

on self-reports, Wood et al. (1997) obtained grades and other information from college transcripts to create a measure of "academic problems." Such data are certainly more reliable and valid than self-reports; however, the Wood et al. operationalization included indicators of severe academic difficulties, such as number of semesters on probationary status and whether students completed a degree within 6 years of matriculation, which raises the question of whether alcohol use has more proximate effects on academic performance in terms of exam, course, and semester grades. Given the consistent finding of a bivariate association between drinking and self-reported GPA, it is important to know whether this association will remain when more valid measures of GPA are used and when key background variables are controlled.

Examining data gathered at a liberal arts college, the present study rectifies many of the problems with prior studies of the connection between college alcohol consumption and academic performance. In particular, grade data were obtained from official college records rather than self-reports; several key variables, including measures of academic aptitude, prior academic achievement, and parents' education, were controlled in the analysis; and the sample was randomly selected with a high response rate.

Although unique in some ways, the college in the present study also has several characteristics that make it a good site for testing this relationship. As a small (2,700 students), very competitive, residential college in the northeastern United States, it is among those types of schools and in the part of the United States with the highest rates of heavy drinking (Wechsler et al., 2000). Most typically, students consume alcoholic beverages while "partying" on weekend nights. In addition, using this institution effectively controls for the effects of attrition on the association between alcohol use and academic performance. High attrition may lead to an underestimation of the magnitude of this association because many students who drop out may "experience academic problems due to alcohol misuse/abuse" (Wood et al., 1997, p. 201). However, the college has a very low attrition rate, the 4-year graduation rate annually hovers around 90%, fewer than 10 students per year (less than 1% of each class) are suspended or dismissed for academic reasons, and students who drop out or transfer almost invariably report that they do so for financial or personal reasons. Finally, unlike many other highly selective colleges, where few grades are given below B+ and grade inflation limits grade variability, there has been comparatively little inflation in recent years at the college in this study. In the fall 2003 semester, the mean grade was 3.19 on a 4.0 scale. Thus, the effects of alcohol consumption can be estimated in terms of a relatively wide range of academic performance.

In short, the data presented here should clarify whether poor academic performance is, at least at this type of col-

lege, "a product of the drinking lifestyle of students or simply a covariate where both drinking and [academic performance] reflect other influences in one's social background" (Perkins, 2002, p. 98).

Method

Sample

Participants were 754 students at a northeastern U.S. liberal arts college who were interviewed during one of four consecutive semesters between fall 2003 and spring 2005. Each semester a simple random sample of the student body was drawn, with sample sizes varying from 180 in spring 2005 to 220 in spring 2004 to 260 in fall 2003 and fall 2004. Response rates were consistently high, averaging 89.3% and yielding a total of 822 interviews. Some respondents, however, were selected and interviewed in more than one survey. For these respondents, a single interview was randomly selected in compiling the combined data set.

Data collection

In all four surveys students enrolled in a research methods course conducted structured, face-to-face interviews with fellow students as part of a class project. Each survey provided informed consent to all participants and was approved by the college's institutional review board. Interviewers received thorough training on survey interviewing and were carefully supervised, and all interviews were validated by the supervisor. Fall surveys were conducted in October and early November and the spring surveys in late March and April. Although each survey focused on a different topic (e.g., health issues, politics, friendship), the main questions analyzed here were included in all four surveys. At the conclusion of the interview, respondents were asked for permission to retrieve information from official college records, including grades, high school class rank, and scores on the SAT. No less than 93.8% gave permission during any one semester; overall, 94.4% of the combined sample granted permission.

Measures

Academic performance. Two measures of academic performance were added to the data file at the end of the semester during which the survey was conducted: a student's average grade during the semester of the survey (semester GPA) and his or her cumulative average grade at that point (cumulative GPA).

Alcohol consumption. Three questions were asked about alcohol consumption. First, students were asked, "How would you describe your consumption of alcohol? Do you