

Dangerous college drinking: Prevention is possible, studies suggest

Alcohol is sometimes seen as part and parcel of college life, but there are programs that can significantly reduce students' risky drinking, according to a series of studies in a special college drinking supplement of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Problem drinking among U.S. college students is not going away and, by some measures, is getting worse. According to one study published in the supplement, drinking-related accidental deaths are on the rise -- from 1,440 deaths among 18- to 24-year-old students in 1998 to at least 1,825 in 2005. In this study, researchers led by Ralph W. Hingson, Sc.D, M.P.H., of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) in Bethesda, MD, found that heavy episodic drinking (sometimes referred to as "binge" drinking) and drunk driving have also increased among 21- to 24-year-olds.

"College students are being swept up in the same societal problems as the rest of the population, and that's discouraging," says William DeJong, Ph.D., a professor in social and behavioral sciences at the Boston University School of Public Health. DeJong is a special editor on the supplement and the lead author of a review article summarizing the research in the supplement.

But what is encouraging, DeJong says, is the growing evidence that college prevention programs do help reduce heavy episodic drinking and other alcohol-related problems.

Fourteen studies published in the supplement detail results of projects funded by the NIAAA's Rapid Response to College Drinking Problems initiative. Between 2004 and 2005, the NIAAA selected 15 college campuses with serious student-drinking issues to work with the agency and other experts in developing programs to combat the problem.

The resulting programs ranged widely -- from counseling for individual students with drinking problems to programs that involved the neighborhoods surrounding college campuses. And researchers found that all of these approaches had their own benefits.

One study, for example, looked at an assistance program for students who had been sanctioned by the university for drinking- or drug-related violations. Counselors assessed each student's alcohol and drug use, then had several sessions with them to discuss ways to change their behavior. Lead author Hortensia Amaro, Ph.D., of Northeastern University in Boston, and her colleagues found that, six months later, students who'd gone through the program were drinking less and using more positive "coping skills" than their counterparts who had not been through the program.

At the other end of the spectrum, two studies evaluated programs that brought colleges and their surrounding communities together -- through measures like increased police patrols in problem neighborhoods and efforts to make students more aware of their responsibilities as community residents. Both studies, one led by Robert F. Saltz, Ph.D., of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, CA, and the second led by Mark D. Wood, Ph.D., of the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI, found certain positive effects, including reductions in heavy drinking and student incidents off-campus.

“You really need a full complement of efforts at all of these levels,” DeJong says. “This is not just a student problem or a college problem; it’s a community problem.”

It’s common for college administrators to have a defeatist attitude toward reducing campus drinking problems, DeJong noted. What is important to remember, he says, is that “the vast majority of students are making good decisions” when it comes to alcohol and that, where problems exist, it is possible to address them.

“The message here is that there are programs and policies that work,” DeJong says. “These studies make the case that prevention is possible.”

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DeJong, W., Larimer, M.E., Wood, M.D., and Hartman, R. NIAAA’s Rapid Response to College Drinking Problems Initiative: Reinforcing the Use of Evidence-Based Approaches in College Alcohol Prevention. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, Supplement No. 16: 5-11, July 2009.

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