

Changing the Culture of Alcohol Abuse on Campus: Lessons Learned From Secondhand Smoke

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ABSTRACT. Alcohol abuse is the single greatest public health hazard on American college and university campuses, but the culture of abusive alcohol consumption continues to be highly resistant to change. The author argues that secondhand smoke campaigns can be used as models to change the culture of alcohol abuse on campus. He proposes the implementation of “secondhand alcohol” campaigns and describes their essential components and advantages.

Keywords: alcohol, health education

There is no greater public health hazard on American college and university campuses than the abuse of alcohol.¹ Alcohol is often the proximal cause, and otherwise a frequent key facilitating factor, in many student and campus perils including deaths, accidents and injuries, physical violence, unintended and/or unprotected sexual intercourse, sexual assault, property damage, legal consequences, academic failure, damaged interpersonal relationships and reputations, and aggravation of campus–community relations.^{2–4}

The recognition that alcohol causes more disruption, destruction, morbidity, and mortality than any other campus hazard has resulted in many programs and interventions to ameliorate its adverse effects among college and university students. Yet, in spite of these efforts, the carnage continues, and, indeed, in some respects continues to worsen. For example, using multiple data sources Hingson et al⁴ found that from 1998 to 2005 alcohol-related unintentional injury deaths (eg, motor vehicle accidents, falls, drowning, burns, suffocation, and unintentional gunshot wounds) among col-

lege students aged 18 to 24 years increased from 1,440 to 1,825 per year. These findings are not surprising given that binge drinking among various populations of college students has continued unabated or increased over the course of years.^{4–6}

The data lead to only one conclusion: despite the best efforts of governmental and other agencies, researchers, health care professionals, student affairs staff, and health education/promotion specialists, the struggle to ameliorate alcohol abuse on campus is not going well. Current prevention and harm reduction efforts—categorized according to effectiveness in the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism’s 3-in-1 tiered approach⁷ and consisting of a synergistic combination of individual (eg, educational, cognitive-behavioral, motivational interviewing, and alcohol expectancy challenges) and population-level environmental (eg, enhanced law enforcement, restrictions on alcohol retail density and drink specials, responsible beverage service policies, and social norms campaigns) approaches—should not be disparaged, however, for without them the situation would undoubtedly be even more dire. These strategies are continually being enhanced in various ways to optimize their efficacy; but, even with more widespread application and refinement of technique and targets, they are likely to produce no more than incremental progress. Thus, although current efforts should certainly be continued and refined, novel approaches are desperately needed if college student alcohol abuse and its repercussions are going to be substantially reduced.

All those involved in the struggle against alcohol abuse among college students underscore the importance of “culture change” in their efforts. Yet, the culture of alcohol abuse on college and university campuses has been highly resistant to change. Social norms campaigns, limitations on the

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number, density, and special pricing of local bars, and reductions in alcohol advertisements as well as other approaches have been shown to have some efficacy. There is, however, another approach to changing the culture of alcohol abuse on campus that has yet to be sufficiently exploited and that might prove to be highly effective. Moreover, the efficacy of this approach has already been demonstrated in a different context in American society. Thus, it is time to aggressively implement “secondhand alcohol” campaigns, analogous to those of secondhand smoke.

Who among us, growing up in the middle of the 20th century or earlier, would have ever imagined that one day smoking would be banned altogether in airplanes and many restaurants or bars, or that it would be illegal in many states to smoke tobacco within 25 feet of the entrance to a public building? Who could have imagined 50 or 60 years ago individuals feeling sufficiently empowered to ask others around them in public places to stop smoking because the smoke was bothering them? Secondhand smoke campaigns were built on a foundation of scientific research demonstrating that secondhand smoke was dangerous, not simply annoying, to others. From there, however, individuals found themselves more and more comfortable—indeed, empowered—to speak up and ask, and ultimately insist, that they not be subjected to another’s smoke.

We find ourselves in a similar position with respect to secondhand alcohol effects. Indeed, there are compelling data, analogous to the secondhand smoke data, that those who abuse alcohol adversely impact the health and quality of life of others on college and university campuses as well as the surrounding community.

In 1995 Wechsler et al⁸ reported that students at colleges and universities suffered frequent adverse consequences caused by drinkers; indeed, 66% of college students reported experiencing one or more secondhand effects of drinking behavior. More specifically, the percentages of college students experiencing secondhand alcohol effects were as follows: violence including being pushed, hit, or physically assaulted (13%); unwanted sexual advances (21%); sexual assault (1% to 2%); serious quarrels or arguments (22%); humiliation or being insulted (27%); noise or other disruption of study or sleep (43%); personal property damage (12%); and having to “babysit” a drunken student (44%).⁸ Using the 1999 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Survey data for full-time, 4-year college students aged 18 to 24 years, Hingson et al² projected that 632,899 (13.3%) college students were assaulted, pushed, or hit and 71,379 (1.5%) college students were victims of sexual assault or date rape by another student who had been drinking. Because of the growing college student population, by 2001 the latter figure had increased to 97,000 students who had experienced sexual assault or date rape at the hands of a drinking student.⁴ Boekeloo and colleagues⁹ reported similar findings regarding secondhand effects of alcohol on college campuses, adding that approximately 15% of college freshman were confronted with vomitus in a hallway or bathroom. In reality, then, the secondhand

effects of alcohol are at least as injurious to persons and disruptive of the overall environment than those of tobacco.

In light of such numerous and disturbing consequences, one might think that college students themselves would confront and reproach their peers who drink abusively and disturb others in the process. Yet, this appears to be a relatively infrequent occurrence and many students report acceptance of a range of secondhand alcohol effects,⁹ perhaps because they, too, engage in abusive drinking as well as because others are afraid to confront abusive drinkers for fear of being ridiculed and labeled spoilsports as well as becoming socially ostracized. The fear of not fitting in with one’s peers is a powerful factor in determining whether a college student will call attention to secondhand alcohol adverse effects. The time before the advent of secondhand smoke campaigns presents a compelling analogy to the reluctance of today’s college students to confront their peers on abusive drinking. But just like those unwilling to confront public smokers in the mid-20th century, there may be a vast reservoir of “silent Americans” unhappy with secondhand alcohol effects imposed upon them. If it were possible to tap into this resource of college students dissatisfied with the secondhand effects of alcohol, abusive drinking on campus might be substantially reduced.

What might such a secondhand alcohol campaign look like? First, it is crucial that it be led by college peers for reasons that will be detailed shortly. The campaign would emphasize that how a college student peer drinks alcohol is his or her own business as long as the individual does not endanger himself or herself and others are not adversely affected. But college students would be empowered and encouraged to assertively confront alcohol-induced adverse behaviors that interfere with the rights of others: “No, you may not keep me up all night with your loud noise; no, you may not be physically or sexually aggressive with me; no, you may not damage my property; and, no, you may not vomit on my floor or in my bathroom.” The message from peers would be simple and direct: “Your friends and classmates will not tolerate secondhand adverse alcohol effects, and drunkenness will not be accepted as excuse for disruptive behavior.” The key to such a campaign is to empower college students—to provide them with license—to confront their peers on abusive drinking that results in secondhand effects, just as secondhand smoke campaigns have done in the domain of public tobacco consumption.

A great advantage of a peer-led secondhand alcohol campaign is precisely that it is peer led. Rather than “old fogey” college administrators who appear, at least to students, to be intent on limiting what many college students consider a right and rite of passage,¹⁰ instead it is one’s peers—those whose opinions often matter most to college students—who come forward and assert that secondhand alcohol effects are not acceptable.

There is an important distinction between peer pressure and peer acceptance with respect to alcohol abuse on campus. Whereas the former refers to the push by peers for one to join in abusive drinking, the latter refers to the failure

of peers to confront abusive drinking and its repercussions. These are not simply flip sides of the same coin, for they have very different preventive implications. Insofar as a key facilitating factor of college student alcohol abuse is tolerance or acceptance of such behavior by one's classmates, it follows that peer rejection of abusive drinking and its adverse effects on others will undermine such behavior. Indeed, disapproval by peers is likely to have a much greater ameliorating effect than any disapproval expressed by nonstudents (eg, parents, campus officials, law enforcement personnel, and others). A secondhand alcohol campaign uses heavy drinking college students' need to fit in and desire for peer acceptance to advantage. It reverses the current situation in which peer pressure is used to inhibit confrontation of abusive drinking to one in which peer pressure and acceptance—two of the most powerful tools in behavior change—are used to discourage alcohol abuse on college campuses.

A secondhand alcohol campaign has other benefits as well. Responsibility for limiting college student abusive drinking is transferred from student affairs staff and other school officials to peers, an important developmental step in the progression of students to adulthood. College students are encouraged to regulate their own behavior and act as their own police force, an approach to ameliorating abusive drinking that students themselves have repeatedly suggested. In addition, such a campaign targets harm reduction and adverse effects rather than consumption per se, a focus that most involved in the effort to decrease alcohol abuse on campus believe is critically important. Insofar as a college cannot openly condone violations of the law (eg, underage drinking), repercussions for consumption are necessary but limited; on the other hand, there is a clear message that there will be no tolerance for behavior that directly threatens the health of the drinker or that adversely affects others. Finally, a secondhand alcohol campaign avoids the minefield of whether the minimum legal drinking age should be lowered, for the issue becomes not the age at which a student consumes alcohol but whether he or she consumes alcohol responsibly in a way that minimizes self-harm and secondhand adverse effects on others.

That secondhand alcohol strategies may be effective in reducing alcohol abuse on campus is suggested by the success of analogous secondhand smoke campaigns as well as by the efforts of organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving that have greatly influenced public perceptions regarding the acceptability of certain inebriated behaviors that threaten others. Moreover, there are already research data demonstrating the possibility of altering secondhand alcohol consequence expectancies among college students.¹¹⁻¹³ Secondhand alcohol campaigns are consistent and synergistic with the many current efforts to ameliorate alcohol abuse on campus. Insofar as there is no panacea—no silver bullet—in the battle against abusive drinking among college students, all currently available effective tools need to be thoughtfully but aggressively employed. Secondhand alcohol campaigns

may prove to be a key weapon in this most important battle, especially in the effort to change the culture of alcohol abuse on college campuses across the nation.

NOTE

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