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Approach is put to test at pair of local colleges

Limited 'social norms' success at F&M, E-town; originator stands by theory.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - They thought attitudes and behaviors would change. It worked for other colleges.

Once students realize alcohol- and drug-consumption is not nearly as pervasive as they think it is, fewer will drink to excess or use drugs themselves.

That was the gist of the concept, anyway.

Franklin & Marshall and Elizabethtown Colleges, however, saw limited success after introducing the "misperceptions theory and social norms approach" to substance abuse prevention on their campuses.

Suggested by Dr. H. Wesley Perkins and Dr. Alan Berkowitz in 1986, the social-norms principle initially grabbed interest because it was so different from what was the predominant approach.

Until then, most campaigns used scare-tactics — what Perkins calls "health terrorism" — to try to motivate students toward positive choices concerning alcohol and drug use.

Perkins' method said: Focus on students' positive life choices, which usually represent the majority choices. Base media and education campaigns on current data, making them scientific, truthful and specific to the individual institutions.

Perkins is chairman of the anthropology and sociology department at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y.; Berkowitz, who is now a consultant, was director of the counseling center.

Their research showed college students overestimated peer alcohol, drug and tobacco use; and studies documented that those misperceptions correlated strongly with personal drinking behavior.

By closing the gap between what the students believed to be true and what was actually true, Perkins said, college communities have since seen dramatic results.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, for example, saw a 32-percent reduction in high-risk drinking over four years by promoting the fact that most students drink only moderately, if at all. Northern Illinois University saw a 44-percent reduction over nine years. Western Washington University had a 20-percent reduction in its first year.

"When a school says, 'We tried it, but we didn't get much of a result,' " Perkins noted in a recent telephone interview, "they didn't change the misperceptions or, perhaps, they didn't know how to evaluate it correctly ..."

"Are they saying they changed the perceptions but they still didn't change the behavior? I would bet my paycheck that's not what happened ..."

Dr. Jack Heller, however, said that is what happened at F&M. "We found that we could get people to correctly perceive how much others drank, but that did not connect to a decline in average consumption," he said.

Heller, an associate professor of psychology, worked for years with Assistant Director of Counselling Services Dr. Christine Conway, collecting accurate data on alcohol and drug use — and perceptions of use — among F&M students. And the college ran the media campaigns to ensure that the students' perceptions became sound.

"It seems clear that people's perception is not the only thing that leads them to drink," Heller said. "Social situations have a very powerful press on what people do. Our current thinking is that we have to take a closer look at situations in which students drink, and ask 'What about that situation is maintaining consumption?' and then start to target some of those situations."

According to Dr. Kent Trachte, dean of the college, F&M invested "probably \$8,000 to \$10,000" annually over the past several years to try to alter high-risk behavior through social-norming tenets.

"Social norms," he said, "has a two-part hypothesis: 1) You can change perceptions through a campaign that's like an advertising campaign; and, 2) when you change perceptions, you can change behaviors. The second part of that was not supported by the data collected."

Thus, the college, under the direction of its president, John Fry, decided to forgo the social norms approach this year as its primary tool toward substance abuse deterrence.

A new Presidential Task Force on the Quality of Campus Life — a group of students, faculty, administration and community members — met for the first time Friday, March 4.

Because "alcohol abuse and drug use negatively affect the quality of life for all members of the community," Trachte said, "(we) may want to try different strategies for different segments of the student population.

"I think high-risk drinkers know they are not normal," Trachte said about those who are frequent binge drinkers, for example, "but they think they can handle it. Can we come up with some intervention strategies for this group?"

One area the college will investigate, he said, is the concept of "environmental management."

Bars and "package stores" located near campuses need to "be more assiduous in enforcing the drinking age and more vigilant in not serving to of-age students when they are visibly intoxicated," he said.

Education and punishment for violations, as well as the positive messages of social norms campaigns, Trachte said, can all be integrated into a campus's efforts to keep the environment safe and legal. But, he said, the task force will also discuss how to craft strategies that target specific groups of students.

"You've got to mount a very intensive campaign, and consistently — for a long period of time," Perkins said in defense of the social norms approach. "You also have to use credible data, current. You can't think the world is flat for a number of years and then someone introduces evidence that the world is round and you immediately set off onto the ocean.

"You need heavy dosages of the message ..." and, he said, the message must be presented "synergistically" via computer screensavers, workshops, orientation

programs, and as part of the classroom content, for example. "... If they are getting it through multiple sources," he said, "it becomes more convincing."

"I believe in the concept," said Sandy Spayd, director of health and counseling services at Elizabethtown College; although, she admitted, the college and Elizabethtown Area High School did not see the dramatic results Perkins had them convinced they'd see.

From about 2000 to 2003, the college was also serving as a resource for the high school's social-norming campaign. "I know, for us, I have a certain sense of guilt myself," she said, because the campaign got diluted or pushed to the back by other responsibilities.

"As it turned out," said Gerald Lorson, director of administrative services with Elizabethtown Area School District, "all of (the) software programs were IBM. Our school district happens to be Apple. We worked for months trying to get over those hurdles, and ended up giving up."

The approach is being introduced in the district's middle school, Lorson said, because the administration likes the concept and because the school's adviser, Terry Bupp-Petersheim, is "very technologically savvy."

"If you can get them in sixth grade entering, and exiting in the eighth grade, and if you can connect the dots," it just might work, said Spayd at the college. But, she warned, "it takes a lot of time and energy to gather the statistics and interpret them ...

"I really think the key (for the social-norms approach to work)," she reflected, "is to have one area, or person, or office where that's their sole responsibility.

"I find that if it is your job responsibility, it gets done," Spayd said. "We've got research that can defend it. ... What interferes with it is when there is not continuity."

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