

## Marin Voice: Alcohol Justice firmly against proposal allowing ads on campuses

By [Cruz Avila](#) |  
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The California State University system, a sprawling 23-campus network of institutions providing undergraduate and graduate degrees for half a million California residents, is facing a \$1.5 billion budget hole.

As a response, it appears to be chasing alcohol industry dollars while seemingly turning a blind eye to the health and well-being of its students — many of whom are well under 21 years of age.

Like most groups invested in public health and safety, representatives from the Marin-based nonprofit Alcohol Justice believe there is another way.

CSU’s “alcohol advertising to students” proposal – Assembly Bill 840 – has careened through the Legislature without a single no vote. The bill lays out a blood-red carpet for the alcohol industry to tailor the educational environment to train new customers — including those ostensibly too young to drink.

AB 840, written by Central Coast Assemblymember Dawn Addis, creates loopholes in what are referred to as “tied house restrictions.”

California’s tied house laws are a set of guidelines for alcohol sales intended to prevent giant producers of low-cost, mass-produced products (like Anheuser-Busch or Heineken) from maintaining strangleholds on the market.

One such guideline maintains that producers cannot purchase advertising directly from sellers. Addis’ bill, however, would exempt California State University-associated alcohol retailers (in practice, stadiums and entertainment facilities) from the restriction. This would allow interested producers to purchase whatever sort of display they feel in these facilities.

The problem is that these facilities are part of a college system primarily intended to serve college students — and 40% of the attendees in the Cal State system are under the legal drinking age.

Few people would approve of allowing Big Alcohol to advertise in dorms, and even many Greek organizations frown on alcohol sponsorships, but the Legislature seems to have no issue with opening up every other recreational venue on campuses to advertising.

Research shows that alcohol advertising is effective, a statement that seems obvious but is lost on policymakers. A 2018 University of Missouri study found college students specifically are more influenced by advertising when the ads are deeply associated with their campuses. Similarly, researchers have found adolescents are more likely to latch onto ad campaigns when they are associated with music venues, sports teams, and other entertainment contexts, than when purely extolling the virtues of the product.

All of which means AB 840 gives the industry a direct route to advertise to underage California students in the contexts of collegiate sporting events, campus-sponsored concerts, DJ'd parties and their own senses of school pride. A marketer, looking to make an end run around commonsense alcohol marketing restrictions, could not dream of a better opportunity.

The advantage for unrestricting alcohol ads in campus facilities comes from its ability to raise cash for a vital but overlooked and under-invested system. That little bit of cash pales, however, compared to the economic, psychological and developmental costs of encouraging more alcohol consumption by young adults.

Three of the four leading causes of death for college students between 18 and 24 years of age are strongly tied to alcohol use — fatal motor vehicle crashes, suicide and lethal interpersonal violence. On top of which, the last three years have seen a stunning rise in alcohol-related overdoses, as ethanol both lowers the fatal dose of many depressants and encourages less care in what people take and when.

College age, especially when enrolled but under 21, constitutes a vulnerable interval. Students do consume alcohol under the auspices of our universities. Regretfully, these students sometimes find themselves derailed, hurt or killed as a result of that consumption.

Proactive and compassionate leadership at these schools can reduce those consequences when they see the opportunity to do so.

The real question before the Legislature with AB 840, and the one that it seems chillingly eager to ignore, is: At what price point can institutional blindness be bought?

*Cruz Avila is executive director of Alcohol Justice, a nonprofit based in San Rafael.*