

# Perspectives

Insights From Colleagues of UE

## Beyond Student Affairs: Institutionalizing Prevention of High-Risk Drinking

By *Cindy Berg*

High-risk drinking on college campuses—and the associated hazing, assaults, falls, and fatalities—remains an ongoing challenge for campus risk managers. Analysis by United Educators of its claims data from 2004 to 2008 demonstrates that alcohol use by the perpetrator, the victim, or both was a factor in approximately 30 percent of all assault claims, and that claims involving alcohol cost on average 25 percent more than claims not involving alcohol.

Yet despite the broad legal, financial, and risk management implications, on most campuses, alcohol prevention is considered the sole purview of the student affairs office. Other key stakeholders—including risk management officers—are rarely at the table with student affairs leaders to collaborate on addressing high-risk drinking. Without institution-wide support for alcohol prevention, real progress in reducing the dangers of high-risk drinking is unlikely.

### Framing the Problem

#### Failing to Move the Dial on Drinking Rates

Despite the strides made in the field of alcohol prevention over the past few decades, little headway has been made in reducing national rates of high-risk drinking at America's colleges and universities. On one hand, alcohol abstinence rates among high school seniors have grown 11 percent. (Johnston, et al. (2009). *Monitoring the future: National survey results of drug use, 1975-2008*.) On the other hand, as the data on the following page demonstrate, heavy drinking rates among college students have remained virtually unchanged for the past 15 years—and are only modestly lower than when the data were first collected thirty years ago.

#### *About the Author*

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### Helpful Definitions

**Alcohol prevention:** The reduction of the prevalence of high-risk drinking and its negative consequences.

**High-risk drinking:** The consumption of four or more drinks for women and five or more drinks for men during a single drinking occasion. Sometimes referred to as “binge drinking.”

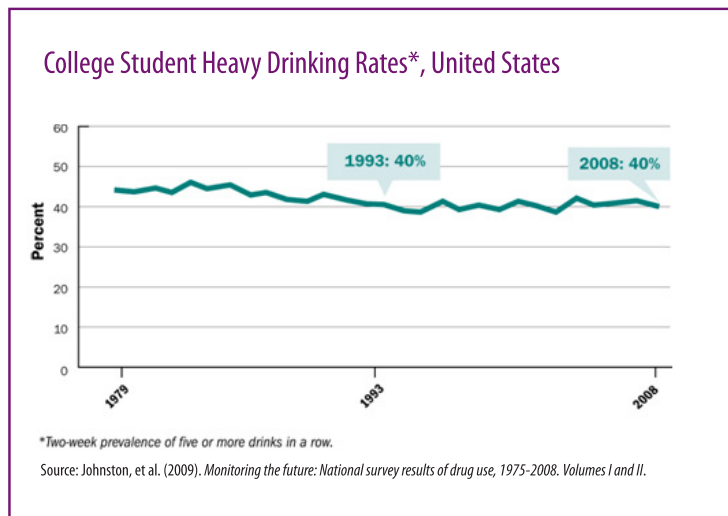
### Drilling Down on Obstacles to Progress

In June 2009, Outside The Classroom launched The Alcohol Prevention Coalition (<http://www.outsidetheclassroom.com/solutions/higher-education/Coalition.aspx>), an ambitious new initiative, to address high-risk drinking among students. The goal of the coalition is to provide colleges and universities with research, insights, tools, and data that support their efforts to address this perennial challenge. As a first step, our researchers examined the reasons that high-risk drinking continues to be a problem on most college campuses and found two primary factors. The first factor is that the field of college alcohol prevention has not uniformly adopted best practices. The second factor, and the focus of this article, is that prevention is simply not an institutional priority on most campuses.

The lack of institutionalization of alcohol prevention is manifested in several ways, including:

- Low priority for senior administrators
- Failure to devote a steady stream of funding (hard dollars in the budget) to prevention
- Absence of accountability across the institution for performance on student health and wellness
- Limited understanding of the connection between this issue and its impact on institutional priorities (such as student retention, student health/safety)

When these circumstances exist, it is often difficult to motivate people outside of student affairs to devote time and energy to alcohol prevention.



## The Downside of the Centralization of Alcohol Prevention

Ironically, the growth of alcohol prevention as a field has contributed to the de-prioritization of addressing high-risk drinking at the institutional level. Since the mid 1990s, most campuses have employed a designated staff member to address alcohol and other drug issues (most commonly referred to as an alcohol and other drug (AOD) coordinator). While centralizing this function makes sense organizationally, it often results in the mindset that all alcohol-related issues are the sole concern of the “alcohol person.” Thus, prevention tends to become less of a shared responsibility across the institution.

*“If it has the word ‘alcohol’ on it, they give it to me. They won’t even read it.”*

–Director of Wellness, Private University in the Southeast

*“I’m an army of one...serving 100% of the population.”*

–Assistant Dean, Student Affairs, Private College in the Northeast

Contrast this model to that of the sustainability function on college campuses. At most institutions today, sustainability is positioned as an organization-wide imperative, often articulated in the institution’s strategic plan as a key priority. Unlike alcohol prevention, funding for environmental efforts is stable (rather than grant-based); many sustainability officers report directly to the president or provost; and some campuses even require each department to submit plans detailing their role in helping the university achieve its environmental objectives. Being green is simply viewed as everyone’s job. By contrast, accountability for alcohol prevention too often rests solely within student affairs, and more specifically, within the AOD office.

Institutions should not underestimate the challenge of reducing high-risk drinking. Every fall, college administrators witness a phenomenon known as the “college effect”—a significant change for the worse in students’ alcohol consumption immediately after they arrive on campus. Data from the AlcoholEdu for College national database (2006-2008) suggest that from pre-matriculation to mid-fall semester, the rate of high-risk drinking among students increases by 115 percent, while the non-drinker rate decreases by 45 percent. Further support for the college effect is the fact that since 2001, high-risk drinking rates among college students have held steady, while non-college student rates have declined. (Johnston, et al. (2009). *Monitoring the future: National survey results of drug use, 1975-2008. Volumes I and II.*)

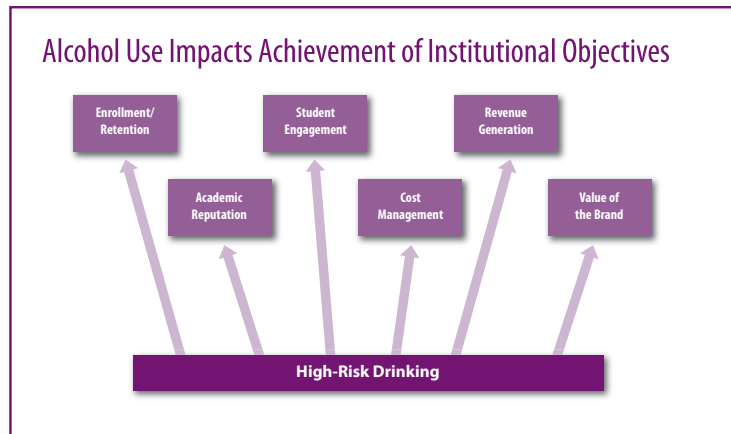
That said, a number of institutions have made significant progress in mitigating the college effect and have seen rates of high-risk drinking and negative consequences significantly decrease over time. For example, Frostburg State University in Maryland reduced its high-risk drinking rate by 27 percent in the past 10 years; the University of Nebraska-Lincoln saw its high-risk drinking rate drop 22 percent from 1997 to 2007. A common characteristic of such successful campuses is an institution-wide commitment to addressing the problem.

## Making the Case: The Institutional Costs of High-Risk Drinking

One of the most effective approaches for institutionalizing alcohol prevention is elevating the alcohol issue to resonate with senior leaders, which typically requires emphasizing the connections between high-risk drinking and mission-critical priorities (such as academic excellence and increased enrollment and

retention), cost reduction, and risk management. By highlighting these linkages, campus professionals can begin to reframe the issue not as “the alcohol problem,” but rather as a key challenge that must be addressed in order to achieve organizational goals and objectives.

Today’s economic climate has driven issues such as student enrollment and retention to the top of most institutional agendas. Recent data suggest that the economy has affected enrollment decisions for the majority of students, and retention rates at four-year institutions in 2008 were at their lowest point in twenty years, with only a slight uptick in 2009. (ACT, (2009). *Trends and Tracking Charts: 1983–2009*). Addressing the challenges of enrollment and retention will require acknowledging the impact of high-risk drinking on these institutional objectives.



While the data on alcohol-related attrition remain scarce, a 2006 survey by David Anderson of George Mason University found that student affairs administrators believed that nearly one-third of all college attrition is related to alcohol. That said, the majority of campuses today do not regularly measure alcohol-related attrition, or even discuss college drinking in exit interviews with departing students. Moving forward, it will be important for higher education institutions to (1) develop practices for measuring and analyzing alcohol-related attrition and its key drivers, and (2) include alcohol prevention professionals in any campus efforts to improve retention.

Cost reduction is another key strategic imperative for all institutions. Beyond the personal and societal costs of high-risk drinking (drunk driving, loss of productivity, assault, etc.), alcohol can be an expensive problem for colleges and universities. Each year, colleges incur significant costs related to alcohol use, such as counseling services, adjudicating alcohol policy violators, public safety, property damage, and waste management. Additionally, some campuses lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue from alcohol-related attrition. Examining alcohol’s financial costs to an institution can be a powerful lever for gaining support for alcohol prevention from key stakeholders across campus.

## Strategizing on Solutions

Moving towards a shared responsibility for alcohol prevention will require an honest assessment of the degree to which prevention is an organizational priority. The diagnostic test below serves as a tool for evaluating to what extent alcohol prevention is institutionalized on a given campus. This tool can be used to demonstrate the need for broader support for prevention efforts across the organization, as well as highlight specific areas for improvement (e.g., measuring and reporting key indicators for student health).

### Diagnostic Test for Assessing Institutionalization of Alcohol Prevention

| Self-Test Question   | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Do individuals outside of student affairs play a role in achieving your institution's prevention objectives?  |     |    |
| 2. Are senior-level administrators—your president, provost, board members—committed to making improvements on the alcohol issue?                           |     |    |
| 3. Have you successfully linked alcohol prevention to mission-critical priorities (retention, student engagement, student success, financial performance)? |     |    |
| 4. Is funding for alcohol prevention largely derived for hard dollars in the budget (versus grant dollars)?  |     |    |
| 5. Is student health and wellness mentioned as a key priority in your institution's strategic plan?  |     |    |
| 6. Does your institution regularly measure and report key indicators of student health?  |     |    |
| 7. Has your institution articulated specific, measureable goals for improving student health and wellness?   |     |    |
| 8. Does your institution hold any senior-level administrators accountable for student health outcomes (e.g., high-risk drinking)?                          |     |    |
| 9. Have you developed strategies for sustaining engagement among key stakeholders?   |     |    |

#### Scoring based on number of “yes” responses:

- 1-3: Low degree of institutionalization
- 4-6: Moderate degree of institutionalization
- 7-9: High degree of institutionalization

For campuses whose self-test scores reveal a low or moderate degree of institutionalization, the next step is developing a strategy for increasing the level of organizational engagement in alcohol prevention. While this is generally thought to be the responsibility of the student affairs team, risk managers can play a critical role. As the case study below demonstrates, there are many potential avenues and opportunities for risk management to promote the institutionalization of alcohol prevention.

### **Babson College: A Case Study in Managing Alcohol-Related Risk**

At Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, the risk management team works closely with the offices of campus life, student affairs, and health services, as well as several other departments across campus to help reduce alcohol-related risk. Examples of these collaborative efforts, which can be adopted by other campuses, are detailed below.

**Resident Advisor (RA) Training** Risk management kicks off each academic year with a formal RA training session and follows up with subsequent meetings to provide RAs with a forum for sharing their experiences and asking questions about potential risk-related occurrences. These discussions give RAs access to risk management's expertise on how to handle scenarios where alcohol may be a risk factor, and allow RAs the opportunity to gather feedback on what they might do when faced with these situations. In addition, risk management meets with RAs regularly to discuss campus events, helping RAs develop risk prevention strategies and educating them about risk levels inherent in each event. This formal training and, as importantly, informal meetings, has opened lines of communication between residential life and risk management, such that RAs now seek risk management input when planning events.

**Police Report Review** Babson's risk management staff immediately reviews police reports and discusses problem areas and prevention strategies, as relevant issues arise, with public safety and student affairs. Risk management also provides campus safety with insights on the intake and writing of objective police reports. For instance, officers ask questions that allow them to capture and report important information on students' alcohol use (where they were drinking, how much they were drinking, etc.).

**Large Event Planning** In addition to meeting with RAs for small events, risk managers at Babson meet with student affairs staff at least quarterly to discuss the planning of large events. At these meetings, the event is categorized (low vs. high risk) to ensure that all parties (including students involved in the planning) are aware of the degree of risk management required. Risk management staff offers specific strategies for reducing risks, for example, limiting alcohol consumption to safe levels by using bracelets with a pre-approved number of tear-off tabs which can be "spent" during the event. For high-risk events, such as campus bonfires, post-event reviews are used to evaluate the success of the risk management efforts and discuss alternatives for making future events exciting for students with less risk.

**Facilities Reviews** Babson's risk managers also meet monthly with the facilities department to discuss property damage on campus, both repairs that have and have not been reported. Risk management and business services staff became aware, through conversations with facilities staff, that significant and expensive damage to ceiling tiles occurred regularly in an area which students passed through to reach residence halls after events that involved alcohol. Since facilities services the entire campus, they can provide valuable insight into potential risk management requirements of populations that student affairs may not be aware of, such as visiting groups that pay for use of facilities.

In addition to these efforts, Babson's risk management department works with key constituents across campus— alumni affairs, athletics, dining, and others—to raise the general awareness of alcohol-related risk inherent in most areas of campus life. Rather than attempting to prohibit campus activities that involve alcohol, Babson's philosophy has been to acknowledge risks, proactively manage against them, and suggest constructive alternatives.

## **Conclusion: Bridging the Gap**

Because the impact of high-risk drinking extends far beyond student health, solutions to the alcohol problem require a strategic view and cooperation among various stakeholders across campus, including risk managers. We strongly encourage risk managers to become active participants in campus dialogue about alcohol prevention, to develop or strengthen relationships with colleagues in student affairs, and to own their role in addressing this challenging issue. Risk managers might begin by considering these questions:

1. **How would you score the level of “institutionalization” of alcohol prevention on your campus?**
2. **How confident are you in the quality of current prevention and risk management programming on your campus? Are programming decisions driven by rigorous analysis?**
3. **How often and in what ways do the risk management professionals on your campus engage with student affairs colleagues to discuss risk prevention approaches regarding alcohol?**
4. **What immediate steps can be taken to promote greater collaboration between risk managers and alcohol prevention professionals on your campus?**

### About Outside The Classroom

For over a decade, Outside The Classroom has been steadfast in its endeavor to strengthen the field of alcohol prevention by providing institutional leaders and their students with the information and tools they need to develop well-informed, cost-effective strategies for reducing alcohol-related risk and preventing harm.

Today, the organization's flagship educational program, AlcoholEdu® for College, is used on over 500 campuses and by 36% of all first-year students at America's higher education institutions. In 2008, Outside The Classroom launched The Alcohol Prevention Coalition to take on the larger scope of the work – providing institution-wide solutions to the key challenges threatening effective alcohol prevention. All of Outside The Classroom's programs are developed under the leadership of national prevention expert William DeJong, PhD. For more information please visit [www.outsidetheclassroom.com](http://www.outsidetheclassroom.com).

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