Despite decades of research, hundreds of campus task forces and millions invested in bold experiments, college drinking in the United States remains as much of a problem as ever.

More than 1,800 students die every year of alcohol-related causes. An additional 600,000 are injured while drunk, and nearly 100,000 become victims of alcohol-influenced sexual assaults. One in four say their academic performance has suffered from drinking, all according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

The binge-drinking rate among college students has hovered above 40 percent for two decades, and signs are that partying is getting even harder. More students now drink to get drunk, choose hard liquor over beer and drink in advance of social events. For many the goal is to black out.

Drinking is so central to students' expectations of college that they will fight for what they see as a basic right. After Syracuse University, named the nation’s No.1 party school by The Princeton Review, tried to limit a large outdoor gathering, outraged students labeled the campus a police state.

Why has the drumbeat of attention, effort and money failed to influence what experts consider a public-health crisis? It is not for lack of information. Dozens of studies show exactly why, when, where and how students drink. Plenty more identify
effective intervention and prevention strategies. A whole industry has sprung up around educating students on the dangers of alcohol abuse.

For the most part, undeterred by evidence that information alone is not enough, colleges continue to treat alcohol abuse as an individual problem, one that can be fixed primarily through education.

“Institutions of higher education are still really committed to the idea that if we just provide the right information or the right message, that will do the trick, despite 30 or 40 years of research that shows that’s not true,” said Robert F. Saltz, a senior research scientist at the Prevention Research Center, part of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. “The message isn’t what changes behavior. Enforcement changes behavior.”

Yet many colleges still look the other way. Few have gone after environmental factors like cheap and easy access to alcohol or lenient attitudes toward underage drinking.

At some colleges, presidents are reluctant to take on boosters and alumni who fervently defend rituals where drinking can get out of control. Administrators responsible for prevention often are not equipped with the community-organizing skills to get local politicians, bar owners and the police to try new approaches, enforce laws and punish bad actors.

A student’s death or an unwelcome party-school ranking might prompt action, but it is unlikely to be sustained or meaningful. A new prevention program or task force has only so much impact.

Even at colleges that try to confront these issues comprehensively, turnover and limited budgets pose significant obstacles. When administrations change, so do priorities.

In the 1990s college presidents routinely declared alcohol abuse the greatest threat to campus life, and the federal government demanded that they do something.

The first large-scale examination of alcohol use among college students began in 1993. Run by Henry Wechsler, a social psychologist at the Harvard University School
of Public Health, the College Alcohol Study surveyed 17,000 students at 140 colleges on why and how they drink.

The following year, Mr. Wechsler pronounced 44 percent of all college students binge drinkers, using that term to mean consuming four or five drinks in a row. The results set off a storm of news coverage and helped shift public understanding of college drinking from a relatively harmless pastime to a public-health concern. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which financed the first survey, invested millions in further surveys and research.

Mr. Wechsler and his team painted a complex portrait of campus culture, one in which the environment fueled excessive drinking. More than half of the bars surrounding campuses, they found, used discounts and other promotions to lure in students. Higher rates of binge drinking were associated with membership in a fraternity or sorority, a belief that most students drink and easy access to alcohol.

At the same time, the studies made clear that much is beyond colleges’ control. Half of students had started binge drinking before they got to campus.

Advocates and policy makers sensed an opportunity. The United States Department of Education established the Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Use and Violence Prevention, which provided research, training and technical assistance. Mr. Wechsler’s findings sparked a 10-campus experiment to try to bring drinking under control. Focusing on colleges with higher-than-average rates of binge drinking, the project aimed to prove that by working with community partners to change the environment, colleges have the power to shift student behavior. The Johnson foundation put more than $17 million into the project, which was conducted with the American Medical Association over a 12-year period.

But early results showed that in the first few years, half of the colleges involved did not try much of anything. The other half reported “significant although small” improvements in drinking behavior. Meanwhile, a survey of about 750 college presidents found that they were sticking to what they had always done, focusing on arguably effective “social norming” campaigns, which aim to curb students’ drinking with the message that their peers do not drink as much as it seems. Today a number
of colleges that participated in the lengthy experiment still struggle with students’ alcohol problems.

Several colleges developed new programs: training servers, notifying parents when underage students were caught drinking and coordinating enforcement with the local police. Setbacks, however, were common. Louisiana State University found local bar owners hostile to the idea of scaling back happy hours or drink specials. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, the campus-community coalition had little authority. To appeal to local businesses, a new mayor in Newark, Del., weakened regulations on selling alcohol near dormitories at the public flagship university.

The following years saw the end of several major projects. Mr. Wechsler’s College Alcohol Study wrapped up in 2006, having surveyed 50,000 students and produced reams of research. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shifted its attention elsewhere. The Amethyst Initiative, a campaign by more than 100 college presidents to reconsider the legal drinking age, came and quickly went. And in 2012, funding cuts eliminated the federal center that had guided colleges on preventing alcohol and drug abuse.

Jim Yong Kim, a physician with a public-health background who was president of Dartmouth College, attempted to drag the issue back into the spotlight, announcing an intensive, public-health and data-driven approach to dealing with campus drinking. He used his influence to drum up participation from 32 institutions in the National College Health Improvement Program’s Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking and secured money to keep it going for two years. But when he left Dartmouth to lead the World Bank, in 2012, the leadership and the money dried up. The project issued its first and final report this year.

Educators and researchers who lived through this period say a combination of exhaustion, frustration, inertia, lack of resources and campus and community politics derailed the national conversation about college drinking. Taking on the problem proved tougher than anyone had thought.

“All those efforts caused some issue fatigue,” said John D. Clapp, director of the federal alcohol and drug center when it closed. The feeling, he said, was “Hey, we tried this, and it’s time to move on.”
Today, fewer than half of colleges consistently enforce their alcohol policies at tailgates, in dormitories and at fraternity and sorority houses. Only a third do compliance checks to monitor illegal alcohol sales in nearby neighborhoods. Just 7 percent try to restrict the number of outlets selling alcohol, and 2 percent work to reduce cheap drink specials at local bars, according to researchers at the University of Minnesota.

Philosophically, many educators are resistant to the idea of policing students. They would prefer to treat them as young adults who can make good choices with the right motivation. Traci L. Toomey, who directs the alcohol-epidemiology program at Minnesota’s School of Public Health, recalls visiting a campus that had long prided itself on letting students monitor the flow of alcohol at social events. “As if somehow magically they’d do a great job,” she said.

In the Minnesota surveys, only about 60 percent of campus law-enforcement officials said they almost always proactively enforced alcohol policies. Half cited barriers such as understaffing and students’ easy access to alcohol at private parties and at bars that don’t check IDs. Only 35 percent of colleges’ law-enforcement units almost always issue criminal citations for serious alcohol-related incidents, preferring instead to refer cases to other offices, like judicial or student affairs.

Students themselves say more-aggressive enforcement could change their behavior. One survey of those who had violated their colleges’ alcohol policies found that parental notification, going through the criminal-justice system or being required to enter an alcohol treatment program would be more of a deterrent than fines and warnings.

Duke University was home to an all-day party known as Tailgate, which raged in a parking lot before and after every home football game. Wearing costumes, cranking up the music and funneling beer, students left behind a mess so huge it required front-loaders to clear. Administrators tried all sorts of things — cars versus no cars, kegs versus cans, shorter and longer hours, food and entertainment — in a futile effort to rein in bad behavior. In 2010, a 14-year old sibling of a student was found passed out in a portable toilet. Administrators shut it down.
Fraternities and sororities remain a third rail for many college presidents. “Even though the Greek system was identified as the highest area of risk in terms of harm and rates of drinking, we didn’t have many schools touch that,” said Lisa C. Johnson, a former managing director of the Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking. “It’s fraught with politics. It’s fraught with, Are we going to lose funding from alumni who value the traditions? Also, it’s complex because Greek houses may be owned by the fraternities, not the university.”

Some prevention advocates hope that scrutiny of sexual assault on campuses may result in more attention to alcohol abuse, because the connection has been well documented. It took a series of federal complaints and investigations, supporters say, for colleges to begin revising and better enforcing their sexual-assault policies.

Others are betting that money will talk. Jonathan C. Gibralter, president of Frostburg State University, calculated that alcohol abuse cost $1 million in staff time and lost tuition over a recent four-year period. Putting a price tag on the problem, he said, helped keep people motivated to crack down on off-campus parties, work with local law enforcement and raise expectations among students.

The different forces at play nationally may not be enough to focus attention on dangerous drinking in college, but culture change can happen. It’s just slow, said John Porter, director of the Center for Health and Well Being at the University of Vermont, which has grappled with alcohol abuse for more than two decades. Asked to lead a new campuswide approach to the problem, Mr. Porter remains hopeful. When he was a child, he said, he used to sit on his mother’s lap in the front seat of their Buick. She’d be smoking cigarettes. Nobody was wearing seat belts. “Today we’d be aghast,” he said.

Correction: December 19, 2014

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article omitted the name of the Minnesota institution that employed the researchers who compiled statistics about alcohol abuse. The researchers are at the University of Minnesota.
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