. “First, this behavior is difficult to detect. The typical pre-gaming episode is brief, involves a small group of students, and is done in private, all of which makes the enforcement of campus drinking policies far more difficult. Second, environmental management strategies that reduce overall underage and high-risk drinking rates—for example, restricting the availability of alcohol, hosting more alcohol-free events, imposing stricter party rules, eliminating low-price bar promotions, and increasing fake ID checks—may be pushing some student drinkers to pregame.”

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