



My name is John Tymitz, and I am the CEO Emeritus of the Institute for Shipboard Education and the Semester at Sea® program. I have spent the past 40 years in teaching and higher education administration, and I am very familiar with the culture of toxic drinking that is so common among young adults today. Over the years, I have heard many supporters of the 21 year-old drinking age argue that we cannot consider alternatives to the law because young adults are too immature and education cannot work. These critics are wrong. I have seen realistic education programs succeed, and I'm here to tell you that we need to

consider a change to the status quo. The problems associated with toxic drinking are getting worse, and the safety of our young adults depends on our willingness to take a fresh approach to alcohol education.

I am not a fan of daytime talk shows, but one afternoon in September of 2008, I was surprised to hear a bold claim come from the living room television while I was working around my house. Dr. Phil, the popular daytime host, was discussing the issue of the legal drinking age with a panel of experts, and Choose Responsibility Board Member Barrett Seaman's appeal for a lower legal drinking age resonated with me immediately. He argued for a system of education and licensing that was similar to the graduated policies I helped craft during my time with the Semester at Sea program. I have seen a similar program work well, and I knew then that Choose Responsibility was on the right track.

In 1984, the same year Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, I became the CEO of the Institute. During those early years, my colleagues tried to answer a complicated question: how should we design our alcohol policies for students studying on our ships? We realized that many students studying with us would come from U.S. colleges where the drinking age was 21, but once they joined our program, these students would be sailing to ports in countries with lower drinking ages and vastly different cultural relationships with alcohol. Without proper education, they would be free to drink recklessly in unfamiliar settings where international legal problems could prove dangerous. In order to promote a culture of responsible drinking and safe behavior onboard our ships, we wanted to craft an institutional policy that would prepare our students for the realities of alcohol in many of the countries they would soon visit.

After discussing the issue with my colleagues, we decided that we could not impose draconian, unrealistic policies on our students. Once they reached our port countries, the students would more than likely drink, and we didn't want the consumption of alcohol to turn into the kind of underground operation that was so common on college campuses after the drinking age was raised to 21. Onboard



crackdowns would only lead to disastrous consequences away from our ships, where we could not always be around to supervise the students.

Our policy allowed 18 year-old students to drink in a protected environment: students received tickets that they could redeem for drinks during our daily social hours. The drinking that occurred onboard the ships was easy to monitor, and it prepared our students to drink safely in the places they frequented once we reached our ports.

This common-sense approach was based on education and moderation rather than punishment, and it was very successful. Alcohol-related problems were rare, and students who ran into trouble visited a professional mental health counselor to ensure that they would engage in safe behavior in the future. Students drank safely onboard our ships, and they carried this responsible behavior out into the port countries that we visited. We had a responsibility to teach these young adults about safe alcohol consumption, and I feel strongly that our program was successful.

I stepped down as the CEO of the Institute in 2007, and despite the tremendous success we experienced in our programs, I'm still concerned about the persistent culture of toxic drinking on and off college campuses. As parents and educators, we have not done enough to teach our young adults about safe alcohol consumption. I simply need to look around to see the terrible consequences of this behavior: alcohol-related deaths and binge drinking are becoming more and more common on college campuses. Most recently, even drinking among high school students has begun to creep upward. Something is not working, and the status quo cannot stand. I strongly believe that a graduated program of alcohol education, much like the one [CR] proposes, could go a long way toward educating young people about responsible drinking in the same way that we did during my tenure at the Institute. Education can work, but we won't see the benefits of such a program until the federal government stops threatening states with financial penalties for trying a different approach.

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