

PRC in the News

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As College Drinking Problems Rise, New Studies Identify Effective Prevention Strategies

Alcohol-related deaths among U.S. college students rose from 1,440 deaths in 1998 to 1,825 in 2005, along with increases in heavy drinking and drunk driving, according to an article in the July supplement of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs.

The special issue describes the results of a broad array of research-based programs to reduce and prevent alcohol-related problems at campuses across the country. These studies resulted from the Rapid Response to College Drinking Problems Initiative, a grant program supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), part of the National Institutes of Health.

"This supplement is a valuable resource that underscores the growing number of research-driven strategies that college administrators and health officials can put in place to address serious student drinking problems," says Acting NIAAA Director Kenneth Warren, Ph.D.

Reviewing the magnitude of the college alcohol problem, Ralph W. Hingson, Sc.D, M.P.H., director of NIAAA's Division of Epidemiology and Prevention Research, and colleagues analyzed data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other government sources. They found that serious problems persist, as indicated by the increase in drinking-related accidental deaths among 18- to 24-year-old students, which resulted mainly from traffic-related incidents. In addition, the researchers found the proportion of students who reported recent heavy episodic drinking — sometimes called binge drinking, defined as five or more alcoholic drinks on any occasion in the past 30 days— rose from roughly 42 percent to 45 percent, and the proportion who admitted to drinking and driving in the past year increased from 26.5 percent to 29 percent.

"These are tragically and unacceptably high figures that indicate an urgent need for colleges and surrounding communities to implement evidence-based prevention and counseling programs," says Dr. Hingson. The results of NIAAA's rapid response grants, he says, demonstrate the wide range of individual, group, and community-level approaches that can influence student behavior and challenge the culture of college drinking.

Through the initiative, NIAAA scientists worked with 15 colleges facing alcohol-related crises, pairing them with five multidisciplinary teams of prevention and intervention experts. The collaboration yielded a mix of programs that showed different benefits. Examples from their findings include the following:

- James F. Schaus, M.D., and colleagues at the University of Central Florida found that brief motivational interviews proved effective for high risk drinkers seen in a busy college health clinic. Compared to a control group, students who participated in two sessions reported consuming less alcohol six months later and had fewer drinking-related problems nine months later.
- Hortensia Amaro, Ph.D., and colleagues at Northeastern University in Boston developed a one-on-one counseling program for students with alcohol and drug policy violations. Six months later, students who received the intervention were drinking less than counterparts who had not been through the program. Joseph A. LaBrie and colleagues at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles evaluated the long-term effectiveness of a motivational-enhancement group intervention for first-year college women. Participants consumed significantly less alcohol across 10 weeks of follow-up, but not at six-month follow-up, suggesting the need for booster sessions during the first year of college.
- Two separate studies developed programs in which colleges worked closely with their surrounding communities, using measures such as increased police patrols in problem neighborhoods and raising student awareness of their responsibilities as community residents. The studies found reductions in heavy drinking and a decrease in the number of off-campus incidents involving students. One study was led by Mark D. Wood, Ph.D., of the University of Rhode Island, and the other by Robert F. Saltz, Ph.D., of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, working with two universities in Washington state.
- Another study found that colleges have made online alcohol-policy information more available and accessible to students, parents, and other interested parties. This shift may reflect a greater engagement of colleges and universities in the issue of drinking on campus in general, according to lead author Vivian B. Faden, Ph.D., acting director of NIAAA's Office of Science Policy and Communications.

Dr. Warren notes that the rapid response grants grew out of the recommendations from the 2002 report of the NIAAA-sponsored Task Force on College Drinking. He adds that NIAAA remains committed to working with academic leaders and researchers to bridge the gap from research to practice in developing evidence-based college alcohol prevention and treatment programs.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health, is the primary U.S. agency for conducting and supporting research on the causes, consequences, prevention, and treatment of alcohol abuse, alcoholism, and alcohol problems, and disseminates research findings to general, professional, and academic audiences. Additional alcohol research information and publications are available at www.niaaa.nih.gov.

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