

“Safer” Colleges can Reduce Heavy Drinking

A recent study shows that changing rules and enforcement on and near college campuses can significantly reduce heavy and dangerous drinking among college students. College drinking has become a serious concern. There are more than 1800 alcohol-related deaths each year among college students, while other negative effects related to college student drinking extend far beyond this figure to include 590,000 accidental injuries; more than 690,000 students assaulted by another student; more than 97,000 victims of sexual assault or date rape; and about 25% of college students reporting negative academic consequences.

The Safer California Universities study was designed to identify those areas of the campus environment in which heavy and dangerous drinking occurred and to implement strategies to change that environment in positive ways. The study involved 14 large public universities in the state, half of which were assigned randomly to the Safer intervention condition after baseline data collection in 2003.

Environmental interventions took place in 2005 and 2006 after one year of planning with seven Safer intervention universities. The Safer environmental interventions included 1) nuisance party enforcement operations that stepped up police response to disruptive parties, 2) minor decoy operations to prevent sales of alcohol to minors, 3) driving-under-the-influence checkpoints, and 4) social host ordinances that held party hosts or organizers responsible for nuisance parties. Campus and local media were used to maximize the visibility of environmental strategies.

To measure the effects of these strategies, cross-sectional random samples of undergraduates completed online surveys over four consecutive fall semesters (2003–2006) on both the intervention and comparison campuses. Measures included the proportion of drinking occasions in which students drank to intoxication at six different settings during the fall semester (residence hall party, campus event, fraternity or sorority party, party at off-campus apartment or house, bar/restaurant, outdoor setting), any intoxication at each setting during the semester, and whether students drank to intoxication the last time they went to each setting.

The results showed that students were significantly less likely to become intoxicated at off-campus parties and bars/restaurants at the Safer intervention universities compared to the control campuses. Significantly fewer students at the Safer intervention schools also reported that they became intoxicated the last time they drank at an off-campus party; a bar or restaurant; or across all settings.

One very important finding was that there was no increase in intoxication settings *other* than off-campus parties and nearby bars and restaurants. Therefore, the researchers concluded that students simply drank less – they didn’t just move their drinking to a different venue.

The strongest effects were achieved at Safer universities with the highest level of implementation. The success of the strategies was dependent in part on the ability of campus prevention specialists to translate the concept into concrete action. The prevention specialists provided many suggestions for overcoming potential and actual obstacles. Robert Saltz, lead investigator said, “These are real campuses in the real world. Of course some were more successful in implementing the Safer Colleges strategies than others. But especially on those campuses that were able to put a strong program in place, the results were very gratifying.”

Dr. Saltz went on to say, “College drinking has become a dangerous and persistent problem. But these findings should give college administrators and communities around colleges the evidence and motivation they need to put effective strategies in place. Our study tested one set of evidence-based strategies. Other combinations may also work. The take-home message is that it is possible to combine well-chosen, evidence based strategies that change the college environment and ratchet down the harm currently produced by alcohol use by college students.”

The full article can be found in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 39, Issue 6 (December 2010), and is entitled "Alcohol Risk Management in College Settings: The Safer California Universities Randomized Trial" by Robert F. Saltz, PhD; Mallie J. Paschall, PhD; Richard P. McGaffigan, MSW; and Peter M. Nygaard, PhD.