

Colleges try new strategy

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Student drinking rates reported on the decline

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In recent years, colleges have spent millions of dollars on scare tactics aimed at reducing binge drinking — posters showing students covered with vomit, displays of cars wrecked in drunken crashes — yet student drinking rates have remained unchanged.

Now, saying those campaigns may have actually encouraged heavy drinking, a group of colleges across the country is trying a new tactic: saying students don't drink so much, after all. To the surprise of many, the approach has produced reports of marked declines in heavy drinking on a number of campuses.

The twin premises of the new strategy are that binge drinking has been exaggerated and that, by harping on it, colleges have pushed students into thinking they must drink heavily to fit the model of the American college student. Rather than scaring students about the dangers of drink, the colleges are introducing campaigns that show off statistics indicating that, in fact, most students drink in moderation.

Proponents admit that the data are limited to a handful of campuses. But the declines at those colleges have been enough to prompt several hundred institutions, from Dartmouth and Cornell to the universities of Washington and Arizona, to adopt the same tactic.

The federal Department of Education is paying for a more comprehensive study of the effects of the strategy.

The new campaigns have opened up a debate. "It's a terribly hopeful approach in a field which is despairing of hope, but popularity is not proof of effectiveness," said Richard B. Zelevansky, former head of

student health services at the universities of Wisconsin and Virginia, and editor of the Journal of American College Health.

Among other public health and college officials, though, the approach is winning converts.

"I was completely skeptical. It seemed too good to be true," said William DeJong, director of the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, a federally funded research center in Newton, Mass. A pattern of success on different campuses, he said, "changed the way I've come to think."

Devotees call the campaigns social norms marketing, and in the spirit of Madison Avenue, talk about moderation as a product, aiming to sell it to students in much the way The Gap sold Americans on wearing khakis: with sly but pervasive messages suggesting that everyone else is doing it, too.

"Zero to 3" read frisbees handed out at Cornell, referring to the number of drinks most students drink when they party. "What's the norm?" asks one side of footballs at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York, with the answer, "Four or Fewer," on the other.

Posters blanket bulletin boards and student newspapers at Hobart and other campuses proclaiming the facts flatly: Two out of three students don't drink on the big party nights; 55 percent of students drink fewer than five drinks when they drink.

The strategy was first suggested by H. Wesley Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart, who 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.

Last month, an umbrella group of 21 national higher education associations issued a statement asking its members and the media to ban the phrase "binge drinking," calling it inaccurate and counterproductive.

shown the same gap between perception and reality. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, random breathalyzer tests given to about 2,000 students in 1997 found that 86 percent had no alcohol in their blood when they returned to their dormitory rooms on the traditional big party nights of Thursday, Friday and Saturday, despite what even administrators acknowledge was a reputation as a "party school."

Northern Illinois University was the first to try the strategy. In 1989, the university had tried a conventional campaign of scare tactics, inviting speakers to campus to talk about the risks associated with alcohol abuse, simulating a car crash. But the percentage of students who drank heavily actually went up slightly over that year, from 43 percent to 45 percent, and students

perceived that 69 percent of their peers drank heavily.

The next year, the university changed to a social norms model, putting up posters and advertisements with pictures of attractive couples under the headline, "most students drink five or fewer drinks when they party." Reported heavy drinking declined, to 37 percent of students.

Other campuses adopting the same campaign posted similar results, prompting still more colleges to sign on.

"These are the best results that anything, short of a 24-hour lockdown, is going to produce," said Drew Hunter, the secretary of the task force on college drinking that opposes the term binge drinking. It includes the American Council on Education, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and 19 other higher education associations.