

News for Faculty and Staff of the University of California, Davis

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Study aids effort to fight alcohol abuse

By Julia Ann Easley

When it comes to alcohol, UC Davis students are running into trouble -- including problems related to aggressive behavior, sex, and drinking and driving -- most often off-campus, according to the survey results of a major new study.

Students reported that roughly one-third of all their alcohol-related problems occurred at off-campus parties held at private homes and apartments. And the situation looms even larger when community bars, off-campus fraternities and outdoor settings are considered.

The findings, presented at a Student Affairs meeting last week, are part of a \$6.9 million research project in which UC Davis is participating to help combat high-risk drinking among college students in California. As an intervention site for the study, the campus will now have assistance in designing and implementing strategies for the problem settings.

Dr. Michelle Famula, director of the Cowell Student Health Center, said of the survey, "It confirms our thoughts about where the high-risk problems are for our students." She is now inviting members of the campus and broader community to form a work group to help devise and implement strategies to reduce the problems.

"Alcohol in this culture I think is insidious," Emil Rodolfa, who is director of Counseling and Psychological Services and a licensed psychologist, told the group of about 60 who attended the meeting. "We're not trying to get rid of alcohol, just high-risk drinking."

The Safer California Universities study is a five-year collaboration of the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, all eight UC campuses with undergraduates and six California State University campuses. It has received funding from the National Institutes of Health.

The survey examined students' drinking patterns, resulting problems and the settings in which they most often occurred.

2,000 students surveyed

At UC Davis, surveys were distributed to about 2,000 undergraduates -- to those under 21 and those of legal drinking age -- in fall 2003, and about 1,010, or 50 percent, responded.

About 78 percent of UC Davis respondents said they drank alcohol during the previous quarter. And among those, 58 percent got drunk. About 15 percent of drinkers reported binge drinking once in the previous two weeks, and an additional 16 percent did so two or more times in the same period. Binge drinking is defined as four or more drinks for a woman and five or more drinks for a man over a two-hour period.

Drinking problems -- getting drunk, passing out, and feeling unsafe -- happened most frequently at off-campus parties, followed by fraternity parties, residence hall parties, bars, outdoor parties and campus events.

Aggressive behavior -- including sexual assault or rape, property damage, physical fights and injuries -- was reported as occurring most often at off-campus locations, followed by fraternities, residence halls, bars, outdoor settings and campus events.

Sex-related problems -- including pressure to have sex, risky sex and sex with someone a student just met -- happened most often at fraternity parties, followed by off-campus parties, bars, residence hall parties and outdoor parties.

The study, now in its second year, also has surveyed key campus administrators and Davis community leaders about student drinking and will consider other data including arrests, treatment statistics from the student health center and maintenance reports for the residence halls. Data from the second annual student survey, conducted in fall 2004, have not yet been analyzed.

Addressing rowdy parties

In an interview, Famula said the study would help the campus address the kind of parties where high-risk drinking caused concern for both the campus and community last spring. (See the Dec. 10 issue of Dateline, online.)

UC Davis is receiving \$150,000 over five years to assist in the administration of the annual student survey, and an additional \$45,000 to implement intervention strategies.

Famula said, to date, a lot of statewide and national intervention strategies used to reduce student drinking have been related to enforcement because funding has been available primarily for police departments and district attorneys through state offices responsible for traffic safety and alcohol beverage control.

"This project is asking if some of the programs successful in other settings can be applied to the student setting," she said.

For example, she said, the proven strategy of police checkpoints to identify drivers under the influence of alcohol could be combined with giveaways, like gift certificates, for sober students who are driving responsibly.

Advice for safe parties

Famula said a new initiative of the Associated Students of UC Davis offers another example of a strategy for preventing problems in high-risk settings.

The student government's safety unit will distribute to city residences about 1,200 door hangers -- like the "Do Not Disturb" signs in hotels -- with guidelines for holding a safe party. Another 1,800 will be given out at Tandem Properties' apartment complexes in Davis.

The door hangers, among other things, encourage students to notify police and neighbors in advance of their party. It also recommends against posting fliers or advertising the party over the Internet in order to reduce the number of uninvited and unknown people who come.

Those who attended the meeting where the survey findings were presented included students, representatives from Student Affairs units, UC Davis and Davis city police, and community leaders, many of whom offered suggestions.

"I was hearing some incredibly important ideas for risk reduction," Famula said.

Those ideas included encouraging neighborhood efforts to improve relationships with students, helping students become more involved in the community, offering more alcohol-free activities on campus, and infusing the academic curriculum with information about the dangers of high-risk drinking and principles for the safe use of alcohol.

New interventions that are part of the study will complement a wide variety of campus programs, including those of the Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention and Treatment Program.

[Return to the previous page](#)

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