

THE SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH TO REDUCING SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND PROMOTING HEALTHY CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS

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Effective prevention of student substance abuse and related problems requires the use of science-based strategies grounded in solid theory and empirical research evidence. The "Social Norms Model" for preventing alcohol and other drug abuse and for enhancing positive social behavior has been implemented in several institutions of higher education with notable success. This approach has emerged from the theoretical and empirical research of Dr. Perkins and colleagues over the last two decades. Dr. Perkins will discuss the evolution of thinking in the prevention field leading to the social norms approach and the evidence of its effectiveness. He will describe the pervasiveness of destructive misperceptions of peer norms and then explain the psychological and social causes of these misperceptions. When left unchecked, misperceived norms contribute to increases in actual substance abuse and other problems. Dr. Perkins will explain the potential for programs to challenge these misperceptions and harness the positive power of peers through the promotion of accurate social norms. This workshop will consider various strategies for putting the social norms model into practice along with common issues faced by those who have implemented these strategies. After providing an overview of the social norms model, Dr. Perkins will address several common issues and concerns raised by professionals using this approach in their work including: 1) How to get the word out in media campaigns and other venues for delivering social norms messages; 2) Who should be targeted in social norms interventions? 3) Incorporating social norming in wellness topics beyond AOD issues; 4) Dealing with disbelief about survey results revealing actual norms; and 5) When are programs most successful in using the approach?