

1995

Alcohol prevention programs

Laura Becker
University of Northern Iowa

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Recommended Citation

Becker, Laura, "Alcohol prevention programs" (1995). *Graduate Research Papers*. 351.
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/351>

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Abstract

Alcohol consumption is a problem on almost every college campus. The problem not only affects the drinkers, but also the roommates who have to put up with the behavior, the faculty who try to teach these students, and the support services staff who does what it can to reduce the behavior, or at least its negative effects

Because of the problem of drinking, many programs have been developed to try to get students to drink responsibly or to refrain from drinking. Despite these programs, the amount of drinkers on college campuses remains astoundingly high. What types of programs really do make the students aware of the consequences of drinking?

6-19-95

EP/Health/Drug & Alcohol

Alcohol Prevention Programs:

**A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education**

**by Laura Becker
January, 1995**

This Research by Laura Becker

Entitled: Alcohol Prevention Programs

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

4.4.95
Date Approved

Michael D. Waggoner
Adviser/Director of ~~Research~~ Research Paper

4-6-95
Date Approved

Larry Keig
Second Reader of ~~Research~~ Research Paper

4.6.95
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of ~~Educational~~ Educational
Administration and Counseling

Alcohol consumption is a problem on almost every college campus.

The problem not only affects the drinkers, but also the roommates who have to put up with the behavior, the faculty who try to teach these students, and the support services staff who does what it can to reduce the behavior, or at least its negative effects.

Some of the problems associated with alcohol consumption are the possibility of being arrested for underage drinking, open container, drunk driving, or public intoxication. Other less obvious problems are linked to a higher rate of casual sex when large amounts of alcohol are consumed. This can also lead to higher rates of date-rape or other unwanted sexual experiences. Aggression seems to be linked to high amounts of drinking and can lead to fist fights, campus brawls, and campus crime. On a less violent note, but still very important, are missed classes, lower GPA's, lower self-esteem, and even addiction to alcohol (Barr & Upcraft, 1986).

Because of the problem of drinking, many programs have been developed to try to get students to drink responsibly or to refrain from drinking. Despite these programs, the amount of drinkers on college campuses remains astoundingly high. What types of programs really do make the students aware of the consequences of drinking?

The alcohol industry is not easy competition for student services professionals. The high-cost marketing techniques used by the alcohol industry to focus on the college population offers quite a challenge for student services.

Often, college students see commercials in which men who are drinking beer have many beautiful women by their sides. Or that beer drinking is a natural thing to do, whether it is while boating and fishing, or hanging out at a sports bar during Monday night football. These commercials do not focus only on the male population. College women see commercials that portray female beer drinkers as being more sexually desirable and attractive. Television is not the only place a college student may come into contact with strategic marketing techniques for alcohol. Local bars also play a large part in contributing to the myth that drinking alcohol is natural for college students. Many bars offer skirt night, where if one wheres a skirt, one gets in free. Of course, targeted mainly to women, many times skirt night is also the night where women also drink free. Sports events are also accompanied with dollar-draws or two-for-one drink specials. While drinking is not necessarily a negative behavior, excessive drinking is a different story.

The purpose of this paper is to review the current status of alcohol abuse on campuses and analyze traditional and new approaches to decrease the problem. First, it will review reasons why students drink. Secondly, it will address the traditional alcohol prevention and intervention programs student affairs professionals have used in the past in an attempt to reduce the drinking problem. Finally, it will offer suggestions modified from the alcohol industry itself to decrease or prevent student alcohol abuse.

Why do students drink?

In order to begin the process of reducing alcohol abuse, it is necessary to ask the students what makes them choose to drink in the first place. Their replies can shape the future for, and content of, alcohol prevention programs. First of all, is college the time when students first begin to drink? In the past, it may have seemed that college freshman began to experiment with alcohol their first year in college. Today, that is not always the case. In 1990, USA Today reported that 33 per cent of high school seniors binge drink, i.e., consume five or more drinks at one sitting. On top of that, 56 per cent of high school students begin drinking before the ninth grade (USA Today, May 15, 1990).

High school students reported boredom, easy accessibility to alcohol (as opposed to the more limited access of illegal drugs), escape from the world, and "to appear adult" as the main reasons for turning to alcohol. One student said that drinking was just much more fun than going to the movies (USA Today, 1990). By the time a student enters college, drinking may no longer be an experimentation, but rather a formed habit. The decision to drink or not to drink may be made before the student comes to college. Institutions can focus on influencing *how* a student drinks.

First-year students may be using alcohol for completely different reasons than originally thought. A study of the role of drinking games on college campuses reported that 78 per cent of college freshman play drinking

games. Students readily reported that the first and foremost reason for participating in drinking games is to socialize (Newman, Crawford, & Nellis, 1991). The second reason reported for playing drinking games was simply to get drunk. According to the students in this study, drinking games provided an easy means of relating to others, especially the opposite sex. The role of drinking games demands attention. If students need alcohol in order to socialize, it is possible that they may need to develop their social skills without the use of alcohol. Student services could consider focusing on helping students develop those social skills during the first year of college and providing planned social activities in a non-threatening atmosphere in place of the dorm-room drunk-fest.

Inhibitions are often lowered as the amount of alcohol consumption gets higher. Common to almost any college drinker is the term "beer goggles," meaning that the drunker one is, the more sexually attractive a potential partner appears. Media myths seem to indicate that relationships are easier found while drinking (Alive and Well, 1994). In response, the beer goggle effect can sometimes be used to explain a sexual experience that may not have occurred under other, more sober, circumstances. College women may also use alcohol as an excuse for sexual experimentation, eliminating a personal responsibility because she claims she was too drunk to know what was going on.

Because of the beer-goggle effect and the double standard placed on women who experiment sexually, alcohol use by women can have particularly

dangerous consequences. More than 75 percent of all acquaintance rapes are alcohol related, with the male, female, or both being intoxicated (Abbey, 1991). Lowered inhibitions and an unawareness of her surroundings may lead to unprotected sex and possibly the transmission of A.I.D.S. or other sexually-transmitted diseases. One statistic from Southern Illinois University found that 61% of students later regret actions that had occurred under the influence (Alive and Well, 1994). The fact that women may use alcohol to lessen their sexual responsibility sheds a new twist on support programming. An answer to decrease college women's use of alcohol might be to help the college woman define her sexual limitations and learn how to experiment with sex comfortably, safely, and with self-respect. The following section will review some of the alcohol-abuse prevention programs used in the past.

Traditional Approaches

Historically, American colleges have tolerated and even approved of the use of alcohol among their students. In the 1930s, alcohol was beginning to hit the social scene heavily, and more and more women began to drink alcohol to signify their new freedom. More recently, attitudes have shifted from the popular belief that all college students drink to discovering ways to decrease their drinking (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992). Alcohol-related auto accidents resulting in injury and death spawned a change in the minimum drinking age. But according to a 1988 survey by Campus Alcohol Consultants,

students' drinking habits have not changed significantly (Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992). Today, as a group, college students drink more than high school students and same-age peers not in college combined (Alive and Well, 1994).

What makes students rebel and experiment with alcohol? More importantly, what can student services do to help them refrain from this experimentation. In 1977, the University of Florida recognized that alcohol abuse was, at the time, one of the country's leading health problems and causes of death. They also noticed the very high percentage of college drinkers and designed a manual on how to develop a campus alcohol abuse prevention program (Gonzales, 1977). That college drinking was a problem twenty years ago is no doubt, but since then, have the newer and improved alcohol prevention programs provided any real decline?

The alcohol prevention approach, initiated by the University of Florida, consisted of the following...

- a media campaign through the student newspaper
- a disco party featuring a breathalyzer
- pamphlets and other information about alcohol
- a poster contest addressing alcohol abuse
- a one-day film festival on alcohol awareness (Gonzales, 1990).

The prevention program was supplemented with academic courses such as "Responsible Alternatives to Alcohol Abuse" and educational workshops

presented to students in residence halls. The program was successful in exposing the problem to students, since over 500 students attended the disco alone and the media campaign was estimated to have reached 90 per cent of the students (Gonzales, 1990).

The beginning of the modern alcohol education movement began in 1975 on the campus of Notre Dame. The "50 Plus 12 Project" sponsored by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse brought together educators from each of the 50 states and 12 private institutions to discuss the issues of alcohol on campuses (Barr & Upcraft, 1986). This conference described components of a model alcohol program. Among those listed were...

- to have alcohol awareness activities, such as exhibitions, media campaigns, films, and literature addressing alcohol use and abuse.
- to have a centralized alcohol information and resource office, as well as a counseling and referral center.
- to have workshops on health and alcohol to allow students to discuss information they have received on alcohol.
- to have courses on alcohol use for academic credit.

But does exposing students to information on alcohol use and abuse necessarily mean that students will choose *not* to drink? Traditional alcohol prevention programs do get very positive results. They expose students to the problem of drinking. They tell students of the negative consequences of drinking (e.g., hangovers, missed classes). They even may offer scare tactics

including correlational statistics on alcohol use and death, or alcohol use and termination of school. Trying to counter the alcohol industry with negative messages is not necessarily the most effective way to reach students. What the traditional programs lack is the knowledge of why students choose to drink in the first place. Most students know that if they drink too much they will experience a hangover. Is that enough to help the student choose not to drink at a party where everyone else is drinking and where alcohol is easily accessible? In order to implement a successful and effective alcohol prevention program, we need to understand the needs and interests of the college audience to develop a program that will reach them. As these programs are developed, the industry which focuses on and encourages drinking among the college population needs to be considered as part of the alcohol-abuse problem.

The Alcohol Industry

The alcohol industry is tough competition for student services. While student affairs professionals desperately try to decrease the alcohol consumption on their campus, the alcohol industry bombards college students with advertisements from all angles. Miller Lite, Budweiser, Coors, and many other companies spend millions of dollars to promote alcohol to college students by using flashy, high-tech, and attractive advertisements.

One way the alcohol industry specifically targets college students is by advertising in their school newspapers. A study done in 1985 estimated that of

all national beer advertisements at that time, 97 per cent of them were placed in college newspapers (Breed, Wallack, & Grube, 1990). In fact, one decade ago, approximately 24 column inches of space per issue in a college newspaper was used for alcohol advertisements. While some may think beverage advertisers in general, such as the soft drink industry, target the college population, according to Breed, Wallack, and Grube, alcohol advertisements allot for more than 45 times as much space in college newspapers than soft drinks.

Not only do beer companies target the college population, but local drinking establishments do as well. In most cases, college campuses are surrounded by bars and dance clubs that serve alcohol, and many of these establishments allow students to enter at the age of 19. The geography of bars, usually within walking distance to the dorms, adds to the concept of easy accessibility to alcohol. Many times students come up with fake identification to help them either purchase alcohol at a store, or be served alcohol at a bar.

Since most of the students who live on a college campus are under the legal drinking age of 21, why do these establishments advertise in the college newspapers? Some of these bars that let students in at the age of 19 may be advertising events that students may attend while not drinking. But many advertisements consist of two-for-one drink specials, progressive draws, or even nights when some people get to drink free. A major strategy of bars is to host a "Ladies Night", where women, usually who must wear short skirts get

to drink free for a period of time. Of course, the bars do not make their money by letting half the population drink free. But rather by enticing men to come to meet women, who, incidentally, may be drinking heavily. The effects of the alcohol industry on the college population should not be taken lightly. In fact, the strategies used by the alcohol industry to encourage students to drink can be modified to send a non-drinking message.

New Strategies for Alcohol Prevention Programs

In light of the serious problem of alcohol abuse on the college campus, what do we tell the college population? Do we preach abstinence or responsible use? Is alcohol use merely here to stay, part of student development (Barr & Upcraft, 1986). Although it may be easy to write the problem off as "part of the process", we must remember that there are students who do refrain from drinking. Unfortunately, these are the students viewed as the "weird" ones by their drinking counterparts (Barr & Upcraft, 1986).

Due to the competition of the alcohol industry, student services must develop marketing strategies that are appealing to the college population (Berne, Smith, & Walch, 1991). This is the generation that was raised under the influences of MTV and the like. So how do we develop programs that compete with the slick, visual stimulating productions of the media? The three keys are energy, creativity, and imagination (Berne, Smith, & Walch, 1991).

Research indicates that marketing strategies that focus on not wasting

money and not experiencing regretted alcohol related consequences may be a more believable source for students (Alive & Well, 1994). Since students seem to use alcohol to ease into the social scene and/or sexual scene, one focus for student services is to take an indirect approach by programming for social/sexual skills rather than alcohol use.

Many students may feel as if there is nothing else to do on the weekends so they might as well join a party. One program implemented at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa is to host a "Mock-Tail Party" in which non-alcoholic drinks are served with the same names as the popular alcohol drinks (Malone, personal communication). By offering structured and advertised social events, it may decrease the pressure to drink by offering another fun activity to do rather than studying on a Saturday night.

Using peers to communicate with college students can be an effective way to reduce alcohol use. The key is for students to view the peer educator as a "true peer" to get the message across. One way for this to succeed is to focus on a particular "party group" and gain support and interest from a member of that particular group. Alcohol prevention information may then be viewed more positively from the group if it is heard from a member of that group (Alive & Well, 1994). Peers may also be used to gather research from a group of students to know why and when they are most likely to drink.

For students to plan their weekend activities, they must first be aware of the various activities going on. By preparing a monthly calendar of

activities ahead of time, students can fit these activities into their schedule and encourage friends to attend with them. Activities that seem to be popular among the college crowd are Casino Nights, Karaoke, line dancing, and sporting events. These events can be non-alcoholic, fun, and unaware to the students, supervised.

What may be the most important tool in reducing alcohol use on campus is a combination of many strategies. Give students the information. Help them understand it. Next, give students the tools to make responsible decisions and make it easy for them to do by offering weekend alternatives to the bars. Finally, provide the support they need to make decisions under less than optimal situations. Make sure that students are aware of the negative consequences of over drinking and help them to be confident in their decision to refrain from drinking or responsible drinking. While alcohol may always be part of the college campus, it does not always have to be as large of a problem as it is today.

Summary

It is essential that campuses be an environment where students learn to make their own decisions. Student services needs to enhance that learning process by providing students with the information necessary to make their own choices. In addition to providing the tools, students also need a support system in order to sustain responsible decision-making. When developing future alcohol prevention programs, administrators must take into account the

reasons why students drink in the first place, what information will allow students to make responsible decisions, the support systems that students will need, and what events are needed to replace the drinking games and binge parties. If these questions are addressed, more effective prevention programs can be implemented that will foster responsibility among students.

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