Substantive dilemmas with substances:
Student trends in use of alcohol and tobacco
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As students arrive on campus, concerns about substance use arrive with them. Many constituencies have various concerns for student health, as well as for their education. Parents, fellow students, faculty, staff, and citizens at large hear numerous media accounts of substance use on campus. Within this issue, we examine direct information about University of Michigan students with regard to substance use, particularly alcohol and cigarettes.

Method
The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has participated in the entering student study of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) each year since 1993. CIRP is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system that was started in 1966 by the American Council on Education, and is now conducted jointly with the University of California at Los Angeles. At the University of Michigan, Student Affairs Research administers the CIRP survey. This study serves as a baseline profile of the entering full-time undergraduate student population. The items included within this survey include students’ self-reported reasons for attending college and reasons students choose UM, as well as student hopes and expectations for the educational experience. The responses also provide family background, high school activities, and give insight into attitudes and viewpoints regarding selected social issues. During 2005, 4,305 students responded (a 75.4% response rate). This sample was representative of our entering first year class in most respects (such as residency, gender, and high school grades). The CIRP survey, with its questions on a variety of topics, asks students to state whether they used substances frequently, occasionally, or never during the year before coming to the university.

We compare some of this material to a study frequently cited across the country, the College Alcohol Survey from the Harvard School of Public Health. The lead researcher, Henry Weschler, takes small samples from a variety of campuses every two to three years for study. At the University of Michigan in 2005, 257 students, representing all undergraduate levels, responded to this survey, a 54% response rate. In 2005, the sample was representative of Michigan in gender, race, and residency considerations, and the respondents were relatively representative as well.

Alcohol use before college
For the past several years, University of Michigan entering students have reported lowering usage of alcohol and cigarettes during their senior years of high school. This is a trend that is catching on in the rest of the nation.

With regard to alcohol use, Michigan students tend to use beer and “wine and liquor” in proportionate numbers. They do not tend to drift to one or another more over time. The following chart demonstrates this trend.
Drinking behaviors of University of Michigan entering students
Reporting their high school senior year “frequent” or “occasional” behavior.

With both beer and wine and liquor, we see a general downward trend from over 60% of students drinking wine and liquor in 1998, to under 50% drinking wine and liquor in 2005, a significant difference. These 2005 numbers for beer and wine and liquor are nearly identical to Michigan students’ national peers, although Michigan students are seeing a more substantial drop in drinking behavior.

These numbers may lead people to believe that most incoming Michigan students drank in their senior year of high school. When we look at students who did not drink (who indicated both that they “never” drank beer and “never” drank wine or liquor), we see a rising proportion of Michigan students reporting not drinking in their senior year of high school. This is nearly indistinguishable by gender.

Who did not drink in high school?
Michigan entering students reporting “never” drinking in high school senior year
Contrary to the assumption that all high school students are drinking, this indicates that almost half of entering Michigan students didn’t drink in their high school senior year. This is particularly true Contrary to the assumption that all high school students are drinking, this indicates that almost half of entering Michigan students didn’t drink in their high school senior year. This is particularly true among students of color. While 53.2% of white entering Michigan students drank wine or liquor in their senior year of high school, only 32.4% of students of color drank in this year. Likewise, while 45% of white entering Michigan students drank beer in their senior year of high school, only 26.9% of students of color drank in this year. These significant differences may help explain difference in drinking behavior during college, demonstrated in data from the UM Substance Abuse Research Center.

**Cigarette smoking before college**

Cigarette smoking is at a new low; with 1.4% of entering Michigan students reporting smoking “frequently” in their high school senior year. 1.7% of white students report this behavior, compared to 0.7% of students of color, which while not a statistically significant difference, is nonetheless striking. Cigarette smoking is often related to alcohol use (both in this data and in other studies), so these findings should not be surprising in comparison to alcohol use trends.

**Behavior once students begin classes**

By comparison to pre-college data, approximately 54% of University of Michigan undergraduates responding to the Harvard survey reported binging at some point in the two weeks prior to the survey. Looking at those reporting binging (drinking four or more drinks in a session for women, or five or more drinks in a session for men), 28.3% of students taking the survey reported binging one or two times in the two weeks prior to the survey. An additional 26.1% of respondents reported binging 3 or more times in those two weeks.

In general drinking behavior, UM students who drank reported the following behavior for the month prior to the Harvard survey:

- 26.8% drank on 10 or more occasions
- 45.2% usually binged when drinking
- 39.8% were drunk three or more times

By contrast, 17.4% of students reported being abstainers from alcohol use for at least one year prior to the survey. While this is a much lower number than the number of students reporting not using alcohol in the year prior to coming to the University of Michigan. However, it is a sizeable number (about 1 in 6), indicating that there are still people resistant to the message of alcohol use. While we wish to be cautious not to over-generalize from a sample of 257 for the Harvard survey, the findings are suggestive. Faculty and administrators should have pause to consider the potential implications of this type of drinking behavior.

Similar findings appear in the 2005 Residential Community Engagement survey from the Division of Student Affairs’ University Housing. Among students living in residence halls, 21.6% reported never being drunk this year. An additional 18.8% reported being drunk one to five times during the year. By contrast, 6.3% of students reported being drunk 10 or more times during the year.

**Michigan students’ self-reported incidents of drunkenness during the previous year.**

**Residential Community Engagement survey**

![Incidents of Drunkenness Chart](image-url)
This level of drinking has resulted in consequences for Michigan students. Students were asked through the Harvard survey to report what consequences of alcohol use they had experienced in the past year. The results indicate that while there are individual consequences, many consequences affect other students and the community at large, either directly or through property damage.

**Michigan students' self-reported consequences of alcohol use in the past year.**

**Harvard survey**
- Have a hangover (67.1%)
- Forget where you were/what you did (40.1%)
- Do something one regrets (39.0%)
- Miss class (34.1%)
- Engage in unplanned sexual activity (28.3%)
- Argue with friends (27.0%)
- Get behind in school work (24.5%)
- Get hurt or injured (19.1%)
- Damage property (16.9%)
- Not use protection when having sex (7.6%)
- Get into trouble with campus/local police (7.2%)
- Require medical treatment for alcohol overdose (1.6%)
- Have five or more of these problems, excluding hangover but including driving after drinking (24.1%)

In terms of cigarette use, this recent Harvard data suggests that 16.3% of Michigan students smoked within a month of the survey administration, with 27.3% having smoked in the past year. This dispels a notion of “everybody” smoking that some students would imagine, but still is a substantial increase from the 1.4% of students reporting smoking more than occasionally before entering Michigan.

**Implications**

Alcohol and cigarette use is dropping in our entering student populations, and that is a very helpful piece of the puzzle, but it is only a piece. University of Michigan students come to campus understanding consequences of alcohol and tobacco use intellectually, but yet still often take up the behavior on campus, often at a high level of engagement (binging), with notable consequences for students (directly and indirectly) and the institution around them. This binging may still be happening in homogenous groups, which may make work such as norming campaigns valuable. By informing students that it is not a norm of all groups of students to drink at heavy volume, the notion that “everyone” drinks is disabused. At the same time, the implications from these studies indicate that thousands of students either do not drink, or drink at a low level of consumption. This may suggest that targeted educational interventions could have an impact on choices and behaviors.

While Michigan has many bingers, almost half of the population either drinks without binging, or does not drink. There may be work to do to empower this population to help their peers understand the real consequences of alcohol use and abuse. Contrary to the notion that alcohol use only harms the drinker, the fact is that many of the consequences listed result in a price (which may include financial, intellectual, emotional or physical consequences) for the educational community at large. This may be another entry point for work on these issues.