



Safe Supportive Learning

Engagement | Safety | Environment

HIGHER EDUCATION UPDATE

Reducing Risk During the First Few Weeks on Campus

Overview

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the first six weeks of the academic year are critical to both the academic and social success of first-year students. The early days on campus, however, often present the potential for high-risk alcohol consumption, drug use, hazing, and behaviors contrary to successful assimilation into college life. According to the [National Institute of Justice](#), the first few months of the school year are the highest-risk time for sexual assault. In the first few weeks of the 2014 academic year, at least eight first-year students at U.S. colleges died due to alcohol-related incidents, according to [Inside Higher Ed](#).

[George Koob](#), director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), points out that “when the freshmen arrive on campus, they see older students still attempting to live up to images from movies and television and they try to follow suit, particularly when it comes to alcohol consumption.” [The Boston Globe](#) reports that the phenomenon is so infamous that college prevention professionals and administrators refer to it as the “Red Zone” – the weeks between Labor Day and Thanksgiving when college students are believed to be most at risk of sexual assault. It is also a period when students are more prone to accidental injury and alcohol poisoning. [Amy Murphy](#), dean of students at Texas Tech University, observed that most students actually arrive at college with healthy attitudes and behaviors, but then fall under the spell of the *college effect*, which is “the idea that once students are on campus, they’re exposed to higher-risk behaviors and are then more likely to participate in them.”

Campus programming during the first few weeks can promote student engagement and reinforce successful transition into campus life while reducing high-risk behavior. Campuses have employed a wide range of strategies to reduce potential harms associated with the start of the academic year, including community building, orientation, additional recreational and academic resources, evening and late-night alcohol-free entertainment, and increased enforcement to control off-campus parties.

Evidence-based Strategies

Research on the impact of the first few weeks in college on later academic success and retention is limited. However, three strategies have produced evidence of effectively reducing high-risk behavior when applied toward the beginning of the academic year.

Recommendations for Parents on How to Talk with Their Children

Guiding parents to have a conversation with their child during the months prior to attending their first semester on campus may result in a higher percentage of students who resist the “college effect” of becoming heavy drinkers once they came to campus. Penn State researcher [Robert Turissi](#) states that, “The results show that if parents follow the recommendations suggested in the handbook and talk to

their teens before they enter college, their teens are more likely to remain in the non-drinking or light-drinking groups or to transition out of a heavy-drinking group if they were already heavy drinkers."

Environmental Prevention Strategies

The NIAAA-funded research project [Safer California Universities](#) concluded that environmental prevention strategies targeting settings where the majority of heavy drinking events occur appear to reduce the incidence and likelihood of intoxication among college students. The interventions include alcohol control measures (e.g., enforcement of underage sales laws; roadside driving under the influence operations; social host party patrols with local ordinances) along with a multi-faceted media advocacy campaign via channels unique to college student audiences. The research also found that intoxication did not increase in other settings as a result of the intervention.

Late-Night Entertainment Programs

An evaluation of [Aztec Nights](#), an on-campus, late-night entertainment program at San Diego State University, found a 56 percent decrease in alcohol and 46 percent reduction in drug violations in the first year of the program when compared to the year before the intervention. Evaluations at other campuses have found that late night programming provides a supportive normative environment for underage and low-risk students who often feel marginalized by an alcohol-focused student culture.

What Colleges and Universities Are Doing

Campuses have traditionally offered orientation activities to welcome new students, sometimes augmented by special classes to help in navigating school life, such as at the [University of North Dakota](#). The first four to eight weeks that students are on campus is an important time to educate party hosts and attendees about community expectations and consequences for the remainder of the year. For example, students in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois and Boulder, Colorado, receive information from the local community about neighborhood standards, which includes tips on hosting parties that minimize problems for neighbors. Many campus communities increase enforcement via "party patrols" in order to take a proactive stance against loud house parties where high-risk, underage drinking, and other disruptive activities take place

As part of the Safer California Universities project, the University of California at Santa Barbara developed the [Life of the Party](#) website. On the website students can get safer party tips and other information to help them make informed choices about the social activities they attend. The information is also distributed throughout first-year student residence halls.

North Dakota State University (NDSU) has experienced positive results with late-night, alcohol-free campus programming and reduction in alcohol-related arrests. Typically anywhere from 1,700 to 2,100 students attend its Opening Weekend [Club NDSU](#), which represents approximately 70 to 80 percent of the first-year student population. NDSU also implements [eCHECKUP-to-go](#) as a requirement for all first-year students to complete within the first six weeks of each semester, with completion rates ranging from 90-100 percent.

Other campuses also offer late night programming during the first few weeks of the fall term. At the University of Nevada, Reno, [Wolf Pack Welcome](#) is the beginning of the NEVADA Experience. It includes 17 days of activities welcoming students to campus and incorporates late night social programming in its overall fall orientation schedule. Similarly, Roger Williams University welcomes its first year students with [Weeks of Welcome/40 Days and 40 Nights of Programming](#).

Resources

- [Safer Campuses and Communities](#)—Website and [toolkit](#) describing the Safer California Universities interventions.
- [Late-Night Programming: A Successful—and Safe—Social and Entertainment Alternative](#)—Book chapter providing guidance for development and promotion of after-hours activities that are intrinsically alcohol-free.
- [NACADA](#) (National Academic Advising Association)—Web resource for advisors, counselors, faculty, administrators, and students working to enhance the educational development of students.
- [National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition](#)—Web resources supporting and advancing efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education.
- [NODA](#) (Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education)—Web resources for college student orientation, transition and retention.

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