



## Hey, Stanford, Banning Booze on Campus Doesn't Work

*Stanford's ban on large containers of liquor is an attempt to 'meaningfully change the campus culture around alcohol.' But similar initiatives haven't been successful.*

Lizzie Crocker

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Stanford University's ban on possession of large containers of liquor on campus—part of a larger effort to reduce alcohol-related sexual violence at the university—was swiftly condemned by victims' advocates as a failure to properly address campus sexual assault.

But the bigger question is whether the ban will effectively reduce liquor consumption and its attendant high-risk behaviors at Stanford at all.

The new policy prohibits undergraduate students, including those over the age of 21, from possessing alcohol in 750 ml containers or larger—the standard size of a bottle of vodka or whiskey.

Stanford has been strategizing ways to address alcohol misuse on campus since last March, several months before Brock Turner, the Stanford swimmer, was convicted of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman outside a fraternity.

In a letter to students at the time, school president John Hennessy noted that roughly 100,000 college students around the country experience alcohol-related sexual violence every year, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Stanford said the new ban is an attempt to “meaningfully change the campus culture around alcohol.” Many elite universities have mandated similar policies in recent years, either banning or restricting possession of alcohol on campuses—with mixed results.

Last March, roughly seven months after Dartmouth College officially banned hard alcohol on campus, a survey conducted by the school newspaper found that a vast majority of students—85 percent of 1,745 survey participants—continued to consume hard alcohol despite the ban.

Hard liquor has been banned at Colby College in Maine since 2010, and at nearby Bates and Bowdoin Colleges since 2001 and 1999, respectively. Both schools have reported reduced numbers of alcohol-related hospital visits since the bans were implemented.

But it's unlikely that those reductions resulted from the hard alcohol bans alone. At Dartmouth, for instance, the number of alcohol-related trips to the local hospital dropped from 80 in 2011 to 31 in 2014—before the liquor ban was implemented.

In 2001, Harvard's College Alcohol Study—a survey of 2,252 students at 19 schools with alcohol bans and 9,051 students at 76 schools without bans—found that students at colleges where all alcoholic beverages were banned were 30 percent less likely to be “heavy episodic drinkers” and more likely to abstain altogether.

But among students who didn't abstain, “extreme drinking” and “alcohol-related problems” were equally common at colleges with and without bans.

In the broader culture, experts disagree on whether banning or restricting access to alcohol and drugs reduces consumption.

Prohibition in the U.S. between 1920 and 1933 resulted in a 15-20 percent decline in the amount of alcohol consumed—“not a significant effect,” said Jeffrey Miron, director of economic studies at the Cato Institute and an expert in the economics of illegal drugs.

“Looking at a host of examples where a state or a country has tried to outlaw drugs or alcohol or even prostitution and gambling, there's some evidence that consumption of the good was moderately reduced,” Miron said. “But people continue to buy and sell the good in some kind of underground market.”

He noted that Stanford's ban will likely not deter students from consuming hard alcohol on campus. Indeed, there's no ban on hoarding smaller bottles of liquor. Any resourceful college kid who wants to drink hard alcohol will find a way.

“We understand why campuses are concerned about this because they're supposed to be trying to follow the law, and there are of course excesses of drinking on campuses,” he said. “But this ban isn't going to fix those problems.”

Kate Carey, one of the lead authors on a new study ([PDF](#)) on alcohol intervention at Greek organizations and a professor of behavioral and social sciences at Brown University, said that the ban may well be effective.

“Stanford is implementing a policy which, in general, is a very effective way to reach lots of people and to potentially shape health behaviors,” she said. “It's an overall risk-management

approach with the philosophy that if you reduce risks in that environment than any individuals of that environment, regardless of their personal risks, will be interacting in a safer social and physical environment.”