

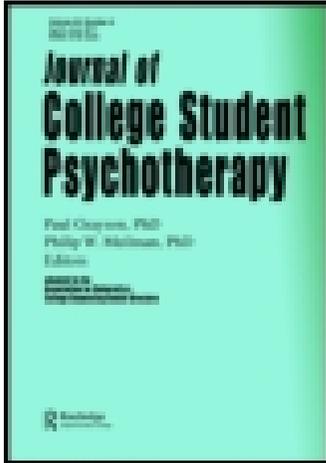
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An Environmental Approach to Combat Binge Drinking on College Campuses

John B. Bishop

ABSTRACT. In 1996, the University of Delaware was chosen as one of six universities to receive a five-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to combat binge or high-risk drinking on college campuses by using an environmental or public health perspective. This paper identifies the major features of such an approach. Specific strategies which are being employed at the University of Delaware are described, as well as some of the lessons that have been learned. Outcomes that have been achieved are also presented. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>]*

KEYWORDS. Binge drinking, alcohol abuse, student drinking

It is common knowledge that the use of alcohol has long been associated with various aspects of college life. Entering first-year students look forward to the parties they have heard about, knowing that alcohol is the fuel that drives those events. Upperclass students are more than inventive in finding ways to escape institutional rules and state and local laws in their zeal to have alcohol be a major part of the social fabric of their lives. Even many alumni look back on their

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time at college with a certain nostalgia about their use of alcohol and, perhaps, romanticize those experiences.

It is also evident that the heavy use of alcohol has often been associated with a wide range of behavioral problems among students. Saltz and Elandt (1986) reviewed studies of college drinking between 1976 and 1985 and found that 90% of college students consumed alcohol, with the heaviest drinkers living off-campus or in fraternity/sorority houses, having lower grade point averages, and more negative consequences related to drinking. Hirschorn (1987) pointed out the perceived connection between drinking and antisocial activities. In addition, Rivinus (1988) noted that the incidence of alcohol use on college and university campuses was higher than the United States population at large and that there was an association between the use of alcohol and accidental deaths, suicides, rapes and other violent acts. Such data clearly illustrates that alcohol abuse on college campuses is not a new problem.

More recently, national attention has been drawn to the growing concern of college and university administrators about the high-risk drinking that is occurring on and near campus communities. The definition of high-risk or binge drinking which most researchers now use is when a male has five or more drinks in a row, one or more times within a two-week period of time or when females have four or more drinks in a row, one or more times in that same time frame (Wechsler, 1995). In 1993, the Harvard School of Public Health conducted a survey of 140 accredited four-year colleges with over 17,500 student respondents (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castello, 1994). The results showed that the magnitude of the alcohol problem has grown, in spite of the attempts of institutions of higher education to sponsor prevention programs and/or increase enforcement efforts. A follow-up survey in 1997 (Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998) indicated little change in the national patterns of alcohol use among college students, reinforcing the conclusion that, on many campuses, the student culture is dominated by the presence and consequences of alcohol. In fact, the Harvard School of Public Health surveys found that more than 50% of the students who use alcohol said they drink to get drunk. Additional surveys conducted by the CORE Institute (Presley, Meilman, Cashin, & Lyerla, 1996) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Douglas et al., 1997) have also found that approximately

two out of every five American college students can be labeled as binge or high-risk drinkers.

In the fall of 1999, college presidents at 113 state universities and land-grant colleges initiated a national public awareness campaign to call attention to the dangers of high-risk drinking among young people. Even the Congress of the United States became invested in the issue in the summer of 1998 with the passage of the “Kennedy Resolution” as a part of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act. That resolution called on college and university presidents to adopt an “Alcohol Code of Principles” with the following components:

- Appoint a task force made up of students, administrators, and faculty that would recommend policy changes to cut the use of alcohol and drugs
- Provide maximum opportunities for students to live in alcohol-free housing
- Enforce a “zero tolerance” policy on illegal alcohol consumption by students and limit opportunities for faculty, staff, and alumni to drink on campus
- Strictly enforce sanctions and penalties for those who violate campus alcohol policies
- Eliminate sponsorship of athletic or other campus activities by alcohol companies
- Form alliances with community officials to limit underage student access to alcohol

THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION GRANT PROGRAM

Clearly, the national level of concern about high-risk drinking on college campuses has never been higher. One of the many initiatives made to combat the issue was developed by the Harvard School of Public Health, with funding provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. During the summer of 1996, the University of Delaware was invited to apply for a five-year grant to develop and implement model approaches to reduce high-risk drinking on campuses and in the surrounding communities. The University of Vermont, the University of Colorado and Lehigh University received similar grants, with the

University of Iowa and the University of Wisconsin joining the program one year later. By 1998, Florida State University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, the Louisiana State University and the University of Nebraska received similar funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In many ways, the Harvard School of Public Health surveys led to the conclusion that the environment on and around our campuses is one which contributes to and sustains the problems associated with high-risk drinking. College students have easy access to alcohol, even though most of them are legally under-aged to consume it. Alcohol is made quite affordable in terms of its cost, due to wide-spread practices of price discounting and “happy hours.” In addition, the alcohol industry obviously spends a great deal of money in advertising its products, often focusing on images that appeal to young people. For example, beer commercials frequently glamorize the use of alcohol by associating it with sports and/or sexual images. In short, there is much in our environment that encourages young people to drink heavily and it is quite difficult to imagine addressing the problems without taking the associated environment into account. Behavioral norms and attitudes as well as institutional policies and practices help make up that environment.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACH

At the University of Delaware and the other institutions of higher education that have received grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, efforts are being made to identify high-risk drinking as an environmental and public health issue. Henry Wechsler, PhD, of the Harvard School of Public Health is the leading advocate of this new approach to what is admittedly an old problem. His research reveals that students who engage in high-risk drinking are causing significant problems for those who do not drink heavily—a phenomenon he calls the “secondhand effects” of the high-risk drinking (Wechsler, 1995). These secondhand effects, which include physical and sexual assaults, property damage, vandalism, and other disturbances of the lives of others, threaten both the quality and safety of the college experience for millions of students and community members who live on or near college campuses.

Why might we hope that this approach will have a better impact

than previous efforts? There are examples of shifts in the opinion of the public in certain health-related matters. Wechsler (1995) points out that the tolerance towards drunk driving has decreased, while the concept of having designated drivers is widely viewed as an acceptable intervention that is designed to keep people safe. The anti-smoking movement is another example. Simply warning people of the adverse effects and health risks associated with smoking did not result in much of a cultural change; however, when the rights of non-smokers to breathe clean air became more emphasized, people became empowered to object to the behavior of smokers and that has led to both policy changes about where smoking is permitted as well as less social acceptance of the habits of smokers. In these instances, the public health approach seemed to be an important factor in changing the behaviors of those whose use of alcohol or tobacco had adverse consequences for others.

Major Features of a Public Health Approach

Approaching the problem of high-risk drinking as a public health issue requires that the environment be the desired focus of change, rather than the individual. At the University of Delaware, the following assumptions have been made in this regard:

1. The welfare of the community is considered to be more important than the wishes or actions of an individual.
2. Individuals have the right to make their own decisions about when and how they choose to use alcohol, as long as those decisions do not have a negative consequence for other people.
3. The violence, vandalism, and other public disruptions that are often associated with the heavy use of alcohol have reached an unacceptable level and are disrespectful of the campus community.
4. Excessive drinking is not an acceptable excuse or alibi for anti-social, violent, or disruptive behaviors.
5. Changing the culture of high-risk drinking will ultimately depend on the willingness of individuals to exercise their personal rights and sensibilities when they suffer the second-hand consequences of someone else's drinking behaviors.

Quite obviously, attempting to change a culture in which high-risk drinking is not only a central component, but often a goal, is a daunt-

ing task. Still, it was once thought that drunken drivers were just a part of our society and that smokers had the right to smoke anytime and anywhere they chose to do so. Today, public sentiment and policy has been effective in changing the culture which surrounds those two issues. It is also important to recognize that the anti-smoking movement was rather ineffective until the rights of non-smokers became emphasized, illustrating how the empowerment of particular groups can have a profound effect on an environment.

THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE PROJECT

With the support of the five-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the University of Delaware has implemented a plan to combat high-risk drinking on the campus and in the surrounding community. Clearly, our hope is that we can develop a new approach to an old problem. Traditional efforts to address the problems associated with high-risk drinking have usually focused on educational programming, increased enforcement of laws and regulations, and increasing the awareness of alcohol-related problems. Such efforts, while commendable and worthwhile, have not appreciably influenced the extent of the problem nor thwarted its growth.

Overall Strategies

In developing the strategies which formed the foundation for our efforts, the recommendations which Wechsler (1995) has made were deemed to be of great importance. The most crucial were as follows:

1. Support must be strong at the top of the institution and community.

In practical terms, this means that the president of the institution must be willing to acknowledge that a problem exists and that it is in the best long-term interest of the college or university to do something meaningful about it. It is easy to underestimate how that support might be challenged by others. For example, there are those in our institutions and communities who have fears about the effects of negative publicity. Admissions personnel and fund raisers might prefer to emphasize all the good news, rather than admitting that problems exist.

Second, there are others who have financial stakes in certain matters. It is often profitable for schools with major athletic programs to provide access to the campus for the alcohol industry in exchange for various forms of funding support. That provides a revenue stream that might be difficult to replace, if there are changes made in that access. Third, alumni are often among the staunchest supporters of some traditions surrounding the use of alcohol that have become problematic for the institution. Is the president willing to have some unhappy alums?

In a like manner, are community officials willing to consider how they are a part of the problem and, therefore, a necessary part of any proposed solution? The truth is that most of the alcohol that is consumed by college students is not provided by a college or university. The supply of alcohol generally comes from the surrounding community and, again, is a lucrative enterprise for some business establishments. Lobbyists in the alcohol industry have shown that they can exert strong political pressures to protect their economic interests. Are community officials and legislators willing to consider policy changes, devote more resources to enforcement efforts, and see how the misuse of alcohol often presents them with other problems that they profess to be concerned about (i.e., public drunkenness, vandalism, increases in other crimes, etc.)?

2. There must be a cooperative effort between the institution and the surrounding community.

Because of the interactions which are a part of daily life between a campus and a community, it is essential to develop a great deal of cooperation between these two in addressing the problems associated with high-risk drinking. It is too easy for a solution that works for one side to have deleterious effects on the other. For example, strengthening campus policies and enforcement efforts toward under-aged drinking could result in more students choosing to move off-campus, thereby increasing the likelihood that the community will receive more complaints about the associated problems. Such a circumstance does not really solve a problem; it simply relocates it.

Another reason for promoting cooperative efforts is that everyone should have a role in finding a solution to the problem. University officials, faculty members, town officials, community representatives, local legislators, on and off-campus security and police forces, alumni,

and parents all have valuable perspectives to share. And most of all, it is crucial to involve students in significant ways. Plans must be developed with students, not imposed on them. There is reason to believe that students will support change, if they perceive that the change has some benefits for them.

3. Focus on the negative second-hand consequences of high-risk drinking and emphasize the rights of those who use alcohol responsibly or not at all.

National data now suggests that it is no longer possible to view high-risk drinking as solely the problem of the drinker; others are paying too steep a price for the associated behaviors. Wechsler (1995) reports that the vast majority of students have experienced one or more negative consequences due to the drinking of others. These range from being assaulted, having property damaged and/or being raped to being insulted, humiliated, and/or having sleep interrupted. In short, if one hopes to decrease these kinds of negative experiences on college campuses and in the surrounding communities, the role of high-risk drinking is impossible to ignore.

At the University of Delaware, students were quick to label the announcement of the beginning of our effort as a focus on “vandalism, violence and vomit.” In fact, that phrase became known as the “Three Vs.” Aside from some initial concern about how graphic the phrase was, it has served the project well because it is simple and accurately communicates how we wished to frame the concerns we had about high-risk drinking. In some of the later communication efforts, a “Fourth V” was added to represent the “victim” of the second-hand consequences of high-risk drinking. Most often, it is a student who is the actual victim of the other “Three Vs.”

It is important to note that this approach to addressing the issues surrounding high-risk drinking should be differentiated from attempts to establish some form of prohibition of alcohol. It is also clear that a public health approach does not take any moralistic stand on the use of alcohol. There is a recognition and acceptance that alcoholic beverages can be used in ways that are both legal and responsible. At the same time, it is important to assert the rights of those who suffer from the second-hand consequences of high-risk drinking and empower

them to take the lead in demanding behavior that is more respectful of the community.

4. Establish a low tolerance level for anti-social behaviors that are related to high-risk drinking.

At the beginning of our efforts, student input was solicited through the use of focus groups. When they were asked about the effectiveness of the University's prior policies in regard to alcohol related problems, students reported that their general perception was that the judicial sanctions were very light and did not suggest that the institution was really interested in changing student behaviors. In most cases, students who had been convicted of violations of the campus code of conduct were referred to alcohol education programs and/or a substance abuse counselor. Neither of these sanctions was viewed as causing much discomfort for the convicted violators and students expressed much doubt that behavior changes would then follow. The recidivism rate in the campus judicial system seemed to support the perceptions of the students participating in the focus groups.

When asked "What kinds of sanctions would be effective in having students believe that the University was genuinely invested in addressing the problems associated with high-risk drinking?", two primary responses emerged: "establish monetary fines" and "get parents involved." With that in mind, the campus judicial policies were revised to include a system of monetary fines, suspension from the University for repeat offenders (known on campus as the "three strikes and you're out" rule), and a parental notification procedure for students who are classified as dependents. At the time, most institutions of higher education were strictly following the provisions of the 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (also known as the Buckley Amendment) and its protection of student records, even though the original act did permit exceptions for health and safety issues. It was clear that judicial convictions involving the use of alcohol and other drug use were not generally viewed as reasons for such exceptions to be made. Several widely publicized cases of alcohol poisoning that have led to the death of college students caused some institutions, such as the University of Delaware, to reconsider this issue and change policy accordingly.

The option of notifying parents when dependent students are convicted of violations of alcohol and/or drug offenses has now become a matter of national attention. Epstein (1999) points out that Section 952

of the Higher Education Act passed by Congress in 1998 now permits institutions of higher education to disclose to parents the outcome of campus judicial proceedings involving alcohol or other drugs. While this legislation does not *require* schools to notify parents of a student's alcohol or drug violation, it is now more likely that institutions will be called upon to defend why they choose not to do so. According to Epstein (1999), this represents a significant shift in the way the public views the problem of college drinking and drug use.

5. Confront the role which fraternities and sororities play in high-risk drinking.

National statistics clearly show that many fraternities and sororities are "functional saloons," with members who use alcohol more often and more heavily than other students (Wechsler, 1995). Data suggests that male Greek-letter societies not only attract members who have histories of high-risk drinking in high school, but encourage those without such histories to engage in the practice once they become members. In many instances, the lofty ideals on which such organizations were originally founded are no longer in sight or are clearly secondary to the concept of a drinking club.

At the University of Delaware, the Vice President for Student Life and the Office of Greek Affairs decided to establish an annual procedure for evaluating each Greek-letter social organization on campus. This now takes place in the form of a "Five Star Accreditation Program" which is designed to reinforce the traditional values of scholarship, brotherhood or sisterhood, and community service. At the same time, penalties are in place for chapters which have individual members or groups of members who violate the campus code of conduct. The accreditation process results in each organization receiving an annual rating, ranging from one to five "stars." Those organizations with low ratings can be prohibited from sponsoring social events, recruiting new members, or participating in some traditional campus-wide Greek-life events. The long-term prospects for organizations with poor annual ratings are not good, particularly because the inability to recruit new members will eventually make it financially impossible for them to continue to function. The belief is that this approach will help those Greek-letter social organizations that truly want to improve their chapters do so by meeting the standards that are prescribed by the accreditation process; those that fail to do so will surely disappear from the campus. In either case, it is hoped that the signifi-

cant contributions that fraternities and sororities make to the campus drinking culture will be diminished.

6. Change the expectations of incoming students.

It is vitally important that strong efforts be made to communicate the expectations of the institution about the use of alcohol to new students and their families. In fact, these messages need to be sent as a part of the institution's recruitment activities and should be a part of what the admissions office shares with high school guidance counselors and prospective applicants. Similar opportunities exist when college catalogues and other public documents are produced. In short, there are ways to begin the orientation program for new students long before they arrive, or consider arriving, on the campus.

Orientation programs offer opportunities for an institution to begin to shape the behaviors of students. The campus code of conduct in regard to alcohol needs to be made explicitly clear to students. In addition, an institution should not shy away from sending messages to students about the values of the institution. When the University of Delaware became aware that, in some quarters, it was regarded as a "party school," it was quite apparent that the administration and faculty were not fond of that label. One of the responses to that was the development of a series of posters and advertisements that directly address the party school image. The general theme employed a play-on-words approach, taking common drinking terms, such as "mug night," "trashed" and "last call," to illustrate the second-hand negative effects of high-risk drinking and underscore that such negative behavior does not have to be endured as a part of the college experience.

Parents also have to be oriented to the expectations of the institution, particularly when it is obvious that they are aware of their students' use of alcohol and may even have facilitated it. The campus may have different rules and regulations than the parents choose to enforce at home and that difference has to be recognized in terms of its possible consequences for students. Also, particularly on campuses where the notification of parents is now a part of the judicial system, it is important to convey the message that the role which parents have in influencing the behavior of their student does not end when they deliver the student to the campus.

7. Increase the number and type of non-alcoholic activities available to students.

A common rationale that college students use to defend their use of alcohol is “there isn’t anything else to do.” College and university administrators frequently respond by pointing to the calendars of campus activities which offer numerous cultural events, athletic contests, social gatherings and student activities and conclude “there are many options available than just drinking alcohol.” What is often missed in this exchange of viewpoints is that the students who currently live on or near college campuses are accustomed to beginning their social activities at an hour when many campuses and communities are closing their facilities, i.e., from midnight to 3:00 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday mornings. An objective assessment of what social options are available to many students during those hours would most likely conclude that private parties are the most available sites. It is also evident that these parties provide easy access to a great deal of alcohol.

To address this issue more effectively, colleges and universities may have to consider changing some of the traditional ways they think about campus life. College students seem to be active on a 24-hour basis, particularly on the weekends. It may make sense to extend the hours of operation of certain campus facilities and provide more funding for the programming of activities during those times.

8. Work to change public policy in regard to how alcohol is made available to students.

High-risk drinking and its public health consequences are directly related to the policies, practices, attitudes and behaviors of the communities which serve as hosts to our institutions of higher education. Changing campus policies and practices will be insufficient as a deterrent to high-risk drinking, if there are factors in the community which are acting as counter-forces. For example, alcohol is often made easily accessible, affordable and marketed aggressively to college students. At the same time, community members tend to blame only students and campus administrators for the high-risk drinking that occurs and the consequences of it. To date, our colleges, universities, and the communities in which they are located have done little to change this scenario.

There is a need to expand the awareness of the community at large of those factors in the community which encourage and sustain high-risk drinking. The public health approach to such issues is clear: viable public policy changes must be considered. That underscores the importance of there being a cooperative effort between the institution and the community, as well as joint responsibility for developing solutions to the problems that are created by high-risk drinkers. In most situations, there will be a need to expand the public awareness of how keg registration laws, limits on the discount pricing of alcohol and “happy hours,” and zoning ordinances can change how the use of alcohol affects a community. A good place to begin is to again emphasize the costs that are associated with the negative second-hand effects of heavy alcohol use.

9. Involve the faculty.

Many faculty members are unaware of the extent to which students are using alcohol. Beyond that, many others do not see a connection between the academic practices of their institution and what happens in the lives of students outside of the classroom. It is important that faculty members be cognizant of their potential role in this issue.

Wechsler (1995) points out that the scheduling of examinations, course requirements and daily schedules may inadvertently help to sustain a culture of heavy drinking. For example, when examinations and other academic responsibilities are not scheduled for Mondays or Fridays, more opportunities exist for students to use alcohol in unhealthy ways. It seems reasonable to expect that students have workloads that require that they spend at least some part of the weekend in completing class assignments or studying. Group assignments, for example, often serve to keep students on task and provide an alternative social opportunity at the same time. Many students readily report that heavy drinking is a behavior that interferes with their academic performance. Missing classes, getting behind in academic assignments, and performing poorly on exams are typical examples. Faculty members should be encouraged to refuse to accept excuses for assignments that are not completed on time because of partying. Beyond that, faculty members are obviously potential role models for students and have considerable influence when they choose to speak out on a campus issue. The heavy drinking culture among students is certainly such an issue in higher education today.

HOW HAS THE PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH WORKED?

The University of Delaware is now in its fourth of a five year effort to approach high-risk drinking as a public health issue. There are some encouraging trends:

- Many students seem to find the overall approach to be a sensible and acceptable one. They understand the distinction between having a good time and engaging in anti-social behaviors. The most common misperception is that the real agenda is to have the campus eventually go “dry,” despite the denials of that by campus administrators.
- As a part of the grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Harvard School of Public Health now surveys the students on our campus each year in regard to their drinking practices and attitudes. By the second year of the project, binge-drinking had decreased by six percentage points and students who reported that they don’t use alcohol at all increased by 10 percentage points.
- There has been a significant reduction in vandalism in the residence halls. Overall charges for vandalism repairs declined by approximately 31% in the first year of the project. Correspondingly, requests from upperclass students to live in residence halls increased by 19%, suggesting that students may be perceiving such an environment to be more desirable than in the past.
- The accreditation program for fraternities and sororities links each chapter’s privilege of recruiting first-semester students to its academic standing and social conduct. In the first year of the accreditation program, there were no fraternities permitted to recruit new members during the fall semester. One year later, the grade point averages of fraternity members exceeded the all-male average, the number of misconduct charges against fraternity members was reduced, and about half of all the chapters received the highest possible accreditation rating.
- While the total number of alcohol policy violations reported to the student judicial system has increased slightly from year to year (perhaps due to increased enforcement efforts), the recidivism rate has dropped. This suggests that the new sanctions for alcohol offenses may be effective in decreasing the number of repeat offenders.

- Within the city of Newark, there was a 29% decrease in the number of alcohol-related arrests in 1999 when compared to 1998. This data has allayed the fears of some that the efforts of the University to strengthen its enforcement efforts would result in more problems being moved into the community neighborhoods.
- Legislative initiatives have also been developed. In the Delaware General Assembly, a keg registration bill has been introduced and is widely supported by law enforcement personnel. In the city of Newark, changes in zoning ordinances and business license regulations will prevent any new establishment from discounting the price of alcohol through the promotion of “happy hours.”

CONCLUSION

To attempt to change a culture in which high-risk drinking is not only normative but often glamorized is not an easy task. Still, approaching this issue from a public health perspective offers an opportunity to re-frame the traditional problems with alcohol that colleges and universities have struggled with, as well as identifying some new potential solutions. The success of the anti-smoking campaign in focusing on the rights of non-smokers is very encouraging; perhaps a similar focus on the negative second-hand consequences of high-risk drinking will yield similar results at some point in the future. The current project at the University of Delaware has produced some positive outcomes, suggesting that the public health message is both an acceptable and potentially effective one in reducing high-risk drinking among college students.

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