

Opinion Editor
Gary Stewart
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Barry Rothfeld
President and Publisher

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August 28, 2000

EDITORIAL

At Hobart and William Smith

Alcohol abuse and solutions

Fourth in a series of editorials on notable campus developments.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) in Geneva will welcome 527 first-year students at convocation Tuesday. The address will be given by Michael Dobkowski, professor of religious studies. His speech is titled, "Happiness as a Moral Imperative: If You're Not Completely Satisfied, Give Us a Call."

Moral imperatives might be easier to analyze and discuss at HWS. Total enrollment is about 2,000 students, the community close-knit. It's also a more effective setting to dissect social and campus issues. This is evidenced by a summer full of accolades for landmark work in alcohol-abuse education.

The "social norms" program initiated by professors H. Wesley Perkins and David Craig has now been embraced in different forms by several campuses around the nation — including Cornell University — and is tied to a simple fact: "Students assume that their friends are drinking more often and consuming more alcohol at parties than they actually are," says Perkins.

He says when students are educated about the facts, drinking and related abuse statistics fall, often dramatically.

This initiative has led to eye-popping statistics in Geneva: In 1999-2000, property damage and missed classes related to drinking were down 36 and 31 percent respectively, with the frequency of heavy drinking reduced by 21 percent.

A steady on-line-based dialogue features "Campus Factoids" and "Campus Reactoids," providing information and insights about alcohol and other drug consumption. It's not a one-shot deal, but part of daily life that involves everyone.

"It doesn't do much good to preach to students," says Perkins.

Yes, change might come easier at a place like HWS. The colleges are dropping its trimester schedule this fall in favor of a semester system, while a series of other new programs are being launched under the leadership of second-year President Mark Gearan. It's also fact that any size institution can learn from HWS after years of research and outreach on a problem that still hurts campuses and communities around America.

The good news is that Hobart and William Smith's Alcohol Education Program is thriving, bolstered by a series of awards, government grants and requests from colleges and universities that are interested in talking about a front-burner moral imperative.