

Presented at the National Conference on the Social Norms Model, Chicago, July 24, 2004:

“Using Social Norms to Promote Health among College Student-Athletes: Results from the HWS Most Valuable Players Project and the NCAA STARR Project”

Presenters:

H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology (315-781-3437, perkins@hws.edu)
David W. Craig, Ph.D., Professor of Biochemistry (315-781-3611, craig@hws.edu)
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Geneva, New York 14456
<http://alcohol.hws.edu>

Sarah MacInnis, Assistant Director of Education Outreach (317/917-6405, smacinnis@ncaa.org)
National Collegiate Athletic Association, P.O. Box 6222
Indianapolis, IN 46206

Headline:

Large multi-school study of college-student athletes shows dramatic success using social norms to reduce alcohol and tobacco use and increase academic engagement.

Summary of conference presentation:

Although previous research has revealed higher rates of health risk behaviors among intercollegiate student-athletes compared to other undergraduates, student-athletes also hold exaggerated perceptions of the norms for student-athlete alcohol and tobacco use much like these norms are misperceived in student populations in general. In 2001 two projects were launched as social norms interventions to test the possibility of reducing these misperceptions and promoting health among student-athletes at Division III schools. The Most Valuable Players Project developed at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS), supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, designed an intensive social norms intervention for student-athletes modeled after the highly successful social norms intervention previously developed at that institution for students in general.

The MVP project included: 1) an anonymous web-based survey about personal attitudes, behaviors, and perceived peer norms that was conducted among all student-athletes at the institution, and 2) print, electronic, and peer communication strategies promoting accurate positive norms to reduce destructive misperceptions (see <http://alcohol.hws.edu/mvp>). Adopting the HWS MVP model, the STARR MVP Project was implemented by the National Collegiate Athletic Association at five other Division III schools throughout the Northeast and Midwest with annual data collection between 2001-2003.

Results are based on 1,140 student-athlete survey respondents in the HWS MVP Project and 3,487 respondents in the five-school STARR MVP Project.

Highlights of results from the pre (Fall 2001)-post (Fall 2002/2003) comparison include:

HWS MVP Project:

- 46% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes drinking more than once per week
- 30% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes reaching a BAC of .08 or greater when drinking at parties and bars
- 34% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes experiencing frequent negative consequences due to drinking during the academic term.
- 38% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes using tobacco weekly
- a 2.5 hours per week increase in time spent in academic activities, on average, for each student-athlete

STARR MVP Project replication at five other NCAA Division III schools:

- 18% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes drinking more than once per week
- a reduction of almost 2 drinks, on average, for each student-athlete per two week period
- 25% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes experiencing frequent negative consequences due to drinking during the academic term.
- 31% reduction in the proportion of student-athletes using tobacco weekly
- a 1 hour per week increase in time spent in academic activities, on average, for each student-athlete

Comments by the researchers:"

“Student-athletes have received more than their share of negative press in the past. This project gave colleges the opportunity to celebrate and make more public the healthy choices that most student-athletes are already making.” --David Craig

“We significantly reduced the misperceptions of high-risk drinking as the norm among student-athletes, and we significantly reduced problem drinking rates. We also prompted significant reductions in tobacco use. That's big news because nationwide, other kinds of projects have not had much success in reducing these problems.” – H. Wesley Perkins

“This social norms program targeting student-athlete populations has reduced problem behaviors and negative consequences faster and to a greater extent than any other program in the past.” --David Craig

“One unique feature of this program is its use of modern electronic technology to expand program exposure to as high as 90% of the target population. This helped to get the message out faster.” --David Craig

“Our results demonstrate a dramatic decrease in dangerous behavior due to an intensive social norms intervention.” – H. Wesley Perkins