Study explores why 'progressive teetotalers' may emerge from college engineering programs

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First-year engineering students who gravitate toward progressive ideas, including about gender equity in the workplace, tend to drink less

alcohol, according to a study by a University of Kansas researcher. The findings could inform efforts to recruit underrepresented students to engineering as well as work to reduce problem drinking at colleges.

"The way they think about themselves shows to be a protective factor against drinking and buffers them against problems of alcohol that they can be drawn into," said Margaret Kelley, associate professor in KU's Department of American Studies. "Another way to think about it is this behavior becomes in conjunction with the more progressive attitudes they display about women in the profession."

Kelley's study, "Using Prosocial Schemes and Beliefs about Gender Roles to Predict Alcohol Use for Engineering Majors," was recently published in *The Sociological Quarterly*. She collected two waves of survey data from first-year engineering students at a large Midwestern university in 2014 to examine the relationship among their prosocial schemas, beliefs about gender roles and alcohol use.

Sociologists consider prosocial behavior to include defending one's beliefs or valuing being truthful, reliable and sincere—all characteristics that tend to help students manage the complexities of college and navigate the competitive environment of engineering.

Researchers have examined gender in understanding patterns in educational choices. Specifically, engineering school administrators in recent years recognized the recruitment and retention of women into engineering programs is not on par with efforts to recruit and retain male students, Kelley said.

Other factors that contribute to the gender gap in engineering include the environment for women in college programs to be "chilly" due to a lack of role models and poor attitudes toward women in science among others, such as a biased curriculum and pedagogy and male

epistemologies, she said.

"The progressive idea about equality in the workplace is important in this environment because the students are in a place which is traditionally very unequal," Kelley said.

In conducting the research, she wanted to examine the social climate of engineering and its implications for efforts at gender and social equity. She studied the students' perceptions of themselves, perceptions of typical engineers, and views on women on the workplace, leading her to find a connection among these perceptions and their coping behaviors that included drinking alcohol.

She said the idea that more progressive and prosocial attitudes led to less drinking was not entirely surprising.

"The ideas have historically been opposed to drinking and those problems," Kelley said. "In some ways it makes sense. The ideas work together. If you believe in improving situations, then you are moving away from a problem, and you are willing to challenge whether or not something is normal."

The findings could have implications for engineering schools recruiting to close gaps among gender and race or ethnicity.

"Some of those programs could incorporate some of those buffering ideas about identity and about prosocial characteristics as something to achieve and strive for in that outreach," Kelley said.

The research could also be pertinent for university leaders and parents seeking to reduce levels of problem drinking, she said.

"For people who aren't really involved in drugs and alcohol research or

education, just the very low level of drinking by engineering students can be surprising," Kelley said.

She said further research should likely examine prescription drug abuse among these students but that the alcohol finding itself is important given the deeply ingrained drinking cultures on most large college campuses.

"Given the traditional party life on campus," Kelley said, "the fact that these students were somewhat removed from that can also be surprising and is positive news."

Provided by University of Kansas

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