

## Peer fear makes students drink more

ITHACA — College students drink alcohol more than they really want to because they think their peers expect it, a Hobart and William Smith sociologist has found.

And colleges and universities deemed "party schools" often maintain the reputation because of perceptions on campus that mislead students into drinking excessively.

"When it comes to college students and alcohol, perception is reality," said H. Wesley Perkins, who based his findings on a database analysis of student responses to questions about their use of alcohol.

"A gross misperception of drinking norms seems to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging more alcohol abuse than would be the case if students were acting according to individual beliefs."

In previous studies, Perkins had shown that students thought their peers were drinking much more than they actually were.

At Cornell University, for example, a 1993 study indicated that while 94 percent of students believed the average student on campus uses alcohol once a week or more, the actual reported use indicated only 47 percent of students drank that often. Perkins' most recent study takes his earlier

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findings a step further, correlating misperceptions with an actual increase in alcohol consumption.

Perkins and other researchers also are preparing research that reveals similar findings for other drugs.

"The pattern exists for every drug you can put on the list," including tobacco and steroids, he said.

College administrators cite alcohol abuse as a central factor in fights and vandalism on campus, date rapes and other instances of sexual assault, and unprotected sex.

To decrease excessive drinking, colleges and universities need to

counter the misperceptions through information campaigns that disclose how much drinking students engage in and tolerate.

"The is one of the most important strategies," said Perkins.

"It's one of the only ones we've see as having the possibility of success. The key here is ... getting the message out about what their peers' norms really are."

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