

Campus Drinking & Social Norms; A soft-sell approach to reducing alcohol consumption on campus gets mixed result

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Alcohol abuse continues to plague college campuses – 1,400 college students die each year, according to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health. Faced with underage students who don't always follow the rules when it comes to drinking, colleges have started taking a less authoritarian approach. In what is called "social norms marketing," colleges post signs around campus saying things such as, "The average college student consumes 0 to 3 drinks per week." The idea, administrators explain, is to get students to reduce their drinking by convincing them that other students really aren't drinking that much.

The effectiveness of the approach on minority students may also be influenced by how they relate to the mainstream campus. If minority students identify with the campus "norm," then "the generic message may have an effect on their behavior, as it will for majority students. In cases where they feel alienated, which is often the case, the social norms campaign may not be perceived as relevant or may even serve to further the sense of alienation that these students feel."

Catherine Sanderson, assistant professor of psychology at Amherst College, who has researched social norms at Princeton University, says minority students probably either disengage from the norm or try to adopt it, so the effectiveness of the social norms approach depends on the strategy minority students chose. "At most schools, White varsity male athletes drive the norm," she explains. "So unless minority students identified with the norm, or if the poster had a picture of a minority student, I'd imagine the approach would not be so effective. It is also possible that minority students, to the extent that they feel alienated from the school, could try to match their behavior to the perceived norm – and hence norm misperception education could be effective for them as well."

FULL TEXT

Alcohol abuse continues to plague college campuses – 1,400 college students die each year, according to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health. Faced with underage students who don't always follow the rules when it comes to drinking, colleges have started taking a less authoritarian approach. In what is called "social norms marketing," colleges post signs around campus saying things such as, "The average college student consumes 0 to 3 drinks per week." The idea, administrators explain, is to get students to reduce their drinking by convincing them that other students really aren't drinking that much.

The problem, warn some public health advocates, is that this social norms approach might not speak to all students – especially Latino, Black and other minority students. If minority students don't feel that they relate to the "average" student, then they might disregard the message.

"It may be fine for students who identify with the norm, but the student population tends to be more segmented," says Kim Miller, manager of federal relations at the Alcohol Policies Project, Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. The problem, she says, is that the social norms posters appeal to a "nonexistent generic student." While that idea might work on an all-White campus, most universities are much more diverse.

In fact, she adds, the social norms approach might encourage some minority students to drink more. "With the Black population in general, drinking tends to be lower than with White students, so it's possible that learning the average number of drinks consumed by all students might make [minority students] drink more," she explains. Still, colleges and universities continue to stand by the approach. According to recent survey data from the Harvard School of Public Health, 44 percent of all college students are frequent binge drinkers, defined as consuming five or more drinks in the past two weeks for men, and four or more drinks for women. Eighty-one percent of all students report drinking in the past year. Heavy drinking was also associated with negative effects: 30 percent of students reported missing a class because of drinking, 10 percent reported having unprotected sex, and 30 percent reported drinking and driving.

According to nationwide surveys, about half of colleges and universities currently use some kind of social norms approach to combat heavy drinking. The National Social Norms Resource Center, which helps colleges and universities develop social norms marketing techniques, says the approach is effective. The Center reports that at Northern Illinois University, social norms marketing reduced heavy episodic drinking by 44 percent over 10 years; at the University of Arizona, heavy drinking was reduced by 28 percent over five years, and at the University of Missouri, it was reduced 21 percent over two years. Moreover, at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where the technique was first designed, heavy drinking was reduced by 40 percent over four years, and at Western Washington University, it fell by 20 percent over three years.

The Center also says that the social norms approach can be effective at reducing sexual violence and smoking rates and improving academic performance. One new book, *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors and Clinicians*, edited by H. Wesley Perkins, offers advice to administrators trying to set up the social norms approach at their schools. It offers case studies of the technique, including one at Northern Illinois University, and explains the misperception many students have that their peers drink more than they actually do.

Yet recent research shows that the social norms approach might not be the magic bullet solution to alcohol abuse that college administrators had hoped for. Professor John Clapp, School of Social Work, San Diego State University, found that in some cases, the social norms approach may encourage more drinking. In his study, he covered the residence halls with social norms posters to make sure that most students were exposed to them, then found that those so exposed tended to drink more, possibly rebelling against the "norm" advocated by the posters.

A study led by Dr. Henry Wechsler, Harvard School of Public Health, found that students exposed to social norms messages did not drink less alcohol, and in some cases drank more. Wechsler analyzed data from surveys conducted at 120 four-year colleges and universities between 1997 and 2001. His team then analyzed any differences in drinking that occurred after schools implemented the social norms approach.

Wechsler found that drinking reported for the previous month was higher at schools with high-exposure campaigns, including students reporting 20 or more drinks in the past 30 days. Wechsler did find that drinking over the past year was lower at those schools which had the campaigns, but the difference was not statistically significant, suggesting that if the social norms approach had any positive effect, it was probably not a large one. Wechsler points towards diversity issues as one possible reason for the apparent failure of the social norms approach. He writes, "The theory supporting a social norms marketing approach was developed at a relatively small private school with a homogenous student population. Large public institutions have adopted it primarily, however, with diverse student populations. In such settings, there may be no 'typical student' or single common social norm." In other words, the approach may be less effective at diverse institutions.

But social norms experts say there are ways of modifying the approach in order to reach minority students. Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D., co-founder of the social norms approach and editor of *The Report on Social Norms* (www.socialnormslink.com), says the campaigns "can be tailored to specific groups and the unique culture of each campus."

"The social norms approach," he says, "could be adapted for use with ethnic minority populations to foster self-

esteem, improve academic performance and persistence and strengthen ethnic identity in a variety of ways." One way of tailoring the message to ethnic groups, he says, is by adopting the mode of communication to fit the style and context of the group. "For instance, in a Historically Black College, or in a predominantly Hispanic institution, the process would require that the unique cultures of these groups be reflected in the prevention activities – including the culture of the message delivery system and the culture of the target population. For example, in cultures which are more oral, nonprint means may be selected, or in cultures where clergy are respected as communicators of health information, they may be asked to be one of the 'channels' to deliver the message."

The effectiveness of the approach on minority students may also be influenced by how they relate to the mainstream campus. If minority students identify with the campus "norm," then "the generic message may have an effect on their behavior, as it will for majority students. In cases where they feel alienated, which is often the case, the social norms campaign may not be perceived as relevant or may even serve to further the sense of alienation that these students feel."

Berkowitz adds that on large, diverse campuses, where no one feels like the "average" student, social norms messages may not be perceived as relevant to all students. He acknowledges that it is important that social norms campaigns consider how minority groups on campus will perceive their messages even if the campaigns are not specifically targeting them.

Catherine Sanderson, assistant professor of psychology at Amherst College, who has researched social norms at Princeton University, says minority students probably either disengage from the norm or try to adopt it, so the effectiveness of the social norms approach depends on the strategy minority students chose. "At most schools, White varsity male athletes drive the norm," she explains. "So unless minority students identified with the norm, or if the poster had a picture of a minority student, I'd imagine the approach would not be so effective. It is also possible that minority students, to the extent that they feel alienated from the school, could try to match their behavior to the perceived norm – and hence norm misperception education could be effective for them as well." "Minority students," she says, "often report less alcohol use than other students, so perhaps it is less important to provide this type of education for them."

Yet administrators maintain that they use social norms posters because they work, even on diverse campuses. Michelle Emmett, associate vice provost for student affairs at Northern Illinois University (NIU), says, "I think that social norms can be very helpful as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing student alcohol use. Here at NIU, education is the foundation of a good alcohol abuse prevention campaign."

She acknowledges, however, that the message is more effective among some groups of students than among others. "It's effective for people who fall in the middle of the bell curve. I would include people of color...on the fringes of that curve."

Some administrators of diverse campuses have taken steps to make sure their social norms campaign reaches out to minority students. Dr. Paul Oliaro, vice president for student affairs and dean of students at California's Fresno State, says that this fall his university started using social norms posters because "we felt given the data that we received, our students tend to drink less, and that's a lesson we want to reinforce as they come on campus, rather than students thinking that coming on campus means heavy drinking. In other words, listen to your peers." On his campus, where more than half of all students are students of color, the social norms campaign is tailored to fit the needs of the student body. One of the posters, which is hanging on the door of Oliaro's office, features an image of eight students of various ethnic backgrounds. The poster reads, "Fresno State students care about friends and party safely. Seven out of 10 have zero, one, two, or at most three drinks when they party. Eight out of 10 avoid drinking games." The poster also includes guidelines for drinking safely.

"If we were not as diverse a campus, this wouldn't work because the poster depicts a very diverse campus. If minority students are overrepresented, you can be accused of pandering, or suggesting that minority students have more problems than other students. You're trying to play by strict standards," explains Oliaro, who says that in two years, the administration will measure the effects of the social norms campaign and then decide whether or

not to continue it.

Public health advocates maintain that administrators of diverse campuses should also consider approaches in addition to social norms. Miller, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, says one effective way of reducing alcohol consumption by all students is to make it harder for all students to buy beer so cheaply and easily. "College bars that ring the campus beck-on and seduce students with high-risk drink promotions that encourage high-risk consumption, like Ladies Nights, Beat the Clock specials, and All You Can Drink." Making alcohol more expensive will likely reduce consumption across all student groups because all students, regardless of ethnic background, have a limited amount of cash in their wallets.

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