

Colleges, communities combat off-campus student drinking

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Programs that bring colleges and their surrounding neighborhoods together may help reduce off-campus drinking problems, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that an alcohol control program at Western Washington University that also involved the community -- including increased police patrols in neighborhoods subject to loud and sometimes dangerous college parties, combined with efforts to make off-campus students better neighborhood residents -- led to a decline in student heavy episodic drinking (also called "binge" drinking).

The findings highlight the importance of college-community cooperation in combating problem drinking, according to lead researcher Robert F. Saltz, Ph.D., of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, CA.

"If you want to reach students living in the community, you need to work with city agencies and neighborhood associations," he says.

Such broad-level efforts also "get the students to understand that they aren't living in a bubble and are part of a community with norms and expectations about alcohol use and acceptable behavior," Saltz says.

The findings are published in a special supplemental issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* devoted to college drinking problems. The study is one of 14 reported in the issue stemming from projects funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's Rapid Response to College Drinking Problems initiative.

In the case of WWU, a public university in Bellingham, Washington, researchers focused on curbing off-campus drinking problems by connecting the college and community. Funds were devoted to bump up police patrols in neighborhoods where college parties were a problem and to better enforce underage-drinking laws. That was coupled with education efforts to make students

aware of their responsibilities as residents of the community; the inclusion of community-service projects in some courses; and forums that brought together students, neighborhood residents and law enforcement to talk about neighborhood issues.

At the beginning of the study and one year later, Saltz and his colleagues surveyed students at WWU, as well as another Washington public university that had adopted a similar program on its own and a third campus that served as a comparison site.

They found that heavy episodic drinking declined at the two intervention universities compared with the comparison school. Students in the former group were one-quarter less likely to report any heavy drinking in the past two weeks.

“The decline in the frequency of binge drinking is very promising,” Saltz says, noting that, realistically, off-campus problem drinking will not be eliminated, but it can “ratcheted down.”

Community-level programs are just one potential way to curb student drinking problems. Other studies reported in the *JSAD* issue find positive effects from projects that screen and counsel individual students for drinking problems or that target specific groups of students, such as freshman women, to prevent risky drinking.

“What we’re all trying to figure out,” Saltz notes, “is how to optimally blend all of these efforts to better protect the students’ health and safety.”

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Saltz, R.F., Welker, L.R., Paschall, M.J., Feeney, M.A., and Fabiano, P.M. Evaluating a Comprehensive Campus-Community Prevention Intervention to Reduce Alcohol-Related Problems in a College Population. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, Supplement No. 16: 21-27, July 2009.

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