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**HEADLINE:** On Campus, Legal Drinking Age Is Flunking the Reality Test

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**BODY:**

Next week, when President C.D. "Dan" Mote welcomes freshmen to the University of Maryland, he will inform them that the college police will enforce underage drinking laws "with terrific ferocity." And then he will turn around and, recognizing that most students do drink, tell the teenagers "to take care of each other when they see someone who's passed out, to take advantage of all of our services for students who abuse alcohol."

"We have a real conflict here," Mote says, and he's talking not only about the College Park campus but about every university and about our entire society. We live in a time when efforts to enforce the prohibition on drinking before age 21 are more aggressive than ever, yet there is a common assumption that most young people routinely violate that law.

Mote is tired of living that contradiction, which is why he joined more than 100 other college presidents in signing a call for action, the Amethyst Initiative, a collective statement that the 21-year-old drinking age is not working and has created a culture of binge drinking on campuses nationwide. (Amethyst is from the ancient Greek for "not intoxicated.")

Too many colleges have become grim enclaves of student binge drinking that leads to all manner of degrading and ugly behavior. "Virtually every sexual assault is associated with alcohol abuse," Mote says. "Almost every assault of any kind is related to drinking. The drinking-age issue is not just about drinking and driving. It's a much bigger pie, and we college presidents see that whole pie."

The Amethyst Initiative, the brainchild of former Middlebury College president John McCardell, is an effort to push lawmakers and the broader public to do something that is politically tough: consider making it legal for younger people to drink.

How could making teenage drinking easier possibly help reduce teen drinking? When I was in college three decades ago, 18-year-olds could drink openly and legally and generally did so in public settings, including at cocktail parties with faculty members and at a college-run pub where professors and staffers mixed with students. The result -- of course, with plenty of extreme exceptions -- was that kids learned moderation. Nobody had to hide, and adults were around considerably more often when students were drinking.

The very notion of lowering the drinking age is flabbergasting to groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which this week put out a statement arguing that a 1984 federal law forcing states to raise the legal age to 21 has saved 25,000 lives. MADD agrees that campus bingeing is a big problem and says the answer is to tighten alcohol policies, punish violators and go after adults who provide alcohol to kids.

But Mote and other presidents can point to long lists of enforcement, education and counseling efforts that are in place, with little real impact.

"The social contract is broken," Mote tells me. "Legislators have made laws that the people do not take seriously. Students point to our alcohol programs and say, 'See, everybody understands that we are going to drink,' and they're right."

Mote signed the petition in a fit of optimism, hoping a serious national conversation might ensue.

Are college presidents, after 30 years of being selected mainly for their ability to raise money, finally taking a stand? Are they ready to sound the alarm about how a hypocritical, ineffective prohibition is hampering the creation of an educated electorate?

Well, maybe. In just 48 hours since Mote's participation in the initiative became public, he's been besieged with criticism. Maryland Del. Bill Bronrott (D-Montgomery) wants Mote and other presidents to remove their names from the petition and get tougher on enforcing the law. Bronrott, a physician who works on alcohol issues, says the research supports the success of the higher age limit in reducing deaths.

But what if a lower drinking age might teach a vast number of young people moderation, even as members of the reckless fringe continue to endanger themselves and others? Anti-drunken driving activists hide behind the faux-clarity of highway death statistics.

When he signed the initiative, Mote says, "I thought the country might be ready. Now? It depends on how quickly people shut down open discussion. Will this lead to a national movement? I don't see how that would happen at the moment."

Can you imagine either presidential candidate discussing a change in the drinking age? They'd be more likely to call for an end to anti-terrorism measures.

So Mote will stand before the freshmen, implore them not to drink and threaten them with enforcement -- and then, because it's the responsible thing to do, he will tell them how to handle it when they get plastered. Which they will. But we don't want to see it, because there's a law on the books.

That's the first lecture in Cynicism 101.

Join me at noon today for "Potomac Confidential" at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline>.

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**GRAPHIC:** IMAGE; Maryland's C.D. "Dan" Mote is among those college presidents calling for a lower drinking age.

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