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UM confronts alcohol abuse

U. of Md. holds meeting on ways to curb alcohol abuse

By Stephen Kiehl

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Five bars are clustered on Route 1 just south of the University of Maryland, College Park campus. Three liquor stores are just north of the university. No wonder, students say, that drinking is a problem.

"Pretty much the only thing you have to do in College Park is go to the bar," said Alex Beuchler, a UM student and president of the Resident Hall Association. "You're going to sneak a drink in the residence hall and binge drink quickly because you don't want to get caught, or go to one of the bars."

More than 100 students, faculty and staff at Maryland gathered yesterday for an "Alcohol Summit" to talk about the widespread use of alcohol on campus and ways to curtail heavy drinking - including a proposal from some college presidents to possibly lower the drinking age.



The presidents' proposal has drawn condemnation from Mothers Against Drunk Driving and others who say it would lead to increased traffic fatalities among young people and have a trickle-down effect that would spur more drinking problems in high school.

But college presidents say the situation on their campuses has only worsened. Last month, for instance, the University of Maryland campus police transported 16 students to hospitals to be treated for alcohol poisoning. And a survey of freshmen at one large public university found that 35 percent of those who drink experience blackouts.

"We have yet to figure out how to deal with this growing social problem," said C.D. "Dan" Mote Jr., UM president. Mote was one of 100 college presidents to sign on this summer to the so-called Amethyst Initiative, which says the drinking age of 21 "is not working" and has helped create a culture of dangerous, clandestine binge drinking.

Student leaders who spoke yesterday split on whether the drinking age should be lowered to 18 - three in favor, three against and one undecided. But they all agreed that students drink on campus, in dorms, and off campus, and that it leads to sexual assault, violent behavior, injuries and academic problems.

"Students come to college with this mentality that 'I'm only here for four years, I need to drink as much

as I can because in the real world I can't go out on a Tuesday night," said Selam Maru, president of the Panhellenic Association, a campus organization of sororities. But Maru said the country should work first on education and intervention for underage drinkers before lowering the drinking age.

Others said that the illicit nature of alcohol makes it something exciting that students want partly because they're not supposed to have it. They said outlawing alcohol hasn't helped and that students would be better off if they learned to drink responsibly before leaving home for college.

"Students would be coming in with a little more, I hate to say this, more experience drinking," said Nizar Dowla, a student who is head of a health group on campus and supports a drinking age of 18.

Senior Brad Docherty said the "abstinence only" approach favored by authorities who support the current drinking age only encourages students. "Anytime an authority figure mentions it, it's in the context of 'No, don't do it,'" said Docherty, 21, from Pittsburgh. "So for students who engage in drinking, they won't know how to do it in a responsible way."

Students and officials said that more education and treatment are needed, such as screening to identify heavy drinkers as freshmen as well as better parental notification when students get in trouble. About 60 to 70 students a year are taken to hospitals for treatment, campus police said.

One expert pointed to a lack of enforcement of drinking laws. "Merely educating people about the consequences of underage drinking - that may help and it may reduce it a little, but unless there's some serious enforcement, I don't think it's going to be significant," said James Fell, a senior program director at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Calverton, Md.

Saying that Maryland is one of 20 states with a loophole that needs to be closed, he noted that those younger than 21 are prohibited from purchase and possession but not consumption.

Each state makes its own law, but all 50 states raised the drinking age to 21 by 1988 after Congress tied federal highway funds to doing so.

Alcohol use must be socialized while students are living at home, said Robin Sawyer, an associate professor in the department of public and community health at Maryland, instead of alcohol being treated as something evil. He said the extent of binge drinking on campus convinces him that the drinking age of 21 is ineffective.

"I have a daughter who's a freshman who lives on campus and tells me alcohol is easier to get than a parking space," Sawyer said. "I don't think the freedom that college permits is the first time you should be tasting alcohol."

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