

The numbers never lie

E. 4160B EDITORIAL

The subject of binge drinking always has been a hot topic on college campuses. The prevailing opinion has been that college students drink too much too often, and for awhile, it was true on certain campuses. Something had to be done.

So, those colleges that wanted to change things decided to show students the error of their ways. They wanted to open students' eyes to the horrors binge drinking could cause.

Colleges combated the problem head-on, displaying posters on campuses depicting the bad side of binge drinking. The posters showed students covered with vomit and displayed cars wrecked by drunken drivers. They used scare tactics because they figured it would make college students drink less.

It didn't.

Student drinking statistics stayed the same around the country. The "scared straight" method was not working. Colleges would have to find another way to stop students from binge drinking.

Then came a study done in 1986 by H. Wesley Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart College. Perkins noticed in surveys that students often overestimated how much their peers were drinking. The more they overestimated, he said, the more likely they were to drink heavily.

In the case of college students, they believed what they heard and acted accordingly. Keeping that in mind, the colleges decided to do something they had never done before. They told their students that other students were not drinking all that much.

The thought was that if students believed other students did not drink as much, they would not drink as much either. It was kind of a lemming's approach to discouraging binge drinking.

And so far, it seems as though it has worked.

The campaigns cite hard numbers that show college students are not drinking as much. At Cornell University and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Frisbees that read "Zero to 3" and footballs with "What's the norm?" on one side and "Four or Fewer" on the other give the facts.

According to the numbers used in the campaign, 2 of 3 students do not drink during big party nights, and 55 percent of students consume fewer than five drinks when they do drink. Armed with those statistics and the means to market the numbers, this campaign has reduced the number of binge drinkers on college campuses throughout the country. Some colleges have seen a 20 percent drop in two years, said William DeJong, the director of the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention.

We think this campaign has its merits. There is something to be said for the numbers the campaign cites. Binge drinking is down in these places, and the campaign almost certainly has something to do with it.

Of course, the study used to promote this campaign does have its weaknesses. Those in support of the campaign will admit the data is not universal. The numbers have only been taken from a handful of universities, but those universities who have taken part in the study have seen their numbers drop dramatically.

Their numbers have reduced enough for several hundred universities to implement the campaign.

The idea has caught on throughout the country. The federal Department of Education has joined the fray, paying for a more comprehensive study of the effects of the strategy to see if it is as effective as believed. Hopefully, the numbers will stand up under the scrutiny of a national analysis.