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Young Adults are Shifting Away From Drinking – How about Denison?

Paul A. Djupe

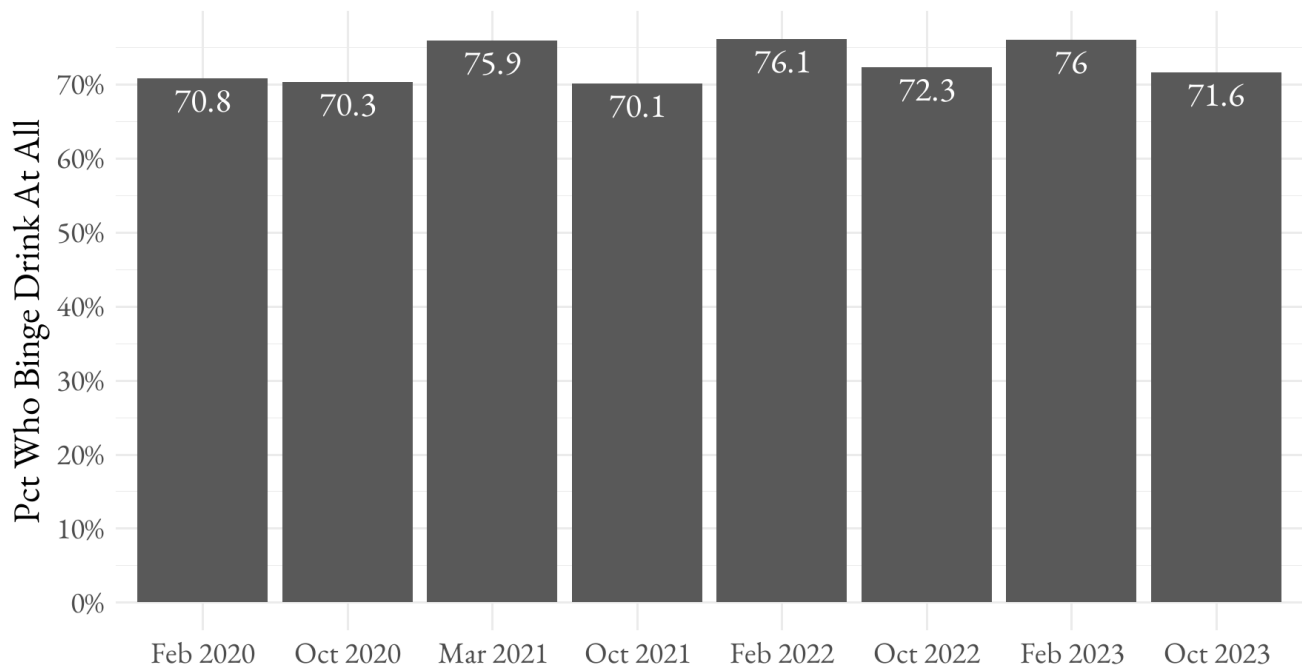
February 5, 2024

By Paul A. Djupe, Director of Data for Political Research

New reports are consistent and clear – younger American adults are not drinking as frequently or as much as they used to. According to Gallup polling, young adults are keeping up with their grandparents in reduced drinking levels. Two decades ago 72 percent of young adults said they drank alcohol (at all), which has fallen to 62 percent. Drinking to excess is also falling: “The rate of overdrinking among all 18- to 34-year-olds is now 13%, down from 21% in 2001-2003.” THIRTEEN PERCENT.

Here’s how weird Denison is. Since the beginning of the pandemic, over SEVENTY PERCENT of Denison students report binge drinking at least once a week. That’s a whole 60 percentage points higher than the 18-34 population. There’s an interesting pattern in the data where spring semesters feature a bit more drinking – another 4-5 percentage points – which surely reflects that the rush process takes place in the spring.

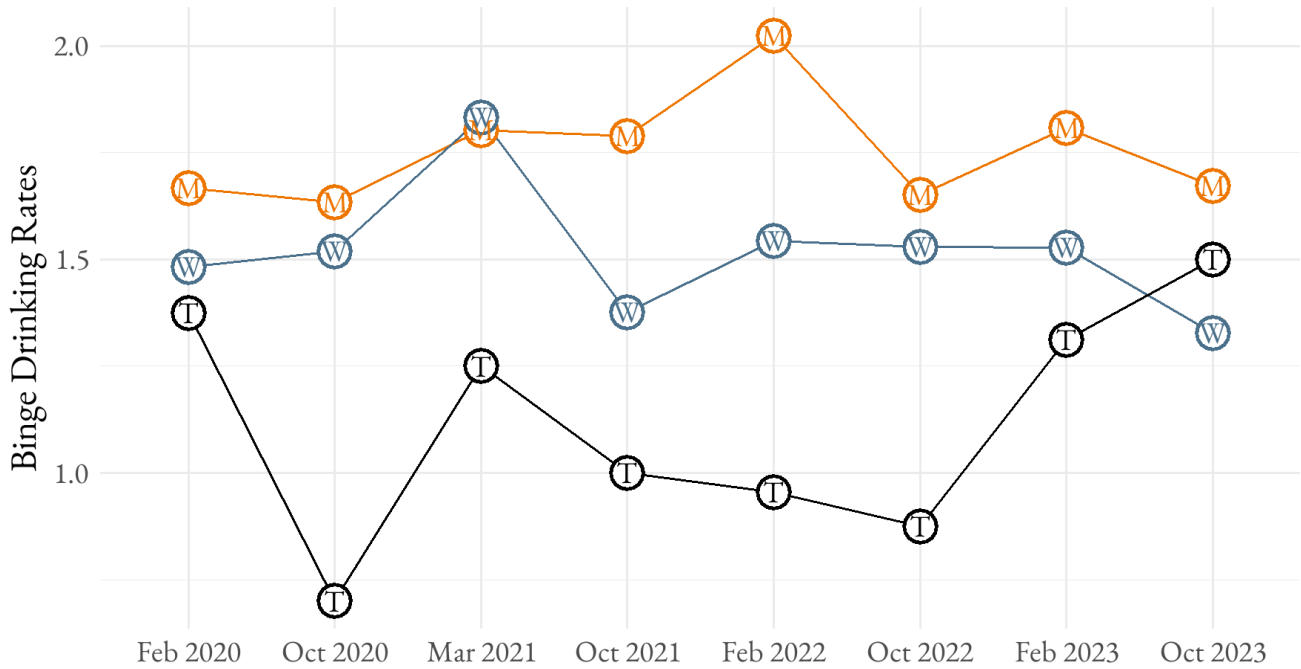
A Stable Just Over 70 Percent of Campus Binge Drinks



Source: October 2023 Survey.

If the extent of binge drinking is the same, perhaps the rate of engagement has slowed. The figure below, however, shows that the number of days a week that students typically binge drink has not really changed. Maybe there was a bump when students came back to campus and social engagement rules eased in the early 2021. But men, women, and trans/nb students all end up in October 2023 about where they were in February 2020. [The trans/nb stats are naturally more subject to fluctuation given the very small sample sizes involved.]

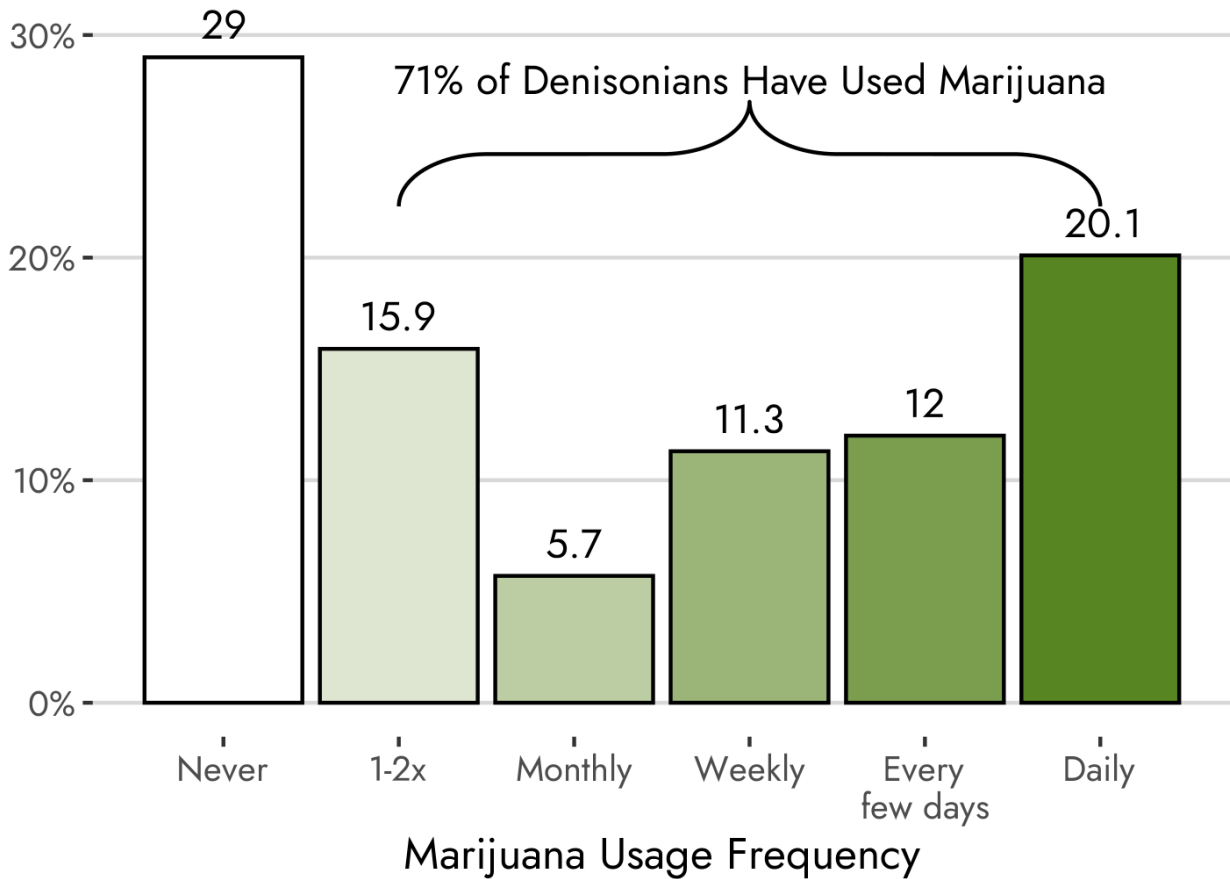
Binge Drinking Rates Are Mostly Stable



Source: October 2023 Survey.

In the broader population, the definition of sobriety appears to be shifting. Once reserved for abstinence from intoxicating substances, it now is used to refer to abstaining just from alcohol. The availability of marijuana and therapeutic THC products is changing the game. I think it would surprise no one that Denison students appear to be “both, and” users. The link between drinking and weed use in spring 2022 is very strong. And usage appears in the same quantities – in our spring 2022 survey, 71 percent of students said they used marijuana.

Frequency of Marijuana Usage on Campus



Source: February 2022 Survey.

Denison aims to be counter-cultural in many ways, though I don't think use of intoxicating substances is at the top of the Denison Forward goal list. I wouldn't say that this is a net bad, as GPAs and campus involvement tend to be robust to all except the Thor-level drinkers, and party culture is pretty well entrenched among (white) students and linked to social support. It's still worth reflecting on just how distinctive Denison students are compared to the culture at large.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who runs the Data for Political Research minor. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action and spread accurate knowledge about campus and what goes on there. He also writes about religion and politics in the US.