

Prevention Progress at PENNSTATE



When Graham Spanier, Ph.D., became president of Penn State in 1995 he shocked many of the faculty, staff, alumni, and students with a declaration that alcohol was the university's number one problem. Since then, Penn State has seen a formidable effort to roll back binge drinking rates and overcome a party school reputation.

Spanier's strong and vocal stand on drinking makes him something of a maverick. He has taken an opposite tack from many college presidents, who try to minimize alcohol problems for fear that acknowledging their magnitude will reflect poorly on their institutions and affect enrollments. With Spanier's backing, alcohol problems and measures to prevent them have been given a high profile throughout the 22-campus Penn State system.

"I was frustrated at first in presidential circles when I brought this topic up, not fully understanding why most presidents didn't want to deal with it," Spanier told *Catalyst*. But after a series of student deaths from alcohol poisoning and falls from roofs and windows began making headlines, attitudes began to change.

"Lately it's been the hot topic," Spanier said. "Much of the early reluctance may have been related to not wanting to draw attention to the negatives. But our experience at Penn State is that most parents want to hear what we're saying, and most high school students are not put off by such talk. I've gone so far as to say in some settings that if students think they're coming to Penn State to drink, they should go somewhere else.

Yet our applications are up 2,600 already this year over last year. Frankly, most students don't come to college to drink. It's something that gets institutionalized after they arrive."

The centerpiece of the Penn State effort is a Commission for the Prevention of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Abuse. Its membership of more than 40 is drawn from throughout the university system and includes faculty, staff, and students, both undergraduate and graduate, as well as representatives of a variety of organizations on and off campus. The commission is an outgrowth of a task force established in 1992 by William Asbury, Penn State's vice president for student affairs and Spanier's chief ally in elevating campus awareness of alcohol issues.

In two years the commission has created a new atmosphere where drinking is concerned.

"It's not so much specific new policies," says Natalie Croll, assistant director of the Office of Health Promotion and Education and a Center Associate. "It's more of a tone in campus affairs."

Penn State's policies governing alcohol availability and consumption are not unlike those at many other schools. The new "tone" is that every-

one at Penn State is expected to both understand and respect the policies. One of the toughest hurdles is gaining support for enforcement of underage drinking laws. When the 1993 Harvard survey identified Penn State as a school where some 60 percent of students engaged in binge drinking—five or more drinks on an occasion for men, and four for women—it was no secret that many of the binge drinkers were under age 21.

A goal of the commission is to enlist faculty and staff in helping reduce alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use by students. Professors are urged to incorporate information on alcohol and other drug risks into their courses. A Greek Task Force is encouraging adoption of tough drinking standards and rules for partying in the fraternity and sorority houses that give Penn State the largest Greek system in

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the United States. Chapters are being prodded to take advantage of help offered by the National Interfraternity Conference to develop responsible leadership. For the first time in years, campus police have raided University Park fraternity houses where alcohol was being consumed by students under age 21. The Penn State alumni magazine published an article reporting frankly on the extent of alcohol problems.

Informational programs about risks associated with alcohol and other drugs and courses in life skills focus mainly on incoming first-year students, but the mood of restraint extends throughout the system. Scoreboards at athletic events carry messages about sobriety and civil behavior. New funds have been made available for weekend late-night events at the alcohol-free student union as a means of competing with off-campus drinking spots.

Spanier believes the commission is having an impact even though many students regard its program as draconian.

"There are clearly some students who see this as an attempt to crack down on them or take away their fun," he said. "I have vowed not to let this vocal minority get in the way of doing what is right."

The commission's efforts are most visible on the University Park campus, where enrollment tops 38,000. New channels of communication are opening between the campus and the surrounding communities. There are 22 bars on the fringes of the campus, however, and they represent a line of resistance to change.

"We're getting lots of cooperation from the neighborhood associations, the local newspaper, the local police, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, and the community generally, but the bars don't seem to have changed at all," Spanier said. One bar ran an advertisement depicting Spanier as Adolph Hitler speaking with a German accent and sending storm troopers to raid a fraternity. The ad invited students to come to the bar for the alcohol that Spanier was supposedly denying them.

The commission's prevention theme for 1997-98 is *Changing the Norms, Challenging the Environment. The Creation of a Civil Campus*

Community. Its strategic plan calls for a social marketing campaign to establish safer and healthier norms of drinking behavior in the campus community. The commission states as its vision "a Penn State community that is responsive to the life-threatening nature of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse and specifically makes prevention, intervention, and treatment programs on substance abuse and related problems a priority."

Among students, support for the commission's work lies mainly with those who are not involved in the weekend drinking scene and who see a party school reputation as a liability. Andy Hoffert, managing editor of the student newspaper at the Hazleton campus, tells about the reaction of a high school senior who heard that Andy was a student at Penn State. "He said, 'Wow, you must be able to hold your liquor—you have to if you go to Penn State'."

Hoffert says he and many other students are worried that if nothing is done to curb rates of binge drinking, the value of Penn State degrees will be diminished and employers will shy away from hiring Penn State graduates. The notion that marathon drinking is part of campus life is unfair to serious students, he pointed out in a column in his campus newspaper.

Is Spanier's campaign working? He has evidence that it is. "We do an annual survey," he said. "The changes between February 1996 and February 1997 were significant and convinced me that presidential leadership can make a difference. Excessive consumption of alcohol is still a major problem in higher education, but here at Penn State our indicators of consumption, binge drinking, and alcohol-related consequences are down. Progress can be expected with effective programs and leadership."

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