Alcohol education in colleges and universities: Goals, programs, and evaluation

Marilyn Jean Dettmer
University of Northern Iowa
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Abstract
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ALCOHOL EDUCATION IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES:
GOALS, PROGRAMS, AND EVALUATION

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Marilyn Jean Dettmer
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Thomas W. Hansmeier

April 13, 1989
Date Approved
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

April 13, 1989
Date Approved
Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

April 19, 1989
Date Received
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
Introduction

A constantly recurring problem on college campuses is that of alcohol use and abuse. The literature reveals that a high percentage of college students drink and that many drink excessively. Gonzalez and Broughton (1986) reported on 1977 studies by Blane and Hewitt which showed that the college student population has a higher number of drinkers than any other population group in the United States. Approximately eighty-five percent of American college students drink beer, wine, or distilled spirits compared to about seventy percent of the general population. Gonzalez (1986) reported on 1979 studies by Wechsler and McFadden which indicated that upwards of ninety percent of both college men and women in some regions of the United States are drinkers. Cherry (1987) stated that alcohol use among college students exceeded eighty percent nationwide. A 1983 survey by Mills, Neal, and Peed-Neal revealed that both men and women drink more as they progress through college, and those who drink more have more problems (Gonzalez, 1986). Drinking apparently peaks during the senior year of college because the level of drinking declines to that of the general population after the students leave higher education (Cherry, 1987).

Why do college students drink? Survey results by Thorner (1986) found that students gave the following major reasons: celebrating—having a good time, ninety percent; because I liked
the taste, eighty-one percent; because my friends did, sixty percent; getting drunk, forty-five percent; getting along better with people, twenty-nine percent. Mascalo's 1979 study identified five major reasons why students drink: 1) to ease anxiety caused by college stress, 2) to ease into personal and social difficulties, 3) depression, 4) loneliness, and 5) feelings of worthlessness (Thorner, 1986).

The most alarming of the above responses is that almost one-half of the students surveyed by Thorner drank with a conscious goal of becoming drunk. This statistic seems to depict the biggest change in drinking styles of students today. "The number of students who drink in comparison to the population at large, point toward a future increase in the number of alcoholics" (Thorner, 1986, p.43).

Given these facts and statistics, it appears obvious that educators need to develop timely and worthwhile alcohol education programs and to make sure these programs are especially effective during the students' freshman and sophomore years. This may help curb excessive drinking and prevent the problems which can do irrevocable damage to the students' lives as well as to their college careers. What sort of problems are we attempting to avert? A wide range of negative consequences may result from the excessive use of alcohol: absences from classes, altercations with police while intoxicated, social criticism from peers,
fights, low grades, involvement in automobile accidents, job loss, etc. Some schools report that as much as eighty percent of the vandalism on campus is alcohol related (Gonzalez and Broughton, 1986). This literature review deals with the goals of alcohol education and describes alcohol education programs to achieve these goals. An evaluation of alcohol education programs is also included.

Goals of Alcohol Education

"Alcohol education is perhaps one facet of health education most often ignored, yet most critical to an individual's health" (Lenhart and Wodarski, 1984, p.39). Educators have, in the past, not dealt effectively with alcohol education because of its complexity. It is not enough merely to impart information; one must motivate students to apply pertinent information concerning alcohol use (and abuse) to their own lives.

Because of the inherent complexity involved, the goals of alcohol education cover a broad spectrum and range from "selfish" to "idealistic" (Thorner, 1986). Selfish goals are implemented primarily for the benefit of the institution, e.g., minimizing damage to university property. Another is the administrative concern for legal liability issues concerning alcohol misuse.

Idealistic goals are designed to influence the values students choose to live by in the future, thus influencing the society in which they will live. Nelson (1987) suggested two
goals: 1) stimulating young people to think about the essentials of learning about life, personal choice based on values and attitudes, and responsibilities towards others; 2) creating a positive impact on society by producing graduates with positive knowledge and attitudes gained through exposure to values education on campuses. Although these goals seem idealistic, one can point to the fact that many of today's undergraduates will attain positions of leadership and influence. Involvement with campus alcohol education programs might lead students, after their graduation, to develop higher standards for society than those currently accepted. Lenhart and Wodarski (1984, p.39) noted: "Students learn various drinking patterns as they mature, and with proper behavioral techniques, these sometimes unhealthy patterns can be altered toward healthier ones."

Many alcohol education problems include one or more of the following goals: 1) Training professionals to identify drinking problems (Mills & McCarty, 1983); 2) Promote responsible alcohol use (Chen, Dosch, & Cychosz, 1982); 3) Diminish alcohol abuse in order to prevent the mortality of students (Thorner, 1986); 4) Provide an educational experience for students which will increase their knowledge about alcohol (Chassey & Clifford, 1988); 5) Train peer educators to provide outreach to the student community (Claydon & Johnson, 1985); 6) Explore and identify one's own attitudes about alcohol, drinking patterns, and related
problems (Riccelli, 1985); 7) Develop intervention strategies
to influence both individual and group behavior (Kraft, 1988);
8) Develop support systems which will help maintain altered
drinking behavior (Lenhart & Wodarski, 1984); 9) Overcome the
existing denial of alcohol abuse problems and facilitate change
(O'Connell & Beck, 1984); 10) Raise the level of understanding
and consciousness concerning alcohol in the university community
(Stolberg, 1987). It can be assumed, then, that the goals for
specific alcohol education programs may vary. Most, however,
are designed to facilitate the positive development of the student
and have been implemented in interesting ways at several
institutions.

Alcohol Education Programs

The Alcohol education programs in place on American campuses
today are quite varied. The prevailing attitude seems to be
that something must be done, so a program is put into place.
Alcohol education programs are abundant, but educators seem unsure
about the effectiveness of these programs.

Many campuses promote educational programs during Alcohol
Awareness Week held nationwide during October. A program at
the University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse, "Tip it Lightly", attempted
to exert a positive effect on the drinking attitudes and behaviors
of students by offering sessions on communication, alcohol and
driving, sexuality, stress management, and other topics related
to alcohol use (Chen, Dosch, & Cychosz, 1982).

Another program, at the State University of New York, Buffalo, was based on the theory that peers help each other best, especially in the area of alcohol and substance abuse. A number of students were trained in counseling practices and alcohol education, including its chemistry, biology, physiology, etc. Through the programming efforts of these paraprofessionals, educational workshops and other activities were developed. The percentage of students who attended these events was relatively small, but those who did attend proclaimed that it had a profound impact on their lives (Thorner, 1986).

A program developed by Meier (1988) at State University of New York, Buffalo, operated on the premise of attraction through hi-tech. It is a computer program which presents knowledge about alcohol through quizzes, graphics, database, and a simulation.

Four scholars in North Carolina developed a program which was based on direct-mail techniques. The theory behind this program was that although many worthwhile alcohol education programs were being offered on campuses, the attendance, and thus total exposure, remained very low. Therefore, direct-mail provided the opportunity to involve directly all of the student body in the reception of new knowledge about alcohol (McCarty, Poore, Mills, Morrison, 1983).
The University of Louisville, which has an on-campus pub, has embarked on a program whereby only faculty or staff members are permitted to serve. Before beginning a work shift, each bartender views a slide show which explains his/her legal responsibility not to serve anyone who is intoxicated and gives pointers on how to turn someone away. This program has provided for positive interaction between students and faculty and has even permeated the classroom in the form of discussion material (Connell, 1985).

Three programs were designed to function specifically on group dynamics. At Kutztown (Pennsylvania) State University, a therapeutic program was used as an involuntary group session for students violating the no-drinking policy in the residence halls. Students arrived at this group by way of a meeting with a judicial officer and a college counselor. Students were required to participate in eight sessions which were designed to dispel any existing denial of alcohol abuse problems, promote students' personal assessment of drinking practices, facilitate change in abusive drinking practices, and increase readiness for treatment of students whose alcohol involvement was dysfunctional (O'Connell, Beck 1984).

At the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) a Student Opportunity Program (STOP) was designed to address the needs of problems drinkers (Riccelli, 1985). Groups consisted of
students whose alcohol-related behavior was jeopardizing their ability to remain on campus. A multi-session format was selected to occur over a two-month time span. Careful consideration was given to timing, ensuring that program sessions began late enough in the semester so that referrals could be received.

Students involved in the Self-Management of Alcohol Consumption of Students (SMACS) program at the University of Georgia are volunteers who enter the program by self-referral from posters, newspapers, radio; by referral by professionals in the university housing office, mental health and counseling centers; or by referral by residence hall advisors (Lenhart & Wodarski, 1984). Students are selected on the basis of their percentile scores on an assessment inventory. Participants meet twice weekly for two-hour sessions which are divided into three phases: education about alcohol consumption, alteration of drinking patterns and behaviors, and a maintenance program.

Sponsors of group programs cite several advantages of this approach: 1) Group support can enhance self-esteem of participants; 2) Group support can strengthen an individual's self-image and encourage the development of each young person's ability to sustain a program to alter drinking patterns; 3) The group interaction situation frequently typifies many kinds of daily interactions of college students which involve drinking behavior; 4) Groups provide a realistic environment for the
testing of new behaviors; 5) Groups have proved to be a more cost-efficient use of staff time (Lenhart & Wodarski, 1984: Riccelli, 1985).

All of the programs described above have two things in common. One is that they are based on the Gonzalez model which assumes a series of relationships between a person's knowledge about drugs or alcohol and his/her behavior relating to drugs or alcohol use (Andrews, 1987). This model has been often studied, examined, and evaluated; at the present time, its validity and reliability have not been sufficiently validated through research (Stolberg, 1987). The second area of commonality is their general philosophy. They are not geared towards the elimination of alcohol use among students, but rather towards the promotion of more intelligent and responsible use of the drug.

Some alcohol education programmers, however, have a different philosophy. A workshop developed at Westfield (Massachusetts) State College by two educators in the Department of Residential Life has two premises. The first is the rejection of the concept of responsible drinking, for reasons stated by Chassey and Clifford (1988):

1. The concept assumes that everyone drinks.
2. It puts a premium on drinking as "proof" of responsibility.
3. It assumes that everyone should drink and allows no freedom for those who choose not to drink.

4. It assumes everyone can drink, ignoring the ten percent of the population who cannot drink without developing problems.

The second premise assumes the existence of a continuum of drinking behavior. The first level, alcohol use, is when the effects of alcohol can be realized with a minimum amount of risk to the user and to others. The second level, alcohol misuse, is when the quantity of alcohol consumed significantly increases the risk of harm to the user and to others. The final level, alcohol abuse, is when a person's drinking behavior poses a high risk to the individual, family, and society.

The Westfield program is targeted towards students who are first-and second-time offenders of the school's alcohol policies and is intended to teach them choices. The format is a workshop which uses a video tape entitled "Choices", produced and distributed by BACCHUS. BACCHUS, the collegiate alcohol education program named for the Greek god of wine, is an acronym for "boost alcohol consciousness concerning the health of university students."

BACCHUS, under the leadership of its president, Gerado M. Gonzalez, has provided guidance, direction, and a sense of unity for alcohol education programmers throughout this country.
Although the sponsors of the Westfield program rejected the use of the Gonzalez knowledge—attitudes—behavior model in favor of his "Choices" format, these programs clearly are not at odds with one another. Campus programming must be done with a wide range of personalities in mind. It is naive to assume that offering non-alcoholic mocktails and other methods to attain "natural highs" will appeal to all students and that they will automatically give up the use of alcohol. However, the opportunity presented by "Choices" may appeal to students who, upon examining their real motives for drinking, find it is mostly a result of peer pressure. But, in this case as in any other, knowledge has been received by the student and an attitude change has resulted. The basic model is still intact.

For students who wish to continue the use of alcohol, it is hoped that the new knowledge gained concerning alcohol use and its consequences will directly impact their drinking behavior so as to prevent misuse and abuse problems. And, for the unfortunate students who may have already slipped into an abusive pattern of drinking, it is imperative to educate them about the options available in terms of treatment and counseling.

Evaluation of Alcohol Education Programs

Alcohol education is a complex, many-faceted endeavor. The initial years have been a combination of successes and mistakes. Important groundwork has been established, however,
and some implications for future programs seem clear.

Howard T. Blane, a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, is alcohol education's most outspoken critic. Blane claims that there is "no evidence that anything that has been done in the past works in changing attitudes, knowledge, or behavior—mainly behavior" (Fulton & Spooner, 1987, p.131). Other sources cite lack of evaluation of programs as a major problem. Claydon and Johnson (1985, p.51) stated: "The one most evident shortcoming of most of the alcohol programs has been their failure to provide adequate empirical data to support their effectiveness in coping with the alcohol problem on campuses." Kraft (1988) supports the position that evaluation methods need to be built into each program. He stressed that the methods need not be complicated but should be "systematic and honest, to detect changes or effects, if any" (Kraft, 1988, p.50).

Another area of concern is ownership of the program. Can one department within student affairs intervene in students' drinking habits with any degree of success? Kraft (1988) opined that a cooperative effort is necessary to ensure a successful program. He encouraged program staff to work with involved community groups, both students and staff, in order to win their involvement and support. "Prevention and treatment program activities should also be subsumed within existing campus programs and activities, as much as possible, so that all campus groups
own parts of alcohol program efforts" (Kraft, 1988, p.49).

According to a study by Gadaletto and Anderson (1986), leadership for efforts to prevent alcohol abuse should come from various campus offices and organizations. This reinforces the value of peer counselors, as suggested by Thorner (1986).

A study by Cherry (1987) supported the conclusion that students with strong social bonds to the college community drink much less than do students with weak or broken bonds. These findings suggest that maximum prevention could be achieved by facilitating student social bonds to the college community and that student leader involvement in alcohol education is important.

One of the largest problems to be solved is lack of participation. Many alcohol education programs are achieving varying degrees of success with the students who are reached, but the programs are only reaching small numbers. David Kraft (1988) challenged future programs to develop a mechanism to attract a significant proportion (twenty to thirty percent) of "average" students to participate in alcohol education activities.

What, then, will be the future for alcohol education? Is it possible to change drinking attitudes and behavior through education? Have we made any progress toward that goal?

A positive answer to those questions was indicated by surveys conducted by Gonzalez (1986) of college students spending their spring break at Daytona Beach, Florida. His intention was to
discern what changes may have occurred in student drinking patterns now that the higher education community, and American society in general, have begun to pay more attention to problems caused by excessive drinking. The survey included questions concerning the students' demographics, sex, and alcohol knowledge and use of patterns. The results of Gonzalez' three-year survey pointed to significant decreases for both males and females in the numbers of heavy drinkers, i.e., students who have more than two drinks daily or more than fourteen drinks per week. Students' knowledge of alcohol effects increased significantly in both sexes. Gonzalez urged cautious interpretation of these results, but he pointed to the fact that they do suggest a "positive development." One may optimistically hope that these results indicate a trend towards decreased consumption of alcoholic beverages by college students which are attributable, at least to some extent, to alcohol education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The literature suggests that effective alcohol education programs and activities are increasing on college and university campuses. These programs offer considerable variety, and they originate from various campus offices and organizations.

The varying degree of success experienced by alcohol education programs imply that the endeavor is in an early stage of development. Creative evaluation methods need to be developed
in order to give alcohol educators a clearer sense of direction.

Alcohol education is geared to meet the need for a cultural change. It involves the introduction of new norms and values. Therefore, immediate pay-offs for alcohol educators will not be forthcoming. The future well-being of our students, however, certainly warrants the effort and cooperation required to implement and maintain alcohol education programs in our colleges and universities. In the words of Fulton and Spooner (1987):

The problem requires a long-term and broad-based approach, with change measured over more than one or two generations of college students. This means a continuing commitment of resources and an understanding that the issue is not confined to the campus environment, but has its roots in our cultural attitude and values. We need to take these factors into account before we conclude that our educational efforts are of no value. To put it another way, would it not be the highest irony if we as educators conclude that education can do no good? (p.132).
References


