

Response of Colleges to Risky Drinking College Students

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ABSTRACT

Heavy drinking and related consequences continue to affect college campuses due to fatalities, assaults, serious injuries, and arrests that occur among students. Several approaches aimed at reducing the harm incurred by students and the college communities as a result of heavy drinking are being used with varying success. A review of interventions including educational, individual, and environmental approaches are described, as well as new, promising, strategies. Despite some success, elevated and risky drinking patterns continue. As such, concerns over implementation of evidence-based treatments and areas in need of further study are discussed.

KEYWORDS: College, alcohol, heavy drinking, interventions

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol is the most pervasively misused substance on college campuses.¹ National studies of college students² continue to document significant prevalence rates of alcohol consumption (68% consumed alcohol in the past 30 days) and alcohol misuse (40% report having “been drunk” in the past month). Even more concerning are the rates of extremely heavy drinking within the past two weeks: 37% of college students had five or more drinks in a row, 13% had 10 or more, and 5% had 15 or more.² The association between heavy drinking in college and alcohol use disorders later in life is well established,^{3,4} yet the primary goal for colleges is the need to reduce immediate alcohol-related harm. Alcohol use is linked to sexual aggression and assault, impaired academic performance, vandalism, physical assaults and injuries, motor vehicle crashes and fatalities, and transmission of sexual diseases.^{5,6} A large number of students are brought to the attention of their institution following arrests, medical transports, or campus citations after violating alcohol policies.^{7,8} As the majority of students consume alcohol,⁹ research efforts have continued to evaluate prevention and intervention approaches to reduce consumption and related harms in the college environment. While effective strategies have been identified,¹⁰⁻¹² challenges exist in implementing and maintaining such approaches. This article will present and discuss the research evidence behind various levels of

campus responses, including general prevention efforts, personalized interventions, and environmental strategies.

General Prevention

At the most primary level, colleges are charged with educating students about campus rules and regulations and the effects of alcohol. The most common approach to educating students is through the implementation of basic awareness and education programs. This type of prevention work on most college campuses is typically delivered at orientation sessions for new students, alcohol awareness weeks and other special events, and, in some instances, instructors infusing alcohol-related facts and issues into regular academic courses.¹³ Although this approach has the potential to reach a large number of students at a relatively low per-student cost, this category of prevention has been found ineffective when conducted in isolation¹; however, further research is needed to investigate the way in which these programs can be used in conjunction with and contribute to the impact of a more comprehensive prevention program.

Personalized Interventions

As noted, the majority of college students have consumed alcohol within the past semester,⁹ therefore colleges typically focus on ways in which to affect current drinkers, using harm reduction models of intervention. The National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) has identified Tier 1 interventions as those with favorable outcomes among college students in independent evaluations (NIAAA, 2002). Two of the example programs, Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students BASICS¹⁴, and Alcohol Skills Training Program ASTP,¹⁵ are commonly used on college campuses. Both the group ASTP and one-on-one BASICS programs incorporate educating students on basic alcohol information relevant to their experience; building motivation to change drinking; challenging expectancies about alcohol’s effects; correcting misperceptions through normative feedback; providing cognitive-behavioral skills training, including how to monitor daily alcohol consumption and stress management; and developing a tailored plan for reducing alcohol use or harm. Most often, these approaches are used to intervene with college students sanctioned for violating campus alcohol policies. These motivational interventions have shown the ability to reduce alcohol use among heavy drinking college students^{16,17,18},

however, the implementation of such programs can be costly and therefore limits the number of college students who may receive such intervention approaches. Additionally, the support for delivering the interventions with fidelity has become a concern as universities use published evidence-based interventions.¹⁹ The training and supervision needed to implement intervention approaches as they were designed for research is challenging, which has the potential to reduce effective execution of evidence-based treatments.

Given the importance of reaching a large number of students while minimizing financial and clinical burdens within overextended departments, universities have implemented computer and web-based intervention approaches aimed at reducing drinking among heavy drinking students.¹² Students receive personalized normative feedback (PNF) about their own drinking behaviors, which then compares their drinking to normative drinking rates of students on campus. Suggestions also include ways to reduce consumption and minimize harm if the student chooses to make changes. Results have identified students receiving the PNF report have significantly fewer drinking days and significantly less heavy drinking compared to those who do not.^{10,12} These findings suggest web-based alcohol interventions with personalized feedback is an effective way to reach large populations of college and university students with minimal cost and personnel effort needed for implementation. Challenges to this approach are decisions about implementation methods and the potential for mandatory participation by various student sub-groups (e.g., first-year students, athletes, Greek Life). More recently, PNF interventions have been extended for Event Specific Prevention (ESP) high-risk and predictable situations, including 21st Birthday celebrations and Spring Break.^{20,21} Preliminary evidence suggests support for this approach but more research is needed to clarify the potential reach and limitations of this strategy.

Environmental Strategies

Finally, various strategies seek to reduce consumption and related harms through altering the environment or changing expectations of acceptable behaviors. These strategies include increasing enforcement of the minimum, legal drinking-age laws, implementation and enforcement of other laws to reduce alcohol-impaired driving, restrictions on alcohol outlet density, increased prices and excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, and responsible beverage service policies have also been evaluated as ways in which to curb high risk college student drinking.^{22,23,24} These approaches have the potential to be highly effective; however, the challenges of instituting and then evaluating these methods has reduced support for wide-scale implementation. In Rhode Island (RI), the potential implementation of these approaches has the ability to reduce drinking rates at a limited number of colleges, given the relatively small size of the state. As such, making a statewide policy change may be more feasible than in other states. However, the proximity to neighboring states

could undermine those efforts if students have options to circumvent RI laws by obtaining or consuming alcohol in bordering states. Regardless, RI faces the same challenges as other states and communities regarding policy change and implementation of new or adjusted local laws. As a result, at the national level, there have been fewer attempts to reduce drinking and associated harm using these approaches.

In RI, in one study (Common Ground) conducted at the University of Rhode Island, officials reached out to specific constituencies in Narragansett and South Kingstown to implement environmental prevention strategies. This included a public media campaign identifying the addition of greater police enforcement and a cooperating tavern program. There were two phases to the implementation. In Phase 1 of the media campaign, investigators targeted potential student resistance to environmentally focused prevention. This was done through reporting majority student support for the alcohol policy and enforcement initiatives. During Phase 2, students were informed about state laws, university policies, and Common Ground's environmental initiatives. Annual student telephone surveys showed increases in awareness of formal efforts to address student alcohol use, perceived likelihood of apprehension for underage drinking, and perceived consequences for alcohol-impaired driving. When examining the potential impact on reduced drinking and alcohol related incidents, police reports of student incidents in the target community decreased by 27% over the course of the project; however, there were no significant reductions in reported alcohol use or alcohol-impaired driving.²⁵

SUMMARY

Despite decades of research and targeted intervention approaches, high-risk drinking and related consequences continue to be problems on the majority of college campuses. There is good evidence of promising approaches toward reducing alcohol-related harm and the efficacy of interventions, yet the implementation of these approaches on college campuses remains a challenge due to limited resources (e.g., staffing) and execution within individual colleges. Although individual level interventions have been strongly supported in the literature, environmental approaches and the integration of multiple approaches are more challenging. Traditional education programs have consistently had limited success as stand-alone interventions, yet they are often used by colleges to affect large numbers of students. As new intervention approaches are being developed (e.g., texting interventions (short message service (SMS) and web applications) to adapt to the ever changing college student populations, college students remain at high-risk for alcohol-related harm and college campuses must continue the charge to understand drinking behaviors and derive new, effective interventions to reduce adverse consequences and the impact of alcohol on campus.

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