

Peer pressure a factor in student alcohol abuse

By **KELLY SHAW**
Finger Lakes Times

GENEVA — A professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges has found that students abuse alcohol because they think they're expected to.

H. Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor who has studied alcohol use by college students for more than a decade, said peer pressure, more than any other factor, influences whether an 18- to 24-year-old will drink two drinks in one sitting or 10.

But Perkins said it's not the type of peer pressure where one student sways another into emptying a bottle. It's that college students think their peers expect them to finish it off.

Also, college students think those around them are heavier drinkers than they really are, so

they drink in excess to keep up with them, Perkins said.

"Their behavior is driven by misconceptions about others," he said. "They're chasing these imaginary peers."

Perkins said the problem is that drunken, outrageous behavior sticks in people's minds, so they begin to think that's the norm.

"Somebody at a party gets drunk and starts dancing on a table," Perkins said. "That's what you remember. We tend not to remember

the people who only have a drink or two.

"When people get up the next morning, they say: 'I can't believe how drunk I got last night.' They don't say: 'I feel good because I only drank a few beers.' We don't talk like that."



Perkins

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Students —

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Perkins' findings on peer pressure are based on nationwide research conducted by Harvard University Professor Harry Wechsler, who surveyed students at 140 colleges in 1993. Hobart and William Smith Colleges were not included in the survey.

Perkins has since analyzed the responses to Wechsler's survey. The pair have co-authored an article on alcohol use on college campuses that appears in this month's issue of the *Journal of Drug Issues*.

How much a college student drinks in one sitting varies from campus to campus, but Perkins said his research has shown that liberal arts undergraduate colleges in the Northeast are where the largest numbers of heavy drinkers can be found. He says that is because students there tend to be more liberal in their attitudes on alcohol use and less religious.

Perkins said in the Midwest and the South, more conservative attitudes prevail. There are more big drinkers on the East Coast than the West Coast, where drug use is the highest, his research has shown.

Nationwide, a college student on average will down four or five drinks in one night out, Perkins said.

Based on the Wechsler survey,

Perkins has also concluded that drinking habits vary based on race and ethnicity. For instance, he said the Irish drink more than the non-Irish, whites more than blacks and Asians tend not to drink much at all.

If a person is in a fraternity or a sorority, they're also more likely to be a heavy drinker, Perkins found.

In another alcohol-related study, Perkins found that between 35 and 40 percent of college students are binge drinkers, although they guessed that 70 percent of their peers were. A binge drinker drinks five or more drinks in one sitting.

Perkins said that finding proves that alcohol abuse on college campuses is not as rampant as many people think, although it is a problem. He said the media feeds this misconception through movies such as "Animal House" and stories about what goes on in Fort Lauderdale during spring break.

"What you hear about is the kids who come home drunk and staggering," Perkins said. "And that forms people's perceptions of what the typical college student is like."

Jennifer Hogan, a psychologist at the Hobart and William Smith Counseling Center who runs meetings for adult children of alcoholics, agreed with Perkins' findings.

"I think certainly people respond to what they see as cultural norms," Hogan said. "And I think all colleges have that sort of drinking culture."



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