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Is High-Risk Drinking at College On the Way Out?

AMONG THE MOST urgent health problems on college campuses is the continuing issue of alcohol abuse by students. Unfortunately, the national rates of high-risk drinking have barely changed in the past 30 years, so most of us take it for granted that alcohol abuse will always be present on our campuses, and that nothing can be done about it. But things are now changing, slightly but noticeably.

During the past decade, while leading an organization that focuses on reducing high-risk drinking in higher education, I've visited close to 1,000 colleges and universities and built the world's largest database on student alcohol consumption. We collect those data through our online course, AlcoholEdu, which more than a third of all college freshmen in the United States took last year. We have also conducted several studies of alcohol-related issues—depression, sexual assault, eating disorders, other substance abuse—as well as best practices for making alcohol prevention a campuswide priority. From those sources of information and inquiry, the evidence suggests real progress toward reducing high-risk drinking.

POINT OF VIEW

By BRANDON BUSTEED

A number of institutions have made a significant commitment to dealing with the problem, defined as a pattern of consuming five or more drinks over two hours, for men, and four or more drinks over two hours, for women. Frostburg State University reported lowering its high-risk-drinking rate by 27 percent in the past 10 years; the University of Pittsburgh, 12 percent in the past two years; and the University of Tampa, 23 percent in 2009 alone. Even Indiana and Arizona State Universities—both ranked among 2009's top 25 party schools by the *Princeton Review* and *Playboy*—reported significant drops in their binge-drinking rates last year.

How did they do it? Among other strategies, Frostburg State began extensive outreach with local police and landlords to help curb excessive off-campus partying. Indiana embarked on a long-term campaign to educate first-year students about some of the myths surrounding normal college drinking. Pitt opened a new student-activity center to provide a robust set of alternative social options.

Although the tactics and strategies vary, common elements include strong campus-communication strategies, increased and consistent enforcement of campus alcohol policies and the legal drinking age, and mandatory education for all incoming students. More important, all of the universities made alcohol-abuse prevention an institution-wide priority, combining the influence and knowledge

of the president's office and all relevant campus groups through task forces and coalitions. The successful institutions have held themselves accountable to their commitment by articulating it in documents like the strategic plan, in communications to constituents, even in department-level and staff reviews. They have diligently tracked their progress through regular surveys, data collection, and monitoring of those data and results each year. And they have shaped strategic plans for reducing high-risk drinking by establishing definable goals, both annual and long-term, and examining systemic changes to residence-life configurations and social spaces on the campus.

Still, even those institutions that have made considerable strides in reducing problematic drinking will readily admit that they haven't solved the problem entirely. They continue to experience alcohol-related incidents. But such incidents are happening less frequently and are less severe in nature.

While many critics say drinking even on such campuses hasn't changed, but rather has simply gone underground, none of the data or results from our student focus groups corroborate that skepticism. By looking at random-sample surveys of student populations, judicial reports, emergency-room visits, campus violations, and other data as a whole, we see a compelling portrait of a different cultural standard emerging on successful campuses—a standard that is decreasingly dependent on alcohol consumption.

MODELS OF SUCCESS are important to help catalyze change on other campuses. Until recently there were but a handful of success stories, but now there are dozens, contrary to the common perception that the problem can't be ameliorated.

Since 2004 we have observed a notable increase in the percentage of incoming college freshmen who abstain from alcohol. That trend dovetails with data from the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 12- to 17-year-olds, conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that showed a 22-percent reduction over the past decade in the percentage of those who drink alcohol. According to the results of our AlcoholEdu surveys, some campuses, such as Frostburg State, have seen more than a 40-percent increase in abstainers' matriculating. The trend of more students' coming to college less interested in drinking is real. Why this trend is taking place is a harder question to answer, but there are certainly some theories.

Students who abstain or drink moderately see college as a precious opportunity to prepare for the real world, as opposed to a four-year vacation from it. Such students feel

a sense of purpose in life and consider drinking a major obstacle to that purpose. Campus efforts to engage students in a different kind of social and academic experience—one less dependent on alcohol—have begun to bear fruit. And the colleges and universities capitalizing on that phenomenon will have a competitive advantage in recruiting the best students in the years to come. Light drinkers and nondrinkers have better grades, participate more in class, and are more involved in extracurricular activities—not to mention that they have found more mature ways to socialize.

If this trend continues, we'll continue to see a greater proportion of abstainers and light drinkers entering college during the next five to seven years. As upperclassmen from previous, heavier-drinking classes graduate, the drinking rates of the overall college population will decline. That pattern, combined with continued positive presidential and institutional commitments, could create a powerful cultural shift around alcohol and higher education.

Perhaps the most noteworthy element in the college-drinking story is the change of mind-set by leading college presidents and boards. They have begun to un-

derstand the powerful relationship between reducing students' drinking and improving academic performance, student engagement, and retention rates. The data on those points could not be more convincing: The more students drink, the lower their GPA's, the less likely they are to interact with their professors, and the more likely they are to drop out. Instead of thinking about problem drinking as only a student-affairs and wellness issue, college leaders have realized that it's an institutional one as well: Reducing alcohol abuse is crucial to the ability of institutions to fulfill their core mission. This more visible and mission-driven purpose, combined with several recent high-profile success stories, has significantly increased the motivation to address high-risk drinking.

For the first time, momentum is on our side with visible successes, promoted by leaders who are painting powerful visions of a different kind of college experience.

Brandon Busted is founder and chief executive of Outside the Classroom, a company that deals with campus drinking problems.