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Study demonstrates effectiveness of a social norms intervention in reducing high-risk drinking among student-athletes

GENEVA, N.Y.— A new article published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* reports the dramatic positive effect of a social norms intervention in reducing high-risk drinking among college student-athletes. Although student-athletes are generally at higher risk for alcohol misuse, that risk can be significantly reduced simply by letting them know that the majority of their student-athlete peers do not engage in or approve of high-risk drinking. In a three-year study, data were carefully collected from the student-athlete population of an undergraduate college. The actual norms were much more positive than what was perceived to be the case and student-athletes simply learning about the reality made a big difference in reducing problem drinking.

Research on the social norms approach to problem drinking and other risk behaviors was first introduced in 1982 by Wesley Perkins, professor of sociology and some of his colleagues at Hobart and William Smith Colleges when they demonstrated that students in general typically overestimate peers' risky drinking attitudes and behaviors. "These misperceptions have now been documented as a nationwide phenomenon in adolescent and young adult populations," notes Perkins. "And we know they are detrimental in producing a 'reign of error' where more students will engage in risky drinking than would otherwise be the case because they think most others are doing it."

This latest study shows that student-athletes as a group are not immune from these misperceptions of their peers. They consistently overestimated permissiveness and risky drinking among teammates. When the facts about actual norms regarding attitudes and drinking practices were revealed, based on credible data, this intervention had a marked deterrent effect on the student-athletes who were previously prone to drinking large quantities of alcohol and experiencing negative consequences. Specifically, among student-athletes with at least one year of program exposure, this program achieved: 1) 46 percent reduction in the proportion of student-athletes drinking more than once per week; 2) 30 percent reduction in the proportion of student-athletes reaching an estimated BAC of .08 percent or greater when drinking at parties and bars; and 3) 34 percent reduction in the proportion of student-athletes experiencing frequent negative consequences due to drinking during the academic term.



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Simply providing students with one or two messages about actual norms based on local data alone will not do the job, however. David Craig, professor of chemistry and coauthor of this research, points out that “Not all programs claiming to use a social norms intervention are equally effective. Intensive exposure to information about the actual positive norms is key to success. Our project provided messages about actual moderate attitudes of the majority, their limited frequency of drinking, and the fact that the large majority of student-athletes do not let their blood alcohol concentrations reach risky levels to cause negative consequences.” Perkins adds, “To be most effective with this strategy, the project delivered the message in a wide variety of print and electronic media and in peer-led team workshops.”

The research article by Perkins and Craig, “A Successful Social Norms Campaign to Reduce Alcohol Misuse Among College Student-Athletes,” appears in the November 2006 issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. The research was supported by a Model Program grant award from the U.S. Department of Education.

More information on Social Norms Research can be found at <http://alcohol.hws.edu/>

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