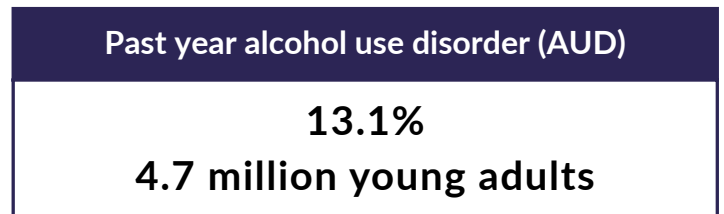
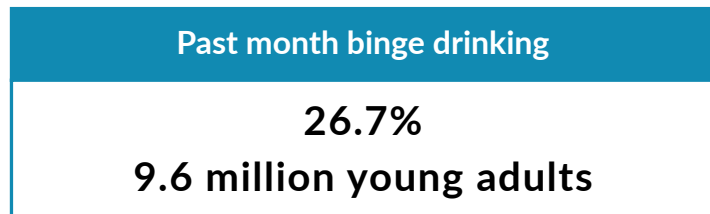


Addressing Alcohol Use on College Campuses: A Communication Pathway

Overview

This communication pathway provides college and university staff, including professors, counselors/social workers, health promotion professionals working within campus health centers, and other trusted adults, with a framework for having open conversations and sharing information with college students about substance use prevention, with a specific focus on alcohol. It is adapted from [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention Message Guide for Providers and A Communication Pathway for Providers](#).

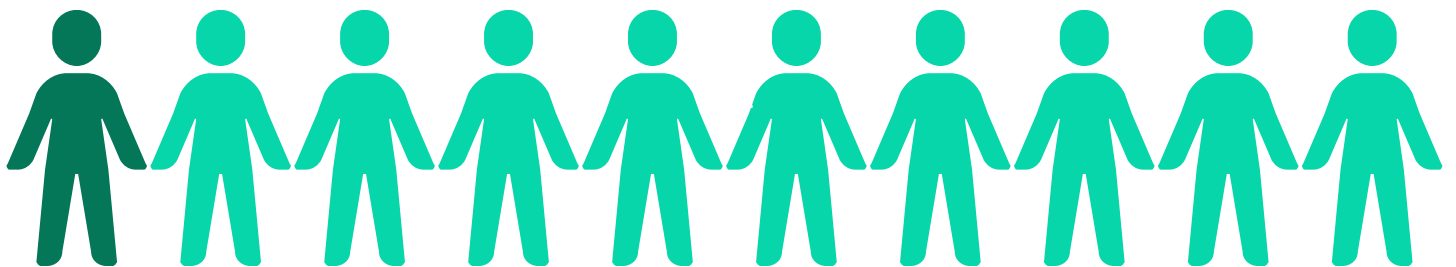
In 2025 in the U.S., young adults (ages 18-25) make up the highest percent of¹:



1 IN 10

young people perceived that they have ever had a substance use challenge...

(Roughly 8% of people aged 18 to 25, or 2.9 million people)



...and only two-thirds consider themselves to be in recovery.¹

(63.4% of young adults who have ever had a substance use challenge, or 1.8 million people)

Given these data points, college staff and professionals are in a unique position to have nuanced and open conversations around alcohol use with young adults on college campuses by creating an atmosphere of safety that supports the ability to discuss alcohol use honestly. Conversations may differ depending on a student's age, circumstances and alcohol-use patterns but can create opportunities for brief individual-level behavioral interventions. For students under 21, discussion may include prevention of underage use and related risks; and for students 21 and older, conversations may focus on safe decision-making, moderation, and identifying risky behavior patterns to reduce the negative effects.

Alcohol use can have serious impacts on young adult health, including:



Potential negative effects on brain development, executive functioning and mental health



Relationship problems



Risk for physical ailments from chronic use, including oral, sleep, and liver problems



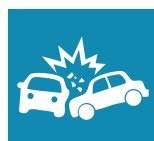
Alcohol overdose



Increased likelihood of polysubstance use, increasing overdose risk



Academic problems



Accidents such as car crashes

Key Considerations

There are a few important considerations to keep in mind before utilizing the communication pathway:

- **Be aware of your role.** These conversations may look different depending on the unique role of each professional on a college campus. It's important to think about how your role and relationship with the student may impact the conversation.
- **Pay attention to context and situation.** Think about the situation in which this conversation might occur and the context of your role. Where or how might the situation arise in which you would have this type of conversation with a student? What might prompt you to have this conversation with a student?
- **Recognize the range of ages.** College students are typically about 18-25 year's old. These conversations may look different depending on whether the student is legally able to drink.
- **Consider confidentiality.** Your unique role may have different implications for confidentiality and mandated reporting. Keep this in mind and ensure that you are upfront and honest about that with the student.
- **Use available resources.** Staff having these conversations can utilize available resources included in the [Resources for College Campus Staff and Professionals](#) section of this tool and may be shared with students during or after the conversation.

Communication Pathway

This communication pathway includes the following key elements:



1. Establish Trust

No matter your role or the context, it's important to build rapport and establish trust with the student.



- **Create a safe and supportive environment.** This consists of physical space, including creating comfort, privacy (as appropriate), and meeting basic needs. It also consists of the intangible space, including building consent throughout interactions.



- **Be authentic.** Show up as a real person with history and experience, not an authority figure or campus staff member simply fulfilling a job requirement. Acknowledge and share why you want to support the student, and as appropriate and relevant, consider sharing briefly about your own motivations around alcohol use.



- **Approach the conversation informally.** Sit with students at the same level, use open body language, and create opportunities for casual connection before diving into serious topics, allowing for co-ownership of the conversation and interaction. Meeting with a real person who cares, rather than a faculty or staff member who is following an intervention script, matters.



- **Do more listening than talking.** Come to the conversation with curiosity and interest in understanding the student's context, motivations, and apprehensions. Don't force sharing; consent must always be built into discussions. Create space for sharing and avoid making any initial assumptions.



- **Be transparent and trustworthy.** Be honest about why you are in the room together with the student, what your goals are, and what your obligations are in your role (e.g., confidentiality and mandated reporting). Develop rapport and trust by creating expectations together and then sticking to those expectations.



- **Pay attention to body language.** Notice how the student is showing up, knowing that every day is unique and people contain multitudes. If a student is demonstrating body language that is unusual or indicates strong feelings, create the opportunity for sharing with the student's ability to opt out and adjust your approach as needed.

In conversations with individuals of any age, it is important to create shared boundaries and expectations. This includes explicit discussion of confidentiality exceptions and reporting requirements, such as mandated reporting, to establish upfront expectations and support a shared understanding of safety. It also includes asking for consent before giving advice or sharing feedback and offering the opportunity to share as much or as little as feels comfortable. If the student does not wish to discuss these topics due to mandated reporting and confidentiality concerns, provide the student with other resources/staff where that issue may not be a concern.

2. Gather Insights

Seek guidance and input from college students about what matters to them. Sample discussion prompts may include:

- *What matters most to you in your life? And why? What are your goals?*
- *What are you studying and what are you passionate about?*
- *What do you look forward to most in the coming year (during college or after you graduate, or beyond)? And why?*
- *What activities, clubs, sports, or social events are an important part of your college experience?*
- *When you're faced with making a tough choice or decision, what do you consider or think about most? Are there certain campus situations where you feel more pressure to make the choices you may not otherwise make?*
- *How do friends, roommates, teammates or other peers influence the choices you make?*
- *What resources or people do you go to when you want support?*

3. Frame the Communication

Choose the frame for communication based on insights from the student and tailor the conversation to them and their situation. The following list of sample frames is not exhaustive; however, the frames provided center on important themes at any age. It can be helpful to reflect what you've heard, with space to adapt your responses and provide additional input or modification, for accurate and meaningful communication.



- **The Future.** Young adults, especially college students, are often future-oriented. Frame the conversation around what they are looking forward to, planning to prioritize, or feeling cautious about in the coming school year, summer, or post-graduation.



- **Risk of Addiction.** Young adults might be concerned about the risk of addiction. Frame the conversation around ways to support their health and to mitigate risks. If family history of alcohol or substance use is disclosed, acknowledge the concern and explore how that information may shape or influence the students' decisions about alcohol or substance use.



- **Social Connection.** Young adults value their social connections. Frame the conversation with affirmation of this value and curiosity around how their choices could impact their relationships with family and friends. If it makes the student more comfortable, you could offer to include a trusted friend or support person in the conversation.



- **Activities.** Young adults value the activities in which they are involved. Validate what matters to them and explore how their decisions can support their goals or commitments related to arts, sports, or other meaningful hobbies.



- **Self-affirmation.** Young adults value being seen as capable, independent, and aligned with their own values. Frame the conversation around their strengths, sense of identity, and ability to make choices that reflect who they are and what matters most to them.

4. Make the Case



Connect to their goals

Connect alcohol-related choices to students' broader college experience, including academics, social relationships, mental health, and future goals, before identifying practical next steps.



Highlight what matters

Using insights gathered during conversations with the student, select information that provides compelling reasons not to use alcohol or to use alcohol safely.



Ask permission

Build trust by first asking the student if they're open to learning more about alcohol use, its impact on health and wellbeing, and safety, before sharing those details with the student.



Offer practical strategies

Consider addressing some common myths around alcohol use and tips and strategies for managing alcohol use responsibly in social situations or reducing the potential negative impacts of alcohol use.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW MAKING THE CASE MIGHT PLAY OUT WITH A COLLEGE STUDENT

Educator: "You mentioned that getting enough sleep and keeping up with your classes are really important to you. Would you be open to talking about how alcohol could affect those things? For example, drinking can interfere with sleep and make it harder to concentrate the next day, which could affect how you feel and perform in class."

5. Suggest Action

After learning more from the student and [Making the Case](#), ask permission to suggest a next step they can take – either by themselves or with your support. Select one or more of the following actions to suggest, or tailor based on your discussion. Encourage the student to:

- Explore alternative ways of coping with stress.
 - If the student is struggling with their mental health and/or substance use, consider referring them to the student health and counseling/behavioral health center(s) for assessment and support.
- Talk to friends and family about how they have fun, socialize, and de-stress without alcohol, or without alcohol as the main activity.
- Explore alternatives to binge drinking and ways to mitigate potential negative impacts. Discuss on-campus clubs or activities that are well-known and liked, appeal to the student's interests or values, and may not have as strong of a culture around alcohol use.

- Learn more about alcohol use, its health implications, and explore resources provided by your campus and substance use. Explore their relationship with alcohol currently, and what they would like this relationship to look like in the future. Identify any limits they might like to set to achieve the relationship they want to have in the future.
- Consider creating a plan for alcohol use and sharing that plan with trusted friends for accountability and support. Create pre-planned responses for declining unwanted drinks and a game plan for tracking drink consumption. When other students are mixing their own drinks, reassure the student that no one needs to know what's in their cup.
- Identify a trusted friend, staff member, or other adult they can go to when you have questions or concerns about alcohol use.
- Provide the student with resources, pamphlets, phone numbers, etc. for on- and off-campus support.

Additional Resources

- Virtual, local and on-campus [mutual aid/mutual support groups](#) ([Alcoholics Anonymous](#) (AA), [Al-Anon](#), [SMART Recovery](#), etc.);
- Information for the student health and counseling/behavioral health center(s);
- Basic information about [medications for alcohol use disorder \(MAUD\)](#), including where they might be able to see a provider skilled in discussing the [benefits and considerations of starting MAUD](#) and who can prescribe MAUD and treat AUD;
- On-campus and local activities that are alcohol-free or not explicitly centered around alcohol;
- Information to connect with and discuss accessibility and accommodation needs on campus (e.g., the office of disability);
- Information about the college's Good Samaritan or medical amnesty policies, if applicable.
- Consider having this list and information readily available so that you can share it with the student via handout or email.

Conclusion

Alcohol use remains a significant concern on college campuses, with millions of young adults engaging in binge drinking and many needing substance use treatment each year. The health and safety risks tied to alcohol use, ranging from accidents and overdose to long-term physical and mental health impacts, underscore the vital role that college campus staff, including professors, health promotion staff, social workers and other trusted adults play in supporting students. This resource better equips campus educators and staff to engage students in honest, nuanced conversations about substance use prevention and intervention. Establishing trust, sharing information openly and offering brief behavioral interventions can help students set and achieve their own goals around alcohol use. Ultimately, meeting college students where they are, with empathy and evidence-based guidance, creates the foundation for safer campuses and healthier futures.

Case Examples: Using the Communication Pathway

<u>Role, Location and Context</u>	<u>Situation</u>	<u>Conversation Starters</u>	<u>Tips</u>
Professor <i>After class in the classroom.</i>	Professor notices that a student in their class consistently misses class or shows up late to class hungover.	<i>"I noticed you've missed a few classes, and it seemed like you might not be feeling well. I'm checking in, not because you're in trouble, but because I'm concerned and want to support you. Is there anything going on that's making it harder to get to class right now?"</i>	Keep it private, focus on observable behavior, avoid labeling the student as "hungover," and offer academic and/or other support options.
Clinician (e.g., doctor, nurse practitioner, PA, etc.) <i>During an appointment or check-up at the student health center.</i>	Clinician is reviewing the student's PHQ-9 and/or AUDIT-C forms and notices some concerning responses/results.	<i>"I'm looking at your screening responses, which suggest alcohol might be affecting your health, stress, mood, or safety. Would it be okay if we talked about that for a few minutes?"</i> <i>"What role does alcohol currently play in your life or social routine?"</i>	Ask permission before discussing results, normalize the screening process, connect alcohol use to health/mental health goals, and offer brief education and referrals as relevant.
Resident Advisor (RA) <i>In the RA's room/office or private meeting space in the dormitory.</i>	RA speaks with a resident who is concerned about how much their roommate has been drinking lately; now they need/want to have a conversation with the roommate.	<i>"Someone shared that they're worried about you, and I wanted to check in directly. You're not in trouble; I just want to make sure you're safe and have support if you need it. How have things been going for you lately with stress, friends, or going out?"</i>	Be transparent about why you're checking in without over-sharing the roommate's concerns, clarify any confidentiality limits, focus on safety, and connect the student to appropriate resources as relevant.
Therapist/Counselor <i>Intake appointment or required counseling session at the campus counseling or behavioral health center.</i>	Therapist receives a referral to see a student after they were caught drinking underage at a party in one of the campus dormitories. Calling to conduct a 15-min. intake call ahead of the student's required appointment.	<i>"I know being referred for a required appointment can feel uncomfortable. My goal is to understand what happened from your perspective and talk through what support, if any, would be helpful."</i> <i>"What do you think led up to that night, and how are you feeling about it now?"</i>	Acknowledge the mandated/required nature of the appointment, invite reflection rather than shame, and explore goals, patterns, coping strategies, and next steps.

Resources for College Campus Staff and Professionals



Basics about alcohol

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): [Understanding the Dangers of Alcohol Overdose](#)
- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [What You Need to Know About Youth & Alcohol](#)
- NIAAA: [Alcohol's Effects on the Body](#)
- SAMHSA: [Learn About Substances – Alcohol](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [Alcohol Use and Your Health](#)



Conversation resources

- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [Getting Candid webpage and resources](#)
- PCSS-MAUD: [Brief Conversations About Alcohol Use: A How-to Guide](#)
- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [Motivational Interviewing Tips for Engaging with Youth](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): [Age-Appropriate Conversations About Alcohol and Other Drugs](#)



Age-appropriate and college-specific resources:

- SAMHSA: [The Consequences of Underage Drinking](#)
- NIAAA: [Harmful and Underage College Drinking](#)
- NIAAA: [College Drinking Prevention](#)
- [College Student Alcohol Use: Understanding the Role of Alcohol Expectancies, Social Anxiety, Social Connectedness, and Need to Belong](#)
- [Association of Recovery in Higher Education \(ARHE\)](#)
- SAFE Project: [Navigating the Transition: A Guide to Alcohol Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery for New College Students and Their Families](#)



AUD treatment, mutual support, and recovery resources:

- PCSS-MAUD: [Recovery Groups Resource](#)
- PCSS-MAUD: [Should I Start a Medication to Help with My Drinking?](#)
- PCSS-MAUD: [Strategies to Reduce the Risks and Harms of Alcohol Use](#)
- PCSS-MAUD: [Preventing Relapse and Return to Alcohol Use: A Clinical Conversation Guide](#)

References

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2026) *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2025 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication NO. PEP26-07-010, NSDUH Series H-61). Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health/national-releases>

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