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Heavy Drinking Among College Students Can Be Predicted

CALVERTON, MD (March 25, 2004) – Drinking among college students has been recognized as a serious problem on college campuses in the U.S. Research has shown that college drinkers drink more, and more often, than young people not in college. A recent study shows just how much some college students, especially males, drink. The study was conducted by researchers at the Prevention Research Center, a center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE), which focuses on the environmental problems related to drug and alcohol use. Results from the survey connected to the study, which included 3,000 students from the state of California, show that among 1,000 male college drinkers, there may be 50 or more occasions per month on which more than 24 drinks may be consumed. “These are levels of drinking at which most men will have passed out or become comatose,” says principal investigator Paul Gruenewald, Ph.D. “These are levels at which drinkers are at risk for the very serious problems posed by peak drinking, including alcohol poisoning and accidental falls.”

With funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), Dr. Gruenewald has discovered a way to identify those drinkers most likely to drink to these peak levels. Using self-reports of drinking from college students, and applying mathematical models of drinking patterns to these data, he can calculate the probability that very heavy drinking events will occur for individuals and groups of college drinkers. The results of the study indicate that college drinkers may have 12 or more drinks on about 10% of the occasions they have alcohol. Male college drinkers may have 12 or more drinks on 20% of these occasions. While much of this drinking takes place among college students who regularly drink large amounts of alcohol, some of it takes place among students who occasionally drink to extremes. At these highest levels, both immediate and long-term risks related to alcohol use are greatly increased. The heaviest drinking occurs among freshman males, and at the beginning of each academic year. By senior year, drinking appears to have moderated.

Prevention efforts such as designated driver programs, responsible beverage sales and service, and programs that deter underage drinking can be effective. These strategies can be made even more effective if they focus on groups of drinkers most likely to become involved in potentially catastrophic drinking. Says Dr. Gruenewald, “We would like to see many fewer reports of student tragedies related to extremely high levels of drinking.

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Our new understanding of peak drinking among college students helps pave the way towards better college prevention programs.”

About Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) is a nonprofit organization specializing in conducting research related to health and social issues and translating science into practice in solution of real-world problems. The organization’s focus includes individual and social problems, issues related to public health and safety and the applications of social policy. Areas of specialty include: treatment and prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, driving under the influence, tobacco use, adolescent high-risk behavior, domestic violence and abuse, and the economic costs associated with these problems.

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