



Changing the culture of drinking on college campuses

At its Web site, the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#) says the tradition of drinking on college campuses has developed into a culture entrenched in every level of college students' environments. "Customs handed down through generations of college drinkers reinforce students' expectations that alcohol is a necessary ingredient for social success," NIAAA states.

The NIAAA says that these beliefs and the expectations that come with them greatly influence how students view and use alcohol. Keg parties, drunken scenes at sporting events, and weekend get-togethers at bars have become the norm at many colleges. Too often, otherwise sensible young people engage in dangerous drinking activities because of peer pressure that permeates their school environment.

But a custom or tradition is not a predisposition. High school students don't graduate hard-wired to binge drink, so the key is to challenge those longstanding expectations and change the culture of drinking on college campuses. To help do this, the NIAAA established the Task Force on College Drinking, a blue-ribbon panel of college presidents, scientists and students who conducted a comprehensive review of research on college drinking and the effectiveness of methods to prevent it.

Among other things, the Task Force concluded that a change in drinking culture requires intervention at three levels: the individual-student, the entire student body, and the community. Because no two schools are alike, programs must be tailored to address each school's specific alcohol-related problems. The Task Force is confident that this approach can provide schools with techniques that will enable them to realistically assess alcohol-related problems, develop well-documented programs to prevent and reduce the problems, and define measurable outcomes to reflect success or make adjustments.

Data from several national surveys indicate that about four in five college students drink and that about two of every five college students in the past two weeks engaged in binge drinking (defined as consuming five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more in a row for women). As NIAAA points out, at least 1,400 college student deaths a year are linked to alcohol. High-risk drinking also results in serious injuries, assaults, and other health and academic problems. It is a major factor in damage to institutional property. All students (whether they drink or not) and the community feel the ripple effects of campus alcohol problems.

The Task Force acknowledges that changing a culture is no easy matter, and it expresses great empathy for college administrators who seek to implement prevention programs. While interest around prevention efforts is keen and immediate if a student dies as a result of excessive drinking, the drive to make deep changes or explore root causes often wanes after a crisis recedes. It takes time and energy to implement an effective, research-based prevention program, and it is essential that administrators obtain external support from the community, alcohol beverage and hospitality industries, foundations, and other organizations.

One organization that has enjoyed success in the area of alcohol awareness and prevention is the BACCHUS Network, which began in 1975 as a student leadership group at the University of Florida. BACCHUS, which is an acronym for "Boost Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students," focuses on providing peer education. More than 32,000 student leaders and advisors work with over 8 million peers on more than 900 campuses to promote healthy and safe lifestyle decisions about alcohol abuse, tobacco use, illegal drug use, unhealthy sexual practices, and other high-risk behaviors. Through the years, BACCHUS has developed a host of prevention materials, and it offers trainings, hosts conferences, and provides speakers on a variety of topics.

One basic prevention strategy promoted by BACCHUS is the positive social norms approach. By

ALIVE & FREE

conducting research and surveys about students' attitudes and behaviors, colleges can determine the "true norms" on their campus, such as "most students *don't* binge when they drink." The next step is to communicate the true norm to students, with the hope that awareness of those norms will change perceptions about alcohol use and encourage students to rethink their decisions about abusing alcohol.

As the NIAAA Task Force emphasizes, the culture of college drinking is counter to the culture of learning. Although there are no easy answers to high-risk college drinking, the Task Force states that: "More educators are acknowledging the existence of a problem. Researchers are discovering new approaches for responding, and communities are becoming aware of their vital role in prevention. Through committed collaborative efforts grounded in research and supported by institutional leadership, the Task Force is convinced that the culture of drinking at U.S. colleges and universities can be changed."

To view the entire Task Force report and recommended strategies for change about college drinking, go to www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov. For information on the BACCHUS Network, visit www.bacchusgamma.org.

--Published April 30, 2007

Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](mailto:info@hazelden.org) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).