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The Company We Keep: Allecia Reid Explores the Social Side of Drinking

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The Company We Keep

Allecia Reid explores the social side of drinking

By Jacob McCarthy

William and Margaret Montgoris Assistant Professor in Psychology Allecia Reid explains the statistical analyses used in a study to Carly Taylor '15 (far left), Caroline Minott '16 (left), and Ali Belzer '17 (right)

It would be tough to find a research subject more relevant to college students' social lives than the one William and Margaret Montgoris Assistant Professor in Psychology Allecia Reid is tackling.

"I'm focusing on alcohol use," she said. "How their peers affect their drinking seems to be really meaningful for them."

That project is just one of several in which Reid is looking at how factors like where we live and with whom we associate affect our behavior and our health.

Reid's work on how social factors influence health behaviors started during a postdoctoral position at Yale University, where she looked at connections between racial discrimination and HIV prevention efforts. That led to a postdoc at Brown and a switch to how peers influence college student drinking. At Colby she's exploring both lines of research and finding ways to work closely with students on projects that will lead to a better understanding of how students—and everyone else—can be healthier.

Reid's work is focused on interventions—deliberate attempts to change people's behaviors, especially when those behaviors might adversely affect their health. Interventions are most commonly associated with substance abuse counseling, but community public health programs and college wellness efforts are interventions, too, as is simply offering a student a pamphlet about healthy alcohol consumption.

To gauge whether interventions are effective, Reid surveys students. She asks how much their friends drink and how the participants think their friends would react if the participant drank less. The participants then experience an intervention—a video about the dangers of binge drinking, for example—and take a follow-up survey a few weeks later. Reid's student research assistants conduct surveys and work with her to make sense of the results, all with an eye toward figuring out how to help students drink responsibly.

They're finding that the company we keep really does make a difference.

In an article she published last year in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Reid reported that, in fact, people who thought their friends would be accepting of more-moderate drinking tended to drink less.

"What does your social network look like, how much do they drink, and how does that affect how you respond to interventions?" Reid said. "If you're in a group with really heavy drinking, it can be really difficult for you to go through an intervention and say, 'Okay. Now I'm going to go back and change my behavior even though all my friends are not. They're doing all the same things.'"

Reid's second line of research focuses on how experiences of discrimination affect health behaviors. In particular she's asking whether HIV prevention programs are effective at reducing HIV rates among people who have experienced discrimination. So far she's learned that if people are discriminated against they are less likely to trust outsiders offering health education, so there is an increased need for health workers to gain their trust.



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—William and Margaret Montgoris
Assistant Professor in Psychology Allecia Reid

In 2014 Reid was named the inaugural William and Margaret Montgoris Assistant Professor in Psychology. The named chair honors a faculty member for outstanding scholarship, and it provides additional resources for the professor's academic initiatives and research. With that additional support, Reid said she's excited to expand her project on college drinking to consider whether there are differences in how much people think their peers drink and the happiness of nondrinkers on campus.

Questions about drinking among college students are of particular interest to her students, Reid said. What they're learning affects them and their friends immediately—it's science with hyper-local relevance and a laudable objective.

"The goal is always to think about how do we help college students to drink more moderately, to tune in to themselves rather than feeling like they need to keep up with friends who are drinking more heavily," said Reid. "Hopefully they take it back out to their interactions with friends."