

Thinking About Drinking: NIAAA Tackles Alcohol Abuse on Campus

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“Come on, guys. Look at yourselves! All you do is study. I’m going to show you the true meaning of college: we’re gonna go out and party!”

– Homer J. Simpson

Homer does have a point. It’s widely accepted that alcohol is a major part of campus life. Each year, thousands of unsupervised 18 to 22 year-olds will drink as part of their college social experience, and for many it does not pose a health risk. But sometimes the drinking doesn’t end with a couple of beers. In fact, there is a sense that alcohol abuse has reached epidemic proportions on campus, and is a factor in assaults, injuries, and deaths among young people.

In an attempt to get a handle on what is increasingly regarded as a serious public health problem, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) has launched a College Drinking Initiative, beginning with the release of its blue-ribbon report, “[A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges](#),” which is the result of several years of collaborative work by distinguished alcohol researchers, senior higher education officials, and students. The report was developed by a group of experts that included both university presidents and researchers in a unique arrangement designed to draw incorporate both scientific and pragmatic perspectives in developing strategies for addressing the college drinking problem. Psychological scientists are playing a central role in NIAAA college drinking initiative.

Released in early April, the report gained significant nation-wide media attention, including coverage on the CBS Early Show, CNN News Hour, and ABC World News Tonight.

The National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, a group of alcohol researchers and advocates that oversees NIAAA’s activities, first formed a task force to examine College Drinking in 1998. Led by APS Member Mark Goldman of the University of South Florida, and Reverend Edward Malloy, President of the University of Notre Dame, the group divided into two panels: one that examined “Contexts and Consequences,” the other to address “Prevention and Treatment.”

Other APS Members involved in developing the report include APS Fellow Kenneth Sher, from the University of Missouri-Columbia; G. Alan Marlatt, an APS Fellow and Charter Member from the University of Washington; Robert Zucker, an APS Fellow and Charter Member from the University of Michigan; and Sharon Wilsnack, from the University of North Dakota.

The short-term goal of the NIAAA initiative is to provide college presidents, policy makers, and researchers with information on the effectiveness of current interventions. In the long term, the goal is to

develop a research agenda advising NIAAA and other policy makers on future research that can improve campus prevention and treatment programs.

NOT A NEW PROBLEM

“This problem was addressed in the early 20th century. It even may have been addressed in the Middle Ages,” said Goldman. But, he added, among psychological scientists “the problem has been seen as a peripheral one – the core mechanisms have not been the forte of psychologists.” He is confident that this initiative will encourage a new focus among behavioral researchers on fundamental and applied research relating to alcohol abuse.

Even before the initiative was launched, NIAAA had maintained a small portfolio of grants on college-age drinking for many years; however, NIAAA’s comprehensive new initiative has the potential to substantially increase the amount of behavioral science research aimed at understanding and addressing this problem. “There’s funding made available now,” Goldman pointed out. “Researchers who might not have previously focused their efforts on college drinking will get involved...there are personal factors, expectancy factors, and pharmacological factors.”

In developing the report, the NIAAA panel also consulted with a range of organizations that focus on college drinking, ranging from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), to The Higher Education Center and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as well as groups of college and high school students.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Drinking, and specifically binge drinking, by college students is not only a matter of health. It could be a matter of life and death. Consider that half of all traffic accidents in the college-age population of 18-24 year-olds are related to alcohol. “We have casualties of going to college – 1400 deaths a year.” Goldman pointed out, citing the number of annual alcohol-related deaths among college students. “That’s half the World Trade Center tragedy, every year.”

In the past, campuses and communities would react to the problem of alcohol abuse in college only when it was too late, after a drinking incident ended in the death of a student. The first reaction would be outrage, followed by ideas to address the problem. But all too often, before good ideas were implemented, the outrage would slowly ebb and the problem raged on. By focusing on the long-term, this initiative hopes to end this cycle.

“This is broader than a public health problem. It’s a cultural problem,” said Raynard Kington, Acting Director of NIAAA. Susan Resnick-Pierce, the president of Puget Sound University, agreed. “These programs need to be part of the fabric of our institutions...Students who drink a lot are not learning,” she said.

NO SINGLE APPROACH

Current research strongly supports the use of comprehensive, integrated programs that target: individuals, including at-risk or alcohol-dependent drinkers; the student population as a whole; and the college and the surrounding community. Known as the “3-in-1 framework,” this approach is designed to reach these targeted audiences simultaneously. The 3-in-1 framework is seen as a starting point to develop effective and science-based prevention efforts.

However, in developing the report, and the resources that go with it, the subcommittee made it clear that colleges and universities are not monolithic, and one size does not fit all. The problems caused by alcohol at large state schools are not always comparable to those found at a small liberal arts college. Yet the problem exists at both places. As a result, there is no single approach being recommended. “Campuses are different, and this offers something for everyone,” remarked James E. Lyons, Sr, president of Cal State Dominguez Hills.

The report, which is a valuable resource for students, parents, health officials, college administrators, and the media, is posted on the initiative’s web site, www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov.