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# CATALYST

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## Scope of the Problem: Misperceptions of Alcohol and Drugs

### *Prevention Through Correcting Misperceptions of Alcohol and Other Drug Norms: Notes on the State of the Field*

By H. Wesley Perkins  
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A growing body of research suggests that misperception of peer norms may increase tolerance for alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems in higher education. Put simply, students typically overestimate drug use and overestimate the permissiveness of their peers. Peers in reality are more moderate in both use and attitudes, and more peers are nonusers than most students think (Perkins, 1991). While alcohol and other drugs can create pervasive and devastating problems on most campuses, misperceptions exceed the prevalence and severity of actual AOD use. These misperceptions fuel the problem behavior: students end up following an illusion or distorted image of their peers and adopt behavior beyond what personal attitudes would otherwise lead them to do. As a result, the perception of heavier AOD consumption becomes a partially self-fulfilling prophecy: problem use actually does become more widespread as some students drink or use at higher levels because they incorrectly perceive that such behavior conforms to that of their peers.

When the concept of misperceptions was first introduced as a prevention issue almost ten years ago (Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986), the phenomenon was largely untested beyond my own campus. The picture has changed substantially since then as very similar patterns have been reported in large and small colleges and universities nationwide. Generalizing from subsequent work in this field, five basic points emerge as applicable on most campuses:

1. The gap between actual and perceived norms exists regardless of the type of drug.
2. Misperceptions persist across historical cohorts. Left unattended, these misperceptions are passed on from one class to the next.
3. Similar misperceptions of peers exist in junior high and high school. Students come to college with a misperception of the campus norm that grows worse after arrival.
4. Misperceptions extend across gender, extracurricular, and housing subpopulations. Regardless of constituency and personal AOD use, students are likely to be "carriers" of the misperception, passing it on in conversation and reinforcing it in the culture.
5. These misperceptions have a potentially significant effect on most students' personal AOD use in addition to and independent of the influences of personal attitudes and actual norms on a campus. Misperceptions help activate and reinforce the already permissive attitudes of some students. They simultaneously place pressure on other students with more moderate attitudes leading to heavier consumption and adverse consequences regardless of whether the campus' actual AOD norms are moderate or relatively permissive.

Unfortunately, the development of programs to address these misperceptions is still in its adolescence. A variety of reliable survey techniques are emerging now to collect data on norms and misperceptions. Mass marketing strategies such as newspaper articles, advertisements, poster campaigns, and media events that publicize true norms and help reduce misperceptions have been

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introduced on several campuses with notable success. Focused workshops and orientation programs that allow students to reveal their true attitudes and to contrast actual norms in a group with misperceptions have also been developed. We need more techniques, however, and more studies about effectiveness.

Other important work on misperceptions is in its infancy. Due to budget and personnel constraints, we may not be able to spread the word effectively to every student. We may therefore need to decide who are the most important targets for changing misperceptions. Identifying students who are most vulnerable to going along with the perceived norm, whose perceptions are most distorted, and who respond best to attempts to correct their misperceptions are important issues for future study. We also need to see how program intervention on misperceptions can be integrated with other intervention strategies, such as curriculum infusion.

Finally, we need to resolve the potential conflicts with programming that attempts to raise perceptions of AOD use risks. Because students who perceive greater risks may be less likely to use drugs, some programs have attempted to raise students' consciousness about risks. Unfortunately, such a strategy may inadvertently exacerbate the misperception that one's campus is highly permissive as more attention is focused on risky behaviors of students. So we need to be cautious about the side effects of other well-intentioned programming efforts in heightening misperceptions (see sidebar article on page 3).

For additional information, including examples of techniques that have been tried on various campuses, write the author at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY 14456, phone: (315) 781-3437, fax: (315) 781-3422, or e-mail: PERKINS@HWS.EDU.

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## Viewing the Glass More Empty than Full

By H. Wesley Perkins

Professor of Sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Students tend to think most of their peers practice and support more alcohol use than is actually the case, and this belief in a false norm has its own negative impact on the community as a partially self-fulfilling prophecy (see "Prevention Through Correcting Misperceptions of Alcohol and Other Drug Norms" in this issue). Thus we need to be careful about how we actually discuss these problems so that our public discussion does not feed the misperception.

Let's take concern about frequent binge drinking as an example. Typically, one might report a finding that 25 percent of students on a campus are frequent binge drinkers. Given the tremendous risks of this behavior to oneself and others, one might understandably be alarmed by the thought that about 500 students in a small college (enrolling, say, 2,000), or as many as 10,000 students in a large university (enrolling, say, 40,000), are frequently drinking large quantities in one sitting. Yet simply announcing this finding to a student body also contributes to an overall sense that alcohol abuse and student life go hand in hand and indirectly helps reinforce the false notion that most students view frequent intoxication as acceptable.

What if we would report, instead, that 75 percent—1,500 students at the small college or 30,000 students at the large university—are not potentially high-risk binge drinkers. It is the old question of viewing the glass half full or half empty, but, in this case, the question is really whether the glass is one-quarter full or three-quarters empty.

If we focus on the incidence of abuse, then the majority patterns or true norms—what most students do and what they prefer—tend to get lost in students' consciousness about their peers. Negative advertising about pervasive drinking problems on campus and the risks associated with it may end up being counterproductive as students' highly excessive misperceptions of the student norm become even more inflated. Thus it might be more helpful to report data a bit differently by focusing on the majority and creating a more positive mindset about acceptable social norms. Of course the actual data remain the same, whether presented negatively as incidence rates or positively as the lack thereof, and concern about those who are heavy alcohol consumers should not be neglected. We must consider the impact of the message on those who receive it, however. If the point is to establish the need for programming or to raise the concern of administrators, then the incidence of problems should be reported. However, when given the problem percentages, most students are not likely to go the extra step in their thinking to invert the calculation and think about who the dominant group of peers really is. Making students aware that the majority do not want and are not a part of the alcohol abuse on their campuses should be the first priority in presentations to students.

# Obstacles

## Preventing Relationship Violence: What You Can Do On Your Campus

By Marcia Lowry Maloney, M.A.  
 Director of Counseling, Newbury College

Relationship violence, an especially challenging phenomenon often fueled by alcohol abuse, has recently come to the forefront of concerns that college administrators need to address. Although statistics on the incidence of relationship violence are not readily available, an informal survey of counseling center directors at the April 1995 Northeast Regional Conference revealed that nearly all counseling centers have dealt with students involved in some form of relationship violence in the last year. At the U.S. Department of Education's 1994 National Meeting on Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention in Higher Education in Washington, D.C., more than 25 grantees attending a workshop called "Alcohol-Related Violence on Campus" expressed a desire to focus specifically on the prevention of relationship violence.

Relationship violence is any hurtful or abusive behavior between two people in a significant relationship, including dating, engagement, marriage, cohabitation, or having a child in common. Abuse prevention laws differ from state to state, but, in general, statutes have expanded the definition of relationship violence, traditionally associated with married couples, to include other significant partnerships. People in a significant relationship may also include gay or lesbian couples, roommates, siblings, blood relatives, or relatives by marriage.

Abusive behavior is legally defined by most states to mean "causing or attempting to cause physical harm, placing another person in fear of imminent harm, or causing another person to engage involuntarily in

sexual relations by force, threat, or duress."<sup>1</sup> Physical injuries are the most visible result of relationship violence. However, abusive behavior may take the form of emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. Often the harmful effects of these physical forms of abuse are the longest lasting.

Michael Paymar, Training Coordinator of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project of Duluth, Minnesota, developed what is called the Power and Control Wheel (shown below), used widely to illustrate the broad spectrum of abuse and coercive control employed by male batterers. For example, using body size to intimidate, controlling financial decisions, and isolating a person from family and friends are just as much a part of the abuse cycle as the more obvious physical attacks. The Equality Wheel (see page 4), also developed by the Duluth Project, is shown as well to

explain the components of a healthy relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Abuse follows a predictable pattern called "the cycle of violence."<sup>3</sup> The cycle has three phases that establish a continuous pattern. First, tension builds, often over an extended time. In more established relationships, the tension-building phase can be much shorter. This phase is characterized by increasing conflict, avoidant or compliant behavior by the victim, and jealous, oppressive, or threatening behavior on the part of the batterer. Second, a violent episode occurs. A verbal, physical, or sexual attack ensues, often without identifiable provocation, lasting usually between 20 minutes to 2 hours (sometimes much longer). Finally, the batterer asks for forgiveness and may go to extreme measures to make up for the abusive incident. Gifts, affection, and promises never to lose

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**The Power and Control Wheel**



Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. Reprinted by permission.

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control again have earned this stage the nicknames of “wine and roses” and “hearts and flowers.” Of course, the batterer’s contrition lasts only a short time until tension begins to build once again, and another assault becomes inevitable.

Alcohol plays an important part in instigating violence in relationships. Alcohol lowers impulse control, impairs judgment, and intensifies negative emotions, all factors that increase the risk of injury to a victim. Abusers often use alcohol intoxication as an excuse for violence, although, in reality, their ability to target one specific victim with violence does not depend on alcohol at all. However, one batterer’s treatment agency points out that “a substance abusing batterer is often particularly dangerous,”<sup>4</sup> and, in order for the person to make any meaningful progress in treatment, the alcohol problem must be addressed. Put simply, if a person is abusive toward a partner while frequently impaired by alcohol, then there are two problems the batterer must face.

The potential for death, injury, and destruction inherent in relationship violence (see box on page 5) is by far the most compelling reason for prevention efforts on campus. Although the problem is pervasive and addressing it effectively is complicated, excellent preventive measures can be implemented through collaboration between campus and community services.

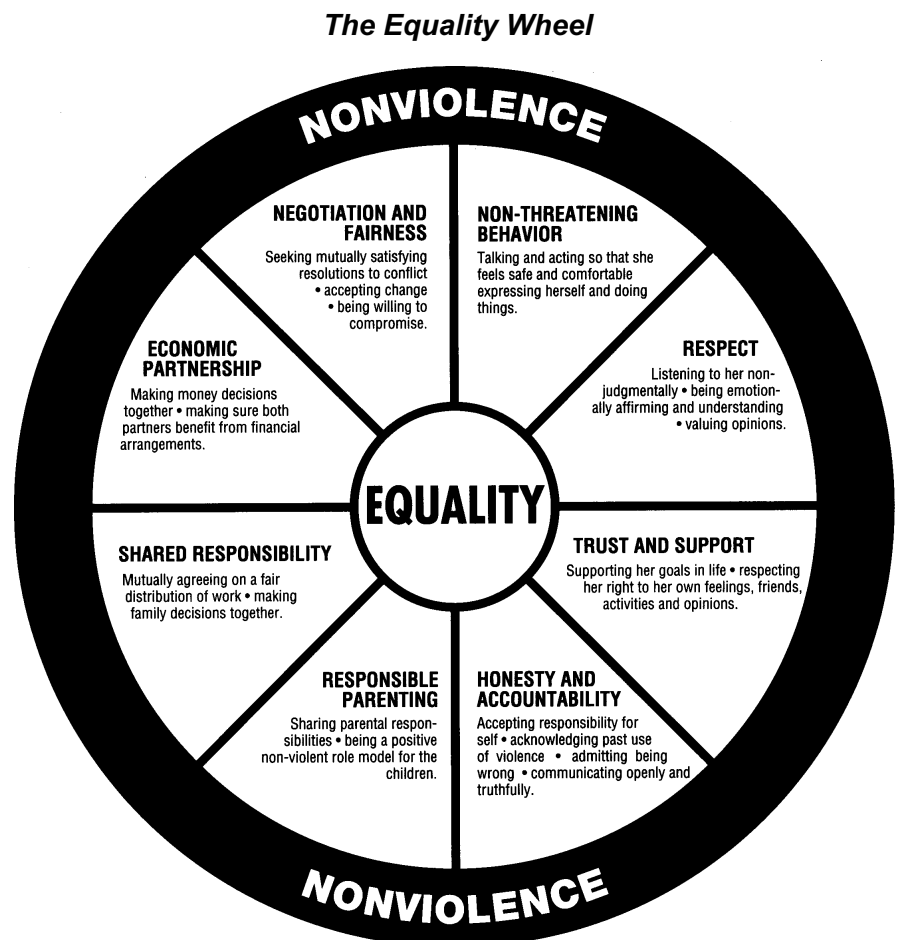
At Newbury College, the Center for Counseling and Health Education takes a prominent role in creating policy; educating the campus community; identifying and addressing problems before they become crises; and intervening in a supportive, active way to protect victims, alter abusive behavior, and prevent further incidents. Over the last year, staff have found that relationship violence can be successfully addressed on many fronts, utilizing a collaborative approach. Initially, the creation of a clear and

enforceable policy served as the foundation for Newbury’s prevention effort. The policy consists of a purpose statement tied into the college’s mission, applicable state laws, disciplinary and legal consequences, and behavioral examples of relationship violence. The policy has become increasingly important as a prevention and disciplinary tool and is published annually in the Newbury Student Guide.

In developing the policy, the counseling staff presented resident hall programs and addressed the issues in individual counseling sessions. Handouts on the cycle of violence, the power and control wheel, the equality wheel, and warning signs were made available to students and posted on bulletin boards. Community service brochures were placed in the information racks around campus. A response team was formed, including the director of

counseling, the chief of campus safety, the director of residence life, and the dean of student affairs.

Staff focus on safety planning, providing information, resources and options, and offering consistent support and encouragement to prevent further incidents with victims. For batterers, staff use an anger management model that incorporates education, limit setting, personal accountability, and the reality of negative consequences. Students complete an anger management worksheet that focuses on understanding anger and choosing alternative ways to express negative feelings. Often, behavior contracts will be set up by the residence life office or through the college judicial process to state clearly what the student can expect if another violent incident occurs. If a restraining order has been served, the campus safety office enforces the order on campus.



Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. Reprinted by permission.

There is still more work to be done, however. The prevention message needs to be repeated each year. Ultimately, the college must continue to be a safe place where students, faculty, and staff can express concern, report an incident, or get help when it is needed.

One final note: Campus authorities must sometimes make the difficult decision to expel a student based on their campus policy. If an abusive incident is a second or third offense, if the incident is severe, if the student is unwilling or unable to accept responsibility and get help, or if, in the judiciary body's judgment, it is unlikely that the behavior will change, dismissal is sometimes the only acceptable option. However, prevention efforts do work. Usually, injuries and related problems can be avoided if mechanisms for raising awareness are in place and help is readily available.

*The author invites your comments and would welcome information on your campus's efforts to prevent relationship violence.*

*Please call her at (617) 730-7157, or write to:*

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## Notes

1. Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 209A (Massachusetts Abuse Prevention Act).
2. Paymar, Michael, *Violent No More: Helping Men End Domestic Abuse*, Alameda, Calif: Hunter House (1-800-266-5592), 1993, pp. 81, 136.
3. Walker, Lenore E., *The Battered Woman*, New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
4. "What You Should Know About Your Abusive Partner," brochure distributed by Emerge, a treatment service for batterers in Cambridge, Mass., 1990.

## Special Feature

### Rethinking the CASA Report

By JoAnn Knox  
Consultant to The Higher Education Center

The Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA), and its chairman Joseph A. Califano Jr., have been taken to task by Forbes MediaCritic for CASA's study, "Rethinking rites of passage: Substance abuse on America's campuses." In June 1994, the CASA study focused attention on binge drinking "as the number one substance abuse problem in American college life" and suggested that what was once viewed as a "harmless rite of passage" has now reached epidemic proportions becoming "a dangerous, sometimes deadly journey for young college men and women."

CASA offered research it believed connected student drinking to increased medical and emotional problems, campus violence (including rape) the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, and poor academic performance.

### Forbes MediaCritic Responds

Senior Editor Kathy McNamara-Mels of the Forbes MediaCritic counters that while CASA's goals in publishing this report are well intentioned, the report has in fact overstated the extent of binge drinking at colleges and universities, and the association between abusive drinking and campus violence.

McNamara-Mels calls into question the validity of CASA's research methodology, citing several examples of purportedly inaccurate, distorted, or unfounded citations used to support CASA's conclusions. For example, CASA's conclusion that there has been "a 300 percent increase in the number of college women drinking to get

## Relationship Violence Incurs High Costs

In terms of cost, the physical and psychological injury to the college student who is victimized is only the beginning. On campus, victims almost always miss classes or work, lie about the cause of injuries, resist assistance, and may eventually be forced to leave school because of stress, embarrassment, and inability to concentrate on academic tasks. Batterers may face a marred college disciplinary record, suspension resulting in missed classes, dismissal from college, arrest, a legal record and repeated court dates, and, finally, imprisonment. Liability for a student's safety, hospital bills that may be paid through school insurance, and staff hours that residence life, counseling, and campus police may devote to the problem top the list of other more global consequences of relationship violence on campus.

drunk" came from a survey "limited to a handful of colleges in Massachusetts in the years 1977 and 1989, hardly a national sampling," states McNamara-Mels.

The claim that "90 percent of all campus rapes occur when alcohol is being used" lacked a source citation. The center's vice president and director of policy and research, Jeffrey Merrill, had indicated in a previous inquiry that this figure came from an April 1992 Center for Substance Abuse (CSAP) publication entitled *Put on the Brakes*. While the figure does appear in that publication, it is credited there to a 1992 campus newspaper article reporting a speech delivered by the university's director of substance abuse services. The professor's source was a Ms. magazine article which McNamara-Mels reviewed. The Ms. article contained no such number.

When confronted with the apparent inconsistencies, CASA's Merrill

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conceded that while the literature underpinning the report was “taken from respectable journals or documents,” Forbes Media Critic “tracked these statistics back further than we did.”

### **And now, the Six O'clock News**

The CASA report received significant coverage in newspapers, magazines, and television markets, due in part to the reputation of Califano, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. McNamara-Mels faults the media for the dissemination of the misleading and overstated report, and especially the “unskeptical journalists” who failed to validate the basis for such disturbing statistics. In turn, the public and, more importantly, college students, were greeted with inflated, attention-grabbing headlines such as “College students of America wade deeper into sea of booze.”

McNamara-Mels asks, “What could possibly be the harm in CASA’s approach and the media’s uncritical acceptance of it when the commission’s recommendations are so worthy?” Michael Haines, a Northern Illinois University researcher, suggests that a report like this has the “effect of normalizing the misbehavior we’ve been trying to prevent.” Experts theorize that “if students believe something to be the norm, they tend to alter their behavior to fit that norm, even if it is not reality based.”

Ironically, CASA’s own report references this theory, suggesting that many schools are publicizing campus surveys that demonstrate a lower level of AOD use than many students assume exists at their school, hoping that if students believe their peers are drinking more responsibly, they will match this behavior.

McNamara-Mels notes that while not all news organizations ran this story, reports such as the CASA study are received by the media daily. With tight deadlines, determining the

validity of the messages is difficult, she says. But she cautions all to heed the advice of Monte Lorell, front page editor of USA Today, “. . . you always have to be a little skeptical.”

Joseph Califano responded to the criticisms printed in MediaCritic in a letter to Editor Terry Eastland. In his letter, Califano argued that the commission’s finding that 42 percent of all college students engage in binge drinking is consistent with the statistics reported by MediaCritic and the data reported by Henry Wechsler and his colleagues at the Harvard School of Public Health. (MediaCritic stated that “about 43 percent of college students report binge drinking each year.” The Harvard study found that 44 percent of college students were binge drinkers. Califano added that “the fact that nearly half of our students drink five or more alcoholic beverages at a sitting is a very serious concern, not only because of its impact on academic performance, but also because, as Dr. Wechsler’s study confirmed, binge drinkers are much more likely than non-binge drinkers to have unprotected sex, get into trouble with campus police, damage property, and get injured.”

## **Literature Search**

### **Sexual Assault on Campus: Time for a Change**

**By Myra Hindus**  
Director, University of Connecticut Women’s Center

Bohmer, Carol, and Parrot, Andrea. *Sexual Assault on Campus: The Problem and the Solution*. New York, N.Y.: Lexington Books, 1993. \$22.95.

Terms such as date rape, acquaintance rape, and sexual harassment have become part of our common language. According to recent studies, between 20 and 25 percent of

college-age women are sexually assaulted during their college years, and about 80 percent of these assaults involve acquaintances. Since many women drop out of school after such an assault without reporting it, the 20-25 percent figure could be an underestimate. A major contributing factor to sexual assault on campus is alcohol consumption. Research shows that 75 percent of men and 50 percent of women were drinking at the time of the assault.

In their new book, *Sexual Assault on Campus: The Problem and the Solution*, authors Andrea Parrot and Carol Bohmer provide a useful and comprehensive overview of how universities can and do respond to this complex problem. The guidelines they set out can provide assistance to administrators, attorneys, public safety personnel, counselors, and others involved with campus assault.

In examining the dos and don’ts of how to deal with cases through the campus judicial system, the public safety office, and student services, the authors offer specific examples of how to handle a case in a skilled and sensitive manner. For example, in a well-publicized case at St. John’s University, college administrators expelled three students accused of sexual assault on the grounds that their conduct was unacceptable according to university standards, even though the courts did not find the defendants guilty.

Parrot and Bohmer also discuss what constitutes a mishandled or bungled case. They warn that blaming victims or covering up cases of sexual assault due to fear of bad publicity often backfires. In the face of badly handled cases, more and more campus rape victims are turning to civil suits or pushing for federal and state legislation to bring colleges into line. The authors state that “colleges are discovering that many of their policies and procedures are woefully inadequate” and must be rewritten. As examples, they cite recent cases of sexual assault involving alcohol in which universities were accused of negligence for violating their own

policies and providing alcohol to minors. They give numerous concrete suggestions about how to re-vamp such policies and promote the benefits of a more proactive approach.

Although the book is helpful in many ways, it fails to discuss the relationship of sexual assault to issues of social control, power, and the larger problem of sexism. It omits the role of activism by students and women's centers in addressing issues of sexual assault and the larger issues related to the problem. Progress in dealing with sexual assault and sexual harassment has come about in many institutions because committed students have been willing to fight these battles. While the book identifies a range of reasons for acquaintance rape—from socialization to the unlimited access that students have to each other—nowhere does it connect resistance to dealing with sexual assault to the deeper denial and inability of universities to deal with institutional sexism. As a result the authors do not assist universities in examining this systemic resistance but rather deal primarily with how universities should handle individual assault cases as they come up.

In conclusion, the book is a good resource for addressing the disciplinary process, the public safety office, legislation, and precedents established in civil suits filed by victims. The last chapter is especially helpful in pointing out that educating students, faculty, and staff is critical to preventing and responding to the problem. The authors also point out that strong penalties for sexual assault are necessary to send a clear message to the campus that this crime will not be tolerated. They urge schools to do research to identify the prevalence of attitudes about sexual assault on their campuses. Readers will do well to heed their recommendations to use such research to devise a comprehensive approach to the problem if sexual assault on campus is to be addressed effectively.

## More on Sexual Assault

By Myra Hindus  
Director, University of Connecticut  
Women's Center

Smith, Michael Clay. *Coping with Crime on Campus*. New York, N.Y.: The American Council on Education/Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988. \$34.95.

In his 1988 book, *Coping with Crime on Campus*, Michael Clay Smith presents a comprehensive analysis of court cases related to campus crime. Smith's book can guide higher education administrators and legal counsel in formulating policies that protect their institutions from liability, especially for incidents involving alcohol and sexual assault. According to the author, the days of leniency by the courts towards those who commit these types of crimes on campus are long gone, and campuses are no longer seen by the legal system as outside the bounds of conventional morality.

Creating an environment where students and others feel safe is of major importance, according to Smith. The author points out that students' fear of sexual assault or sexual harassment can interfere with their ability to pursue their education and can also negatively affect recruitment and retention of students and faculty. Colleges and universities need to pay close attention to these issues and not minimize their impact. Failure to provide a physically safe environment can also result in civil liability. Smith describes the tough stance courts are now taking towards educators accused of sexual harassment, and how colleges are being supported by courts in taking strong action in this area.

Smith's book offers compelling arguments for schools to develop better policies and enforcement mechanisms rather than deal with the legal consequences of not doing so. His forthcoming updated edition, *Crime on Campus: Legal Issues and Cam-*

*pus Administration*, should prove to be equally valuable in addressing campus crime.

## Higher Education Prevention Update

By Ronald B. Bucknam  
Director, Drug and Violence Prevention Programs, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), U.S. Department of Education

FIPSE offered two drug and violence prevention competitions this year. The two competitions were for the Higher Education Consortia for Drug Prevention program and the Analysis Project program.

The Higher Education Consortia for Drug Prevention competition is open to all institutions of higher education, and the Analysis Projects competition is limited to past or present FIPSE grantee institutions of higher education. Both competitions have a start date of September 1, 1995.

Since the beginning of August, the funding for alcohol and other drug prevention has been somewhat up in the air. The House of Representatives bill eliminated funds for federal drug prevention programs, and there is a bill in the Senate to eliminate the Drug-Free Communities Act.

Funding for alcohol and drug prevention in higher education for Fiscal Year 1996 and beyond is presently very problematic. Unless something changes, zero funding means zero funds past FY 1996 for national programs, including the FIPSE grant programs, the Network, and the Higher Education Center.

We know that the FIPSE concept of using the available funds as seeds is working, with more than 90 percent of the grants funded in 1987, '88, '89, '90, and '91 continuing, and with almost two-thirds of the grants the same size or larger than when

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FIPSE funded them. We know that the Network of Colleges and Universities Committed to the Elimination of Alcohol and Drug Abuse is growing and getting stronger, with almost 1,500 institutional members. The FIPSE's focus on changing the alcohol and drug environment by working to strengthen the influence of students who would rather not have alcohol or other drugs involved in their campus life reduces the problems associated with alcohol and other drugs. Data show that by breaking campus myths about alcohol and other drug use we can change student behavior.

## For Further Information

Look for descriptions of additional publications available from the Higher Education Center in the next issue of *Catalyst*.



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## New Center Address . . .

To learn more about the Center's services, or to be put on the Center mailing list, contact **The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention**, which moved to Education Development Center, Inc. on October 1, 1995. The Center's address is:

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Toll-free: (800) 676-1730 or  
(800) 225-4276 in Maryland

**fax:** (617) 969-5979

To obtain an Electronic Version of these publications, they can be downloaded from CSAP's electronic bulletin board system, PREVline (PREvention online), operated by the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. PREVline can

be accessed via the Internet (path: telnet: ncadi.health.org / then press the enter key / User-id: new) or by direct dial-up (telephone (301) 770-0850, User-id: new). To locate this file and others, you may conduct a keyword search on The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention publications in our online library.

For more information, contact the U.S. Department of Education, Drug Prevention program, FIPSE, ROB 3, 7th and D Streets, SW, Washington, DC 20202-5175.

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