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Educators grapple with teen-age drinking

By MARY LeCLAIR
Finger Lakes Times

GENEVA — Two Hobart and William Smith Colleges professors held a day-long workshop Saturday as part of their efforts to improve drug education and reduce the trend of teen-agers trying alcohol earlier.

The professors were prompted not only by their own research, but by a recent National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism study that concluded people who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who started drinking at 21.

H. Wesley Perkins, professor of

Researchers say alcohol has a greater effect on girls. See story on Page 2E.

sociology, and David Craig, professor of chemistry, are director and co-director respectively of the Alcohol and Other Drug Education Project on campus. They organized Saturday's forum to show administrators, as well as elementary, middle, high school and student teachers, new ways to combat the problem.

The workshop filled up quickly, attracting 20 teachers and administrators from the Geneva,



Craig

Perkins

Waterloo, Seneca Falls, Marcus Whitman, and Phelps-Clifton Springs districts, and 10 student teachers currently enrolled at the colleges.

Teachers and administrators

said they are well aware that alcohol abuse among adolescents is the biggest problem affecting their students' physical and emotional health.

Despite the implementation of many drug education programs such as DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) in area districts, teachers agreed with the research that the number of students drinking continues to rise, and students are starting to drink at an earlier age.

Perkins said telling kids about the dangers of drugs and alcohol isn't enough.

"This age group thinks they are immortal; knowledge will not

change the degree of incidents," he said.

To overcome that difficulty, Perkins and Craig believe that information about drug and alcohol use should be interspersed throughout the curriculum and mentioned often. Also, misconceptions about student alcohol use must be eradicated.

Topping the list of why students drink — to no one's surprise — was peer pressure. And the best way, the professors said, to help combat that peer influence is by sharing some little-known statistics.

The message they repeated throughout the day is that stu-

dents perceive that more of their peers drink, and drink in greater quantities, than they actually do.

Federal and state studies, as well as Perkins' and Craig's, have found that when adolescents are questioned about what they think "everybody else is doing," their answers exceed the reality.

"There can be misconceptions in the peer norm, in what students think their peers do or want to do. In every study there is always an exaggerated misconception. The perception of the use far outpaces the reality," Perkins said.

A study of high school students

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found that while only one-quarter of students actually drank alcohol frequently, most students believed more than half of their peers used alcohol a lot.

Teachers also have misconceptions about student use of drugs and alcohol and may be perpetuating the problem, the professors said.

Anne Billings, a William Smith senior and student teacher in the Geneva schools, said she hopes to take what she learned at the workshop back to the classroom.

Seneca Falls Middle School teacher David Major plans to take the information back to the staff and administrators in Seneca Falls, and he is hopeful he'll be able to implement changes in the school's curriculum.

But many teachers were concerned about adding more information into schedules already loaded because of mandated Re-

equal amount of emphasis.

Perkins urged those teachers not to view alcohol education as something extra, but simply an "infusion of new information." For example, math classes could incorporate the recent study in a lesson on statistics, while the science of blood alcohol testing could be incorporated into chemistry classes.

Geneva English teacher Douglas Tepper said he will likely generate discussion in his classes about misconceptions when an example in literature presents an opportunity. For example, he noted that Julius Caesar mistakenly believed people were out to get him, and he could tie that mistaken view of reality to misconceptions people have about drug use.

Tepper said he also plans make it known that students who drink are in the minority.

The workshop was funded through the support of the Christopher D. Smithers Foun-