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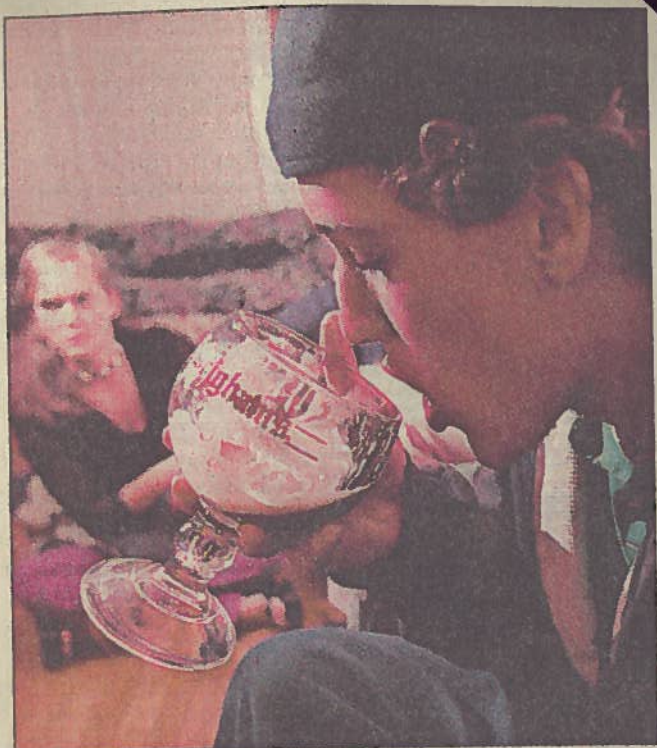
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Marla Brose / Staff photographer

BRAD HORRIGAN, 21, a Syracuse University photojournalism major, finishes off a Guinness Stout during a party this month on Clarendon Avenue. He says he only occasionally has more than four beers at a sitting.

BINGE 101 loses cool

College campuses focus on stopping heavy drinking



GLASSES ARE filled at a keg party on Clarendon Avenue in Syracuse this month.

By **Scott Scanlon**
Staff writer

When Brad Horrigan is a few dollars ahead, he sometimes splurges on a few cans of Guinness.

Horrigan, 21, a senior at Syracuse University, said a few drinks helps him wind down from the school week. But he rarely drinks on weekdays, only occasionally has more than four or five beers at a sitting, and has never been in

trouble with the police.

"Drinking is something I enjoy on a certain level," he said. "But it's not something I need."

There is increasing evidence that alcohol abuse is declining on college campuses, and that the majority of college students drink responsibly, some not at all. In this atmosphere, growing numbers of educators want colleges to refocus on binge drinking, saying that preaching abstinence has failed and should be replaced by an ethic that stresses responsibility.

Experts: Binge drinking drops if students know others aren't doing it

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people conduct themselves whether drunk or sober — not whether they've had a drink or two," said David Hanson, a sociology professor at the State University College at Potsdam who has written two books on binge drinking. "And I think we have to be intolerant of the abuse of alcohol."

A nationwide survey last year of 300,000 incoming freshmen showed alcohol use at its lowest level since the study began in 1968.

But a 1997 survey by Harvard University's School of Public Health found 42.7 percent of students said they had engaged in binge drinking within the past two weeks. The survey was conducted on 116 campuses, including eight in New York state, and the schools that participated were promised they would remain anonymous.

Surveys conducted at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva and elsewhere also show that a third of college students are drinking three-fourths of the alcohol. However, up to 70 percent of students believe the vast majority of fellow students routinely overindulge in drinking.

"When young people go off to college, many try to keep up with this false norm," Hanson said.

So he and other educators have started using the research numbers in a new way. It's called the "social norms" model, and its premise is a simple one: Students want to be like their peers.

Tell them, for example, that more than half their fellow students aren't binge drinkers or that 77 percent of students think alcohol does not make a woman sexier — as a recent flier at the State University College at Oswego did — and the incidence of abuse will decline.

"This is a flip-flop, and it's such a positive force. It sets the expectations of what things are

supposed to be like," said Dessa Bergen-Cico, Syracuse University's director for substance-abuse prevention and health enhancement.

The model was developed at Hobart and William Smith by sociology professor H. Wesley Perkins and others. Advocates say it has proven to be one of the few effective ways to change drinking habits.

"Just teaching about risks and dangers hasn't had an impact on college students," Perkins said. "They perceive themselves as immortal and don't see the risks as that strong. And in a way, they're right. Many are not likely to suffer severe negative consequences.

"But with this approach, you don't have to make a moral judgment. All you're telling them is what students are doing and thinking."

Four schools that have used college newspapers, computer terminals and radio stations to inundate students with survey results — Hobart and William Smith, and the universities of Arizona, Western Washington and Northern Illinois — have seen binge drinking slide 15 percent in two years, according to Perkins.

Nonetheless, alcohol abuse continues to plague colleges nationwide, and some students are more at risk than others. A 1996 survey by the state Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services showed that binge drinking was more common among males than females (50 percent to 33 percent); Upstate students than New York City (48 percent to 28 percent); athletes than non-athletes (59 percent to 36 percent); and fraternity and sorority members (61 percent to 36 percent).

"No single approach will solve this complex and long-standing problem," said Harvard social psychology lecturer Henry Wechsler, who guided his

“There’s a whole shift in what we want to tolerate.”

— Jocelyn Getgen

school’s alcohol survey. “There’s no panacea or snake oil, whether it’s social marketing or banning alcohol. We must do many things affecting both demand and supply.”

During the last two years, colleges nationwide have set out to change the drinking environment. The State University College at Oswego is among those that have forged closer bonds with police, courts and community groups off-campus.

Two years ago, Oswego State officials did not know in most cases when students were charged with an alcohol-related offense off-campus. Now, city court judges routinely refer these cases to the college’s judicial affairs office. Students who violate the school’s alcohol and drug policies are also required to take a seven-hour, alcohol-education program.

“Just the fact that college campuses consider alcohol a drug is a big step,” said Kimberly Bowman, assistant dean of students at Oswego. Bowman’s office has also found new ways to teach students about alcohol use, including a “Toilet Talk” newsletter posted weekly in bathroom stalls across campus.

Oswego also opened Ozone, an alcohol-free campus pub, three years ago. “Part of the reason we developed that place is to have a safe place away from the drinking environment,” Bowman said.

At other schools students who have trouble with alcohol are given fewer chances to shape up before they are suspended. Several — including Syracuse University, Oswego State and SUNY Potsdam — have adopted a policy of three strikes and the student is out.

At Cornell University, everyone who joins a fraternity or sorority, and all sophomore athletes, are required to take an alcohol-education workshop. Faculty and staff have also been trained to watch for students with alcohol problems, and refer them to treatment.

Students have responded by becoming part of the solution — joining programs that stress moderation and organizing events that do not include alcohol.

Cornell senior Jocelyn Getgen is among those who admit they are sick of dealing with vomit on residence hall floors; party-goers returning home late and loud;

and the violence that sometimes accompanies heavy drinking.

“There’s a whole shift in what we want to tolerate,” Getgen said.

Alcohol abuse became important to Getgen her freshman year, when a friend fell and fractured his skull after a night of heavy drinking. Last year, she helped start Renaissance, a group working against alcohol abuse.

Among their efforts was an alternative to Cornell Slope Day, a tradition that marks the last day of school with abundant drinking. The alternative Slope Fest drew 5,000 students who chose to watch bands, toss Frisbees and play games instead of drink alcohol.

But educators say it will take more work than a campus can muster to solve the problem of alcohol abuse. It’s a larger, societal problem, they say.

“This isn’t a college issue alone,” said Chip Morris, State University College at Potsdam’s director of campus life. “In many ways, our society glorifies alcohol. Movies show tough guys drinking a lot, and advertising shows athletes selling beer. We really haven’t come to grips with that.

“We get a lot of attention, but you go to any bar on a Friday night and it isn’t college students drinking,” Morris said. “It’s people.”