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'Official' peer pressure yields mixed results

'Social-norm marketing' aims to curb drinking

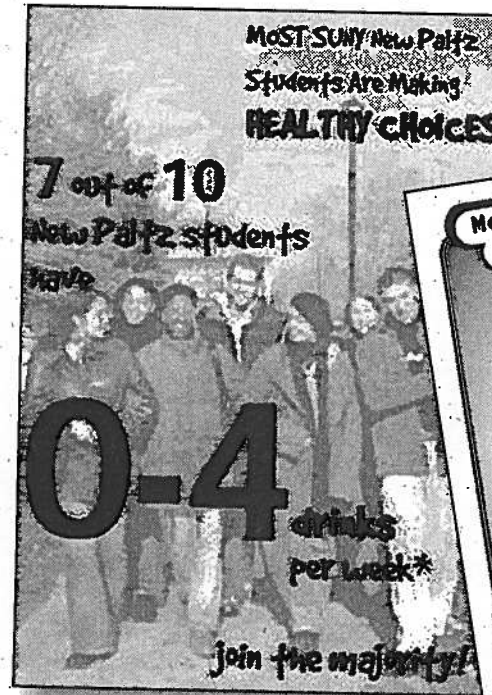
By Claire Bourne
and Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

A number of college leaders this week reported success in curbing heavy drinking on college campuses by providing undergraduates with information showing that most students don't overindulge.

But a prominent researcher's findings suggest just the opposite. He says student drinking has not declined, and in some cases has increased, on university campuses that use the technique, called "social-norms marketing."

The approach is based on the idea that students feel pressured to drink more if they think others around them drink a lot. In recent years, more college administrators and health educators have launched campaigns informing students — based on anonymous surveys and other research — that their classmates consume moderate amounts of alcohol rather than excessive amounts. Nearly three-quarters of college students drink moderately, infrequently or not at all, according to the National Social Norms Resource Center in DeKalb, Ill.

Proponents say the approach makes a difference. Research released this week at a national conference in Boston on the social-norms model found that colleges that take a social-norms approach achieved an average 20% reduc-



None of the cool kids are doing it: SUNY-New Paltz posters urge students to show restraint.

tion in high-risk drinking in two years.

But research conducted as part of the Harvard School of Public Health's College Alcohol Study found that the social-norms strategy failed to decrease incidents of excessive college drinking, even at schools where students encountered the highest number of social-norms messages.

And especially at larger schools, stu-

dents are more likely to be influenced by their circle of friends than by "the drinking habits of a mythical average student," researchers found.

"It's a method that's long on promise but short on proof," says Henry Wechsler, head researcher of the Harvard report, released Wednesday and published in the July issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. Efforts need to go be-

yond promotional campaigns to students, he says. Colleges need to look at conditions in the community, such as the price and availability of alcohol near campus.

Wechsler and his colleagues compared drinking habits at 37 colleges with social-norms programs to 61 schools that did not use that approach. They looked at student survey responses, as well as information about each college's social-norms program.

Critics of Wechsler's research say some colleges might be confused about social norms. "Many schools don't have much sense of what it entails," but they "will say they're doing it," says H. Wesley Perkins, professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and editor of *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age*

Substance Abuse.

Other experts aren't surprised by the conflicting findings. They stress that both views add to the search for solutions to college drinking problems.

"The only way we find out how a concept actually functions or applies is to carry out good research that focuses on variations on the question," says Marc Schuckit, editor of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. "The final answer on exactly how important the social-norms issue is isn't in yet."

