

# Reducing the Vulnerability to Alcohol-Related Tragedies at the College or University: Deadly Errors and Essential Actions

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Fifteen years after the American Medical Association, Harvard School of Public Health, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation rang the alarm bell, there is little doubt that excessive alcohol consumption and related harms among college students is a significant problem at institutions of higher education across the country. Institutions that once attempted to deny or ignore the problem on their campuses found themselves vulnerable to lawsuits, increased maintenance, health response, and enforcement costs, and poor national reputations due to the high-risk drinking habits of their students. Though there are signs that the latest generation of students entering our institutions are less likely to rely as heavily on alcohol for their sole form of recreation, coping, and social success (Howe and Strauss, 2006), and despite challenges by media reporters that the numbers of students harmed are inflated (Milloy, 2002), the reality remains that student deaths, injuries, personal crises and academic failures continue to occur at alarming rates at many institutions. Colleges and universities continue to report that the majority of their most significant medical emergencies, sexual assault claims, and judicial cases still center on the acute intoxication of students.

Fortunately, a variety of federal, state, and private funding sources have enabled researchers to better understand and find effective ways to reduce the problem. Key reports – from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA, 2002), the American Academy of Pediatrics (1999), and others have provided superb summaries of both research findings and best practices. We've learned more about what factors influence the drinking behaviors of our students, and what can stifle or deflate a variety of high-risk behaviors, many of which are based on college rituals and traditions that can end in tragedy. As Peter Lake of the Stetson University Law School often says at conferences across the country, these reports will either be used for the plaintiff or for the defense in civil litigation cases where a student has suffered an alcohol-related death or injury while enrolled the institution. Increasingly, being on or off the official boundaries of the campus has little impact on the final ruling.

The most significant finding in these reports is that the problem of dangerous college drinking is ecological in nature. College students, particularly those of traditional age, enter both a physical and a social environment that is literally and figuratively surrounded by alcohol. A variety of studies have attempted to isolate the environmental factors that influence a student's decision to drink



(see Presley, Meilman and Leichter, 2002). Factors that seem to have the most impact include the access and availability of alcohol, the lack of clear policies on campus and within the surrounding community, poor or inconsistent enforcement of existing policies on campus and in surrounding communities, and the heavy promotion of high-risk alcohol consumption and related activities on and around campus, either by design or by default.

Each of these factors has both a direct and an indirect impact on a student's desire to consume dangerous amounts of alcohol. Indirectly, an alcohol-saturated environment perpetuates a "college alcohol myth" (Workman, 2001), a variety of beliefs and practices surrounding alcohol that become normative for the culture. As a result, excessive consumption appears normal, and research suggests that students drink to that norm (Perkins, 2002).

While many colleges and universities are attempting some form of prevention, national statistics indicate that not all campuses are using the most effective strategies or applying the concepts gleaned from the best practices and national models made available from the U.S. Department of Education and others. In many cases, the issue is not knowledge, but will; campuses continue to lack infrastructure, funding, and even simple agreement across administrators, faculty, staff, and community leaders about the problem itself.

Sadly, many of these institutions will not receive an "A" for effort should the next campus alcohol-related tragedy result in a national media frenzy or a lawsuit, particularly if the campuses current effort contradicts existing research and evidence-based practices that are easily obtainable but not quickly (or easily) implemented.

In working intensively with several of institutions across the country and through my interactions with administrators, faculty and staff at hundreds of institutions at national conferences, I've seen first-hand how common errors in program conceptualization or implementation can lead to limited changes that are difficult to sustain. The efforts are more than failures -- they burn out talented and dedicated staff members and prove the point that "this will never change" to those who are deeply entrenched in or profiting from the existing ecology.

Likewise, there are several key steps that campuses can take that have shown significant results and have actually lowered the institution's vulnerability to future tragedy. While not easy or fast, these "essential actions" have yielded real change at campuses across the country.

**ERROR #1:  
Addressing alcohol consumption without addressing the environment that produces, encourages, and profits from the behavior.**

Despite the research that ties the problems colleges and universities are facing around alcohol, other drugs and violence to a broader ecological framework, and despite the promising results from evaluations of campuses that employ comprehensive environmental programs to address these problems, many institutions continue to focus their energy and resources in one or two practices that attempt to criminalize or moderate the drinking behaviors of students rather than on changing the environment that surrounds and influences that behavior.

By far, the most popular approach is education. These programs focus on teaching students, through peers, trained staff, or on-line programs, about moderation and risk protection strategies. Though research conducted for the NIAAA report has shown that there is no evidence of effectiveness among these programs in reducing alcohol-related problems or campus drinking rates by campuses who use this strategy alone, the vast majority of campuses continue to use education as the center of their prevention efforts.

There are several reasons for this continued practice: First, campuses are made up of educators who believe in the power of education. Second, the strategy is less expensive and demanding than others, requiring less administrator and staff involvement to implement or maintain. It's easily thrown on the pile of other student life efforts that attempt to teach safety and health behaviors. The final reason -- the one we don't like to admit -- is that it's popular with students. Programs are usually hip, fun, and have lots of give-aways. The message is quick (although repetitive), and doesn't seem to shut down anyone's plan to party on Thursday night. Students -- who are experts at risk management -- come to believe that there are a few simple steps that will keep them out of harms way. Some realize that ultimate risk protection requires moderation -- that no strategy can ever keep them safe as long as they consume way beyond their physical abilities. Others do not. Unfortunately, every student, armed with knowledge and perhaps even motivated to make some changes in their behavior, will return to the same environment where alcohol is integrated into the many activities and practices of college life. Without support for new behaviors in the environment, the motivation to adopt them fades.

It's not the education that fails -- it's the institution and surrounding environment that doesn't support the educational message. No one, including the researchers cited for the NIAAA report, thinks that alcohol education is a useless waste of time. When added as part of a comprehensive program, education provides a critical contribution to change. It simply cannot be the center of the prevention effort.

The second strategy growing in popularity is relying solely on policy and enforcement to do the work. At institutions and in communities across the country, new and strictly enforced policies are making excessive consumption and intoxicated behaviors criminal or judicial offenses. Much more importantly, these policies

often attempt to change behavior by exacting severe penalties on the drinker or on the provider. Rarely do we offer policies that support or reward low-risk behavior.

Once again, the problem doesn't lie in the strategy, but in its misuse. Policy and enforcement are superb tools when used correctly and in concert with other environmental changes, particularly with those individuals who refuse to conform to the standards set by the community. But when policy and enforcement are used without a comprehensive plan, students become criminals. Their sole motivation becomes the avoidance of negative legal or judicial consequences. Rather than changing their behaviors or intentions, many students simply work harder at avoiding the consequence by hiding, sneaking, and finding loopholes to policies. A case in point: Many campuses now have "good samaritan" policies to counteract the trend of students hesitating to call emergency services when a peer is experiencing alcohol poisoning out of fear of legal or judicial sanctions. Students were willing to get help from police or paramedics only when they knew they would not face a citation.

A much more serious side effect of strict enforcement without environmental change is that students can become frustrated and begin opposing the entire effort. Rather than being active partners in change, they rally against the effort and slow down progress. While this reaction is common, especially in places where enforcement that once was missing or inconsistent is now suddenly active and constant, it can also be a sign that the increased restrictions and penalties have lost their balance in the overall effort to help students make better choices.

The ecological model suggests that, in order for individuals and groups to follow community standards (policies), there must be a supportive environment that makes the compliant behavior rewarding and valuable. Although the student complaint that "there's nothing else to do" seems more like whining, the statement can actually speak volumes about the prevalence of opportunities to engage in high-risk alcohol consumption and the lack of healthy options (or even messages) on or off campus.

Changing diet serves as an illustrative analogy here. Imagine creating the new policy "You can't eat cake anymore" but not removing all the cake sales, cake posters and advertisements, cake products, birthday, holiday, and celebratory parties that center around cake, and other constant references to cake-eating that surround you each and every day. My guess is that you'll find the policy more frustrating than helpful. The same is true for college drinking policies. We can try to criminalize alcohol consumption and related behaviors, but if we're not creating an environment where students can successfully socialize, relax, and have fun without acute intoxication, then they'll return to the only thing they know -- many since very young ages.

**ERROR #2: Attempting change without involving all stakeholders.**

Another critical aspect of the ecological model that is often overlooked is the need to identify and involve stakeholders from every aspect of the community environment when creating a plan for change. NIAAA, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the



*A model of the four major strategies of a comprehensive environmental plan. All four strategies share equal balance.*

American Medical Association, and a host of others have recommended that change be pursued through a campus-community coalition made up of representatives from key groups across the campus and the community.

What I've witnessed most often is that the actual "coalition" is made up of a small and select group of like-minded people, often from public health or health promotion backgrounds, and a few staff members from key Student Affairs departments who are forced to participate. Rather than establishing a broad network of stakeholders, they become a special interest group with a specific agenda. Armed with well-researched, evidence-based best practices, they are convinced that they know what the campus and community needs, and they'll fight tooth and nail to make sure the campus and community gets it. I know -- I was one of those people. In the beginning of the environmental movement, it was common for consultants to recommend using "media advocacy" strategies that embarrassed or harassed policy-makers into adopting the agenda. The result was not always positive -- some doors to city hall or the college president's office slammed closed rather than flew open.

The truth is, we may truly know what is best for the rest of the campus and community, and may really have the very best strategies for saving lives and reducing problems. Unfortunately, being right isn't important in creating community change. Approaching the world with a plan without allowing involvement and feedback by those who will be directly affected by the plan does little to gain consensus, collaboration, or even compliance. It usually creates resistance, defensiveness, and ill-will that can last for years.

A "stakeholder" is an individual (or group) who is affected by or affects the environment in some way. In the campus-community, this includes everyone who is directly involved in the alcohol culture -- student leaders, club officers, housing staff, judicial officers, Greek leaders and organizers, athletes, coaches, and athletic promoters, campus and community police, campus medical and health promotion staff, faculty, student activities staff, academic advisors, administrators, community leaders, emergency room personnel, detoxification center staff, bar owners, alcohol distributors, servers and waitstaff, landlords, off-campus students, and neighborhood groups.

Of course, not every stakeholder can be in the coalition. But every perspective and stakeholder group can and must be repre-

sented and given a voice when planning change. Like all of us, these stakeholders want to have some control over the policies they are forced to live by and the world they're asked to live, learn, and do business in. Few of us are comfortable letting someone else walk in and tell us how to live our lives or conduct our business. Likewise, those who will have to live under the policies and practices that we know will make them safer, healthier, and even more profitable need to have a say.

Not all stakeholders, however, are willing to come to the table with open minds and a clear notion of shared responsibility. Careful and consistent community organizing techniques are critical to bring diverse opinions together and find common ground. This includes developing a clear set of data from which the effects of consumption and the identification of environmental influences on excessive consumption can be easily understood by all stakeholders, and connecting the coalition's agenda to the individual interests of each stakeholder group in order to find shared benefit. Unfortunately, the task of organizing the coalition is often relegated to the campus AOD coordinator, who has a background in health education and not community organizing. This is also a deadly error on the part of campuses that often leaves the individual exhausted and ineffective and the effort stymied.

Because of the challenges that occur when bringing a diverse set of stakeholders together (often for the very first time), a realistic timeframe is essential. In many cases, it may take years to heal broken town-gown relationships or the chasms that have formed between student affairs and academic units across campus. Top-level administration may be needed in the critical task of building these relationships and encouraging coalition involvement across sectors. Top-level support by college presidents, chancellors, or vice-chancellors includes using their knowledge of campus and community politics as well as using their own political power to help bring people to the table. Those given the task to organize a coalition must have direct access to these administrators.

### **ERROR #3: Creating a plan of action without understanding the specific local environment.**

Finding well-researched, evidence-based best practices for changing college student alcohol consumption and creating a supportive environment for low-risk consumption and abstinence is easier now than ever before, thanks largely to the United States Department of Education's Higher Education Center and a host of public and privately funded research centers, organizations, academic and professional journals and practitioner networks. While incredibly valuable, these resources can be misapplied without careful assessment of the local environment and a clear strategic plan that identifies and measures specific outcomes over time.

Jumping into any strategy before carefully considering the needs of the specific campus and community is a critical error that occurs more often than it should. Although many campuses share common environmental factors that influence the drinking habits and practices of their students, no two campus-communities are alike in their ideological orientations, their local customs and politics, or the drinking practices and locations of their population of students. The coalition must be willing and able to collect a wide range of student behavioral data, police and medical data, attitudi-

nal and normative data in order to determine what gaps in policy, enforcement, education, and social design exist on campus and in the community, and which activities might best fill those gaps or produce environmental change.

Another common error is that coalitions stop with student behavioral data that reports the number of average drinks consumed or the normative attitudes and perceptions across the student population. While helpful, this provides only a small piece of the larger puzzle, and doesn't tell coalition members where excessive drinking is most likely to occur on campus or in the community, and under what conditions. It doesn't help the campus and community understand specific high-risk practices and make essential connections to the policies, structures, and messages that enable them. To broaden their view of the environment, successful coalitions utilize a variety of resources to conduct their assessments, from institutional inventories to simple reporting across key stakeholders such as doctors, public health officials, and police. Many successful coalitions have taken extra time to gather and listen carefully to their students, exploring (through focus groups and interviews) the ways in which specific groups of students from the campus interact with the local environment.

With the data in front of them, a coalition can get a clear picture of their unique campus or community. Centering the coalition's strategic planning on data has several benefits -- it focuses the debate away from opinions and positions, and it provides a critical baseline for goal-setting and measurement. Then, and only then, can the coalition turn to the vast array of strategies and programs available to choose those that best fit the needs of the specific local environment, adapting them to accomplish targeted outcomes or adjusting them to fit the specific setting.

#### **ERROR #4: Not providing infrastructure to sustain the effort.**

Despite the fact that high risk drinking has been called "the most pressing problem facing higher education" (Spanier, 1999), few universities have created an infrastructure that enables long-term campus-community collaboration or programming. Many environmental efforts are funded by relatively short-term federal or state grants. Once the money runs out, many of the efforts fall to the wayside. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *A Matter of Degree* grants continued funding efforts for as many as nine years on some campuses, but without a commitment on the part of local administrators, many of these efforts also faded or disappeared once the grant period ended.

Many experts estimate that it may take as long as two full cycles of students before an institution sees significant change. Even when change does occur, ongoing maintenance of the environment and student behavior is critical. Rather than trying to sustain the same energy and effort of the grant project, campuses must institutionalize their efforts, building collaboration, communication, data collection, and strategic responses into the existing infrastructure.

The greatest challenge, of course, is funding for the staff needed

## ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

- ◆ **Comprehensive environmental change**
- ◆ **Full stakeholder involvement**
- ◆ **Full support from top administration**
- ◆ **Complete and honest assessment of local environment using multiple forms of data**
- ◆ **Strategic planning of activities**
- ◆ **Design an infrastructure to sustain the effort**

to keep the effort organized, keep data current, and keep stakeholders connected. Institutions will need to rethink their funding priorities. Unfortunately, few campuses can boast that they have "arrived" at the ideal environment, eliminated the problem entirely, and are ready to move onto bigger and better things. Alcohol prevention, and environmental management, will need to be integrated into the day to day practices of the institution.

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