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The percentage of U.S. college freshmen reporting that they drank beer occasionally or frequently in the past year has declined significantly since the early 1980s, according to data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's annual college freshman survey.

In 1982, 73.7 percent of college freshmen reported drinking beer in the year before entering college. Since then this rate has declined nearly every year, reaching a record low of 33.4 percent in 2012.

While the decline in beer consumption over the past three decades is encouraging, one-third of college freshmen still report drinking beer in the year before entering college. Research has shown that early alcohol use—particularly before the age of 18—is associated with a higher risk of alcohol abuse or dependence as an adult.

Alcohol is widely available and aggressively promoted throughout society. It is the most commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States -- more than tobacco and illicit drugs -- and although drinking by persons under the age of 21 is illegal, people aged 12 to 20 drink 11 percent of all alcohol consumed in the United States. Click here to learn more about Underage and College Drinking.

NOTES: The 2012 results are based on the responses of 192,912 first-time, full-time, freshmen at 283 U.S. baccalaureate colleges and universities. The survey is typically administered during the freshmen orientation process. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the approximately 1.5 million first-time, full-time students entering 1,613 four-year college and universities as first-year students in 2012.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), The Freshman Survey. Available online at http://heri.ucla.edu/tfsPublications.php. For additional information, contact the Higher Education Research Institute at heri@ucla.edu.