Changing Social Culture on Campus:
A Study of Existing Alternative Programming Initiatives

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Alternative programming initiatives, or late night and weekend programming, are relatively new innovations to curtail alcohol abuse. There is a need to understand current practices at other colleges and universities, the effects these programs are having, and how the initiatives interact with the current social culture on campuses. The research reflects a connection between social norm theory, alternative programming initiatives, and the positive impact they can have on the social cultures within higher education communities.

At a recent conference of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), William Berkowitz (2002), a leading expert in social norm theory, declared that colleges and universities are “fooling themselves” if they believe that there is one answer or approach to changing a social culture in regards to alcohol abuse, retention, incidents of sexual assault, and many other unfortunate student issues. The social norm theory is based on “people’s beliefs about behavior that is expected of them in a particular social context” (Langford & Gomberg, 2002, p. 1). Social norm intervention focus on peer influences, which have been found to be more influential in shaping individual behavior than “biological, personality, familial, religious, cultural and other influences” (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986, p. 963). In relation to alcohol abuse, Berkowitz (2002) responds that he does recognize alternative programming initiatives as social norm tools; however, he questions the timeliness of their effects in deterring high risk drinking as immediately as colleges and universities would hope.

Alcohol abuse has been the primary target of social norm approaches and is the main reason for alternative programming initiatives. This abuse has plagued campuses for years and shows no sign of slowing down (Wechsler, 2001). Within the last decade, many student affairs professionals believe that proactive programming approaches are most effective in reducing this abuse and creating community (Maney, Caldwell, & Mortensen, 2001). O’Neill (2000) echoes these sentiments, “The social norm approach assumes that much of behavior is influenced by how other members of social groups behave, and that the beliefs about what others do are often overestimated” (p. 97). The desired results of changing the social culture and promoting peer interaction are the key components of any social norm campaign (Berkowitz, 2002).

Alternative programming initiatives are defined as “activities that are free of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs and for which participation is voluntary” (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001, p. 4). Typically, these activities are held at late night hours and on weekends when there is a greater threat of high risk drinking for college students (Wechsler, 2001). These initiatives focus on combining enjoyable activities and peer interaction opportunities without the pressure of consuming alcohol. Riordan and Dana (1998) point out that prevention and education are key in curtailing alcohol abuse, but they believe more resources must be directed at such campaigns, including “funding for alternative campus programming that does not include alcoholic beverages, as well as for educational programs and primary prevention efforts” (p. 55). While alternative programming initiatives are the newest trend in combating alcohol abuse, it is just one approach for an escalating problem.

Alternative programming initiatives are “designed to decrease the negative effects of drinking, increase student awareness of the problems associated with alcohol use, and provide alternatives to alcohol abuse” (Riordan & Dana, 1998, p. 51). By placing students in an environment where misperceptions about alcohol use can be corrected, student affairs professionals attempt to alter behavior through positive examples of alcohol use and meaningful social interaction. Since alternative programming initiatives have only recently become a popular approach to combating alcohol abuse on college campuses, many student affairs administrators have begun to discover obstacles that must be overcome in order for these activities to truly
discourage unhealthy behavior (Berkowitz, 2002). For example, Pierce (2000) identified five challenges for changing an alcohol-reliant culture:

- Some students equate alcohol with their rite of passage into adulthood and see it as a personal right, even if they are underage;
- Some students turn to alcohol as a social lubricant, leading such groups as athletes and fraternity members to drink excessively because their peers do;
- Students believe that other students drink more than they do and so in turn drink more than they might otherwise;
- Advertising and alcohol promotions at bars and clubs promote drinking; and
- On many campuses, grade inflation, diminished faculty expectations, Fridays without classes and few early morning classes enable students to drink with impunity. (p. 2)

Opportunities to socially interact help distract students from becoming part of an alcohol-reliant culture. Therefore, alternative programming initiatives may be instrumental in offering students other avenues of social interaction outside of drinking establishments and student initiated parties, where a lot of irresponsible drinking occurs (Wechsler, 2001). Student affairs professionals are challenged to actively participate in changing social norms and establishing programs that will curtail high-risk drinking, thus assisting in altering the campus culture (Berkowitz, 1997).

**Changing Social Culture through Alternative Programming Initiatives**

*Alcohol as a Social Lubricant*

According to Wechsler (2001), “Two in three college presidents consider binge drinking a problem and are looking for ways to combat it” (p. 4). The Harvard University School of Public Health college alcohol study reports that the majority of students, 56%, are not binge drinkers. Students use alcohol to experiment with identity development and sexual relationships, to create a sense of belonging, and to cope with stress and inadequacy. Socially, they feel pressure from friends to partake in binge drinking in order to feel accepted or to manage insecurities (Zucker, Reider, Ellis, & Fitzgerald, 1997). As a result, norms are reevaluated to emphasize social interaction without alcohol as the primary agent of belongingness.

Since alcohol is used as a tool for students to belong, colleges and universities are making intentional decisions about the types of programs they design, and whether or not they will reach the intended audience. Karen Morse, President of Western Washington University (WWU), understands that peer interaction has to be tailored to reach three different populations of students. She identifies the first group as those individuals who do not drink; therefore, substance-free housing and activities are implemented to normalize their behavior and build on social interaction (Potts, 2000). The second group is high-risk drinkers or those individuals who consume to excess on numerous nights of the week, with or without other individuals. Intervention programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), are developed to reduce this type of high-risk drinking and are usually outside the scope of the college or university. Morse categorizes the final group of students as moderate drinkers, or individuals who drink socially with friends at bars or parties, sometimes to excess. These are the students targeted by WWU because alternative programming initiatives would have the greatest effect on peer relationships and their attitude toward alcohol since they are still forming opinions about its use in social situations. Morse believes that students are confused about the amount of alcohol their peers consume. Consequently, they view getting drunk on weekends or even during the week as an accepted part of collegiate life. By offering alternative programs, WWU is shaping social culture before it has a chance to turn moderate drinkers into alcohol abusers.

Since the implementation of a social norms approach at WWU, student perceptions of peers drinking once a week or more dropped from 89% to 49%. In this three-year period from 1995 to 1997, high-risk drinking also dropped from 34% to 27%. Morse (Potts, 2000) states, “This approach has really moved our moderate drinkers to be more responsible in their consumption of alcohol” (p. 1). Morse understands that you cannot tell students not to drink, yet you can help them make educated decisions about alcohol consumption by establishing social norms and clarifying misconceptions about peer use.
Social Norm Theory as a Combatant to Alcohol Abuse

Additional research related to alcohol abuse and possible prevention programs would offer a better understanding of social norm theory and the potential for alternative programming initiatives to influence student culture. Astin (1993) supports this argument by stating that “…students tend to change their values, behavior, and academic plans in the direction of the dominant orientation of their peer group” (p. 8). Astin also feels the values or attitudes of peer groups are of greater influence than individual characteristics like ability, race, or religious orientation. These findings are critical because they provide a basic understanding of pressures that students are facing to consume alcohol.

Berkowitz and Perkins (1986) agree and have expanded on Astin’s theory in their development of a social norm theory. In regard to alcohol, the social norm theory states, “College students greatly over-perceive alcohol use among their peers and are influenced, both positive and negative, by these individuals” (Feldman & Kromm, 2001, p. 5). Essentially, students regularly overestimate their peers’ support of drinking behaviors and how much those individuals actually drink. Since there is no context for students to base their opinions on, they assume that an observed behavior is the correct one, explaining the values or moral disposition of the group.

Using Social Norms Approach to Change the Social Ecology

The establishment of a social norm approach is difficult because it requires that student affairs professionals have an understanding of their students and are able to influence them in a productive and positive manner. Students may overestimate the importance of peer attitudes related to alcohol; however, they may also underestimate healthy behaviors displayed by the same group of friends. Essentially, social norm theory suggests that these overestimations will increase bad behavior and underestimations will decrease the prevalence of healthy decisions (Berkowitz, 2001).

Social ecology is closely related to peer interaction because it is based on the assumption that in addition to individual influence on one’s beliefs and actions, this culture is also changed through large social movements (Hansen, 2001). Social ecology, or culture, is defined as “persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. iv). Kuh and Whitt go on to state that these patterns provide a framework to interpret meanings of on and off campus events. These on and off campus events can be interpreted as social interaction opportunities involving alcohol. In other words, a culture of high-risk drinking is encouraged by variables like “…traditions, rituals, inter-personal relationships, group value systems, and social norms” on a college campus (Hansen, 2001, p. 2).

Students should have the ability to decipher the difference between peer groups that are unhealthy and those that are influential to their own personal development as individuals. William D. Novelli, a marketing veteran, stated:

It’s not enough to change individuals. You have to change the social environment. If we want to convince people to reduce the amount of calories they take in through fat, it’s not enough to focus only on the individual’s behavior. We have to change the social environment, so that when people go to a supermarket or a restaurant, there are low-fat choices and it is seen as normal behavior. (as cited in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 8)

The social norm approach provides theory and research designed to alter the social environment and peer influences. Alternative programming is one subset of the social norm approach, whereby students are able to interact in a safe environment without alcohol. When this is accomplished, misperceptions concerning alcohol will be altered and students will begin to change the social culture because they no longer view the consumption of alcohol as critical to fitting in with peers (Berkowitz, 1997).

Limitations to Using Social Norm Theory to Combat Alcohol Abuse
Richard Keeling (2000), editor of the *Journal of American College Health*, is concerned that social norm strategies are ineffective for high-risk drinkers. He feels as if this approach is entirely too hopeful and that “changing behavior for students whose drinking causes no problems for themselves or others, is not necessary, or, at least, not a priority” (p. 55). Keeling stresses that social norm campaigns promote conformity and are not changing the way high-risk drinkers view their own peer groups of college students. Conformity, he believes, is not intellectual and goes against the missions of higher education and student development theory. Rather, Keeling would like to see some form of the social norm approach where students are given alternatives, such as late night or weekend programs, or shown responsible drinking.

Hansen (2001) agrees with Keeling and adds that campus-sponsored events, such as alternative programming initiatives are excellent avenues for students to be influenced by their peers. It provides students with the opportunity to socialize and set norms, either through casual conversation or storytelling. Of course, these passed rituals could become overused and ineffective if student affairs professionals do not exercise caution and establish policies governing student behavior.

**Current Alternative Program Initiatives Using Social Norming**

*West Virginia University: WVUp All Night*

Alternative programming initiatives are a unique approach to establishing social norms and redefining a social culture on many college campuses (Sirk, 1999). One example of productive alternative programming comes from West Virginia University (WVU). Since 1997, WVU has produced WVUp All Night, a late night program designed to combat alcohol abuse among students. It has six primary objectives:

- Offer weekend entertainment (mostly free) for students that provides an attractive alternative to nightclubs and house parties;
- Provide a place to gather with other students and build a sense of community;
- Provide a safe, more enjoyable campus environment for students to live, work, and study;
- Provide a seven-day-a-week service to students;
- Create a “cool” recreational atmosphere that does not rely on alcohol as the main draw; and
- Model responsible consumption of alcohol. (West Virginia University, 2001, p. 1)

Sirk (1999) states that the *Princeton Review* had long recognized WVU as a party school. Since the development of WVUp All Night, hospital and public safety incidents have been reduced, and WVU has been able to downplay this discouraging image. Programs are drawing up to two to four thousand students a night, and the amount of beer sold is down in both the pub and game room areas. “Up All Night is not a completely dry activity. Students of legal drinking age are allowed to buy beer, but the number of drinks must be capped,” remarks Dr. Kenneth Gray, Vice President for Student Affairs at WVU (Sirk, p. 23). Overall, the program has created an environment where students feel less pressure to abuse alcohol. Instead, they are allowed to interact socially in a positive environment.

Financially, Dr. Gray states that funding for WVUp All Night came from “eliminating duplicate and inefficient programs, and establishing new priorities that continue to put students first” (Lofstead, 1998, p. 1). Parents and community members have proven to be advocates of the program. Letters of encouragement have flooded the Vice President for Student Affairs office, and WVUp All Night was recently highlighted on ABC’s *Good Morning America* because of its efforts to provide alternative programming initiatives to students, thus reducing abusive alcohol consumption.

*Pennsylvania State University: Late Night Penn State*

Pennsylvania State University (PSU) has implemented a similar program called Late Night Penn State (LNPS). “The program offers students multiple forms of free entertainment as a means of curbing high-risk drinking and building meaningful relationships outside the context of alcohol” (Maney, Caldwell, & Mortensen, 2001, p. 2). After conducting a survey of 415 volunteers in 1999, student affairs officers were pleased with some of the LNPS results:
• Approximately two-thirds (65.4%) of on-site respondents believe that LNPS results in less drinking among peers;
• Over half (51.7%) of on-site respondents believe that LNPS results in less drinking among themselves; and
• Nearly all (85.4%) of on-site respondents agreed or strongly agreed that LNPS programs were good examples of having fun without alcohol. (Maney, Caldwell, & Mortensen, 2001, p. 7)

Essentially, LNPS provides alcohol-free alternatives aimed at changing social drinking norms and fostering identity with peer groups. In 1998, 1,150 students participated in a survey conducted in an Introduction to Psychology class, revealing promising trends of alcohol consumption at PSU:

• Nearly half (44.9%) of the in-class respondents believed that LNPS programs result in less drinking among peer attendees;
• Almost two-thirds (63.3%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed that LNPS is a good example of having fun without alcohol use;
• An equal number said they had three to four drinks (22.2%) or five to six drinks (22.5%) when partying;
• The overwhelming majority did not drink either prior to LNPS (86.6%) or following LNPS (81.9%); and
• A nearly equal proportion of respondents said they consumed zero drinks per week (28.5%), as did those who consumed one to five drinks per week (28%). (Maney, Caldwell, & Mortensen, 2001, p. 8)

LNPS is designed to provide an alcohol-free environment with opportunities for students “to gain experiences in programming, leadership development, and responsible social interaction” (Maney, Caldwell, & Mortensen, 2001, p. 2). Since 1999, the program has been successful in changing students’ attitudes about alcohol consumption while creating an atmosphere that encourages civility.

PSU had 24,000 students attend alternative program opportunities in the 1999-2000 academic year (Wilson, 2000). This has prompted the University to renovate existing venues in the student union and cultural center, and increase funding of the LNPS program. The renovations allow for more programs like ballroom dancing, free movies, and creative crafts, some of the most popular programs. According to Harlow, director of LNPS “Painting, stained glass, flowerpots, and coffee mugs accompanied by a background of jazz music draws a diverse crowd of men and women from freshmen to graduate students” (Wilson, p. 2).

University of Maryland at College Park: Weekends at Maryland

The University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP) has a different approach to their alternative programming. The Weekends at Maryland (WAM) program was implemented to make information about weekend programs readily available, thus maximizing students’ choices for on-campus options (Duhaime, 2000) and dispelling the myth that the University was a commuter campus. In the 1999-2000 academic year alone, WAM had 88,894 students attend programs, which was an average of 3,163 students per weekend (Duhaime, p.1). In fact, the annual percentage of students who said they did not stay for weekends at UMCP because they disliked it dropped from 3% to 1% (Duhaime, p. 3).

A recent survey of 490 UMCP students showed interesting results about the campus and perceptions of WAM:

• 29% of commuter students listed social activities as the reason they come back to campus, with an additional 29% stating special events as the reason;
• 33% of resident students leave campus because of sightseeing opportunities, shopping, recreation, entertainment, etc.;
• When asked what students like to do on campus on a weekend, 56% stated they like to attend events, whether it is all-nighters or student organization events; and
When asked why they do not attend WAM events, 51% stated their friends were not interested in going and they did not want to go alone, while 38% said they did not know where the program was or how to register. (Duhaime, 2000, p. 7)

UMCP has used this information to modify their program, enabling them to offer bus excursions, provide free food, and alter marketing to reach more on and off campus students. UMCP has now started to offer consistent programming on Friday afternoons and focused on continuous updates of their website.

Other University Alternative Programming Initiatives

Indiana University (IU) and Ohio State University (OSU) have modeled their programs after the ones at PSU and WVU because of the recent successes (Shindell, Guthier, & Gerritsen, 1999; Ohio State University, 2001). In 2001, the Ohio College Initiative to Reduce High Risk Drinking reports that 79% of the colleges and universities are promoting non-alcoholic events or alternatives to offset weekday party nights and weekends in Ohio (Ryan). While alternative programming has not gained national prominence, student newspaper articles at prominent institutions like the University of Wisconsin, the University of Michigan, the University of Georgia, the University of Arkansas, and the University of Virginia have voiced their support for this initiative. Overwhelmingly, the newspapers advocate for programs that will provide choices to students and offer safe havens for social interaction (Kennedy, 2001; Sober Alternative, 2000; Basinger, 2001; Marberry, 2001; Edwards & Sheperd, 1998).

Conclusion

Alternative program initiatives are late night or weekend activities that support the absence of or downplay the use of alcohol, build community, or enhance student involvement. Alternative programming initiatives are linked to popular social norm approaches battling high risk drinking at institutions of higher education. A connection exists because a college or university must change both the perceptions of high-risk drinking and impact students’ social culture options.

Since the social norm approach involves understanding the high level of peer influence, providing alternative events allows peers to interact in a social environment where high risk drinking is eliminated or reduced and changes are made to the campus culture (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986). While it does not appear conclusive that alternative programs reach the population of high-risk drinkers, it does appear that social culture can be adjusted to make alcohol-free or alcohol-reduced events more acceptable.

This significant research conducted on high-risk drinking, social norms and social cultures, and alternative programming initiatives. It provides a basis for understanding the use of alternative programming initiatives and the need for additional research and assessment. Finally, it links all of the information in a way that illustrates current alternative programming initiatives as a social norm approach to battle high-risk drinking.

This research did not intend to determine whether alternative programming initiatives will continue to be effective; rather, it proposes questions and arguments for both sides as to whether or not it is a worthy venture for college or university campuses at the present time. The effectiveness of alternative programming initiatives will have to be assessed in the future as institutions of higher education are continually asked to determine whether it is socially and financially feasible to pursue or continue such endeavors.

References


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