



ISSUES IN PREVENTION

Translating Research to Practice: Overcoming Barriers to Implementing Effective Off-Campus Party Intervention

Confronting the Problems Associated With Off-Campus Parties With Evidence-Based Strategies

by John D. Clapp

Every fall communities that are home to college and university students brace themselves for the often rowdy off-campus parties that signal the start of the new academic year. These parties have long been a source of friction between town and gown and have led to a wide range of measures, including alliances between colleges and universities and law enforcement agencies, to get them under control.

Why focus on off-campus parties? College students tend to drink in two settings—bars and parties. Parties tend to be less regulated than bars, which are licensed establishments subject to a number of regulations regarding their operation aimed at reducing risks for harm. Parties, on the other hand, are for the most part unregulated and pose multiple risk factors, including high blood alcohol concentrations, drinking games, high risks for females, illicit drug use, underage drinking, and hazing.

It's not just the students who attend these parties who are at risk. Other students and community residents often experience so-called secondary effects of off-campus parties, including fights; noise complaints; enforcement costs; vandalism; loss of sleep or study disruption; and poor town-gown relations, including decreased property values.

Campus communities are likely to see measures to prevent party-related harm in terms of education and persuasion. Enforcement officials may look at prevention in terms of laws and regulations and the allocation of resources to see that they are observed. Both of these “cultures,” however, are aiming at the same goal in protecting individual students and communities. But policies and programs linking concern for student health and safety with local law enforcement do not always sit well with students or even campus administrators. A 2006 report on a California effort to forge new campus law enforcement links pointed out that law enforcement exists in a different culture from university administration, the student body, and other community and government sectors typically involved in the prevention area.

Circumstances surrounding the need to reduce the harms associated with these off-campus parties, however, require a meeting of these cultures. That

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is because prevention and education simply do not work in the absence of enforcement to set clear, swift consequences and to create the deterrence necessary to stop high-risk drinking before it starts.

Increasingly, research evidence is supporting party intervention measures that include enforcement components to reduce problems. For example, a recent study evaluating the effect of social host ordinances (laws aimed at holding party hosts responsible for serving alcohol to minors, noise, and costs associated with police calls for service, etc.) found that youths living in communities with social host policies were less likely to have attended large parties than those in communities without such policies.

Similarly, the Safer California Universities study examined party interventions in a randomized trial of 14 public universities in California. The study used a combination of compliance checks, driving under the influence (DUI) checkpoints, party patrols, social host “response cost” ordinances, and a social host safe party campaign combined with media strategies. These interventions protected against getting drunk at off-campus parties, getting drunk in general, and DUI. At each intervention campus, the intervention resulted in 900 fewer students drinking to intoxication at off-campus parties.

These studies, as well as experiences at campuses around the country, have found that implementing effective intervention strategies around off-campus parties will reduce the overall number of student parties and underage and excessive drinking, limit the availability of alcohol to minors, decrease alcohol-related problems for students and residents, and improve town-gown relations.

The Higher Education Center, in consultation with researchers and campus prevention practitioners, has developed a [checklist](#) to assist campuses and communities implement these effective, evidence-based strategies. Of course, this checklist is specific to those colleges and universities that have decided to address drinking at student parties on or near their campuses. Often, these institutions have collected data that

illustrate the types of problems experienced by students, neighbors, and campus officials related to such parties. Having such data serves two purposes. First, data provide the foundation for discussion among campus and community policymakers about the seriousness of the problems and gain their support to address these issues. Second, collecting data provide the means by which to monitor progress and evaluate prevention efforts. And linking student alcohol use data to the fiscal costs to campus and student academic retention and success, if possible, can be a very powerful tool to convince campus administrators that addressing such problems is a worthwhile investment.

Effective party interventions depend on having the right community and institutional policies both in place and enforceable. Many campuses and communities currently have these policies, while others may want to consider adopting and implementing them. Two of the key policies that provide campuses and communities with tools to get a handle on high-risk parties include social host liability and noise ordinances.

Social host liability refers to laws that hold noncommercial individuals responsible for underage drinking events on property they own, lease, or otherwise control. Whereas laws prohibiting furnishing alcoholic beverages to underage persons target individuals providing alcoholic beverages to underage persons, social host laws target providing *the location* where underage drinking takes place. Local governments can enact municipal (city or county) ordinances in a number of ways. For example, some ordinances make the social host liable for a misdemeanor, which is punishable by imprisonment. Other ordinances treat social host liability in the same manner as a minor traffic offense, that is, an infraction for which, although considered a criminal offense, incarceration is not a possible sentence. Still other ordinances, called response costs recovery ordinances, hold social hosts (including tenants) and landowners (including parents and landlords) civilly responsible for the costs of law enforcement, fire, or other emergency response services associated with multiple

responses to the scene of an underage drinking party or other gathering occurring on private property, whether or not the hosts or landowners had knowledge of the occurrence of the parties or gatherings. Costs associated with response services include the salaries of law enforcement or other responders and the costs associated with responders' medical treatment, repairs of municipal property, and the use of municipal equipment. Similarly, noise ordinances can be used to reduce neighborhood disruption due to large, unruly parties and allow all residents to coexist peacefully in a manner that is mutually respectful of the rights and interests of others.

An important campus-based policy is the development of a campus code of conduct policy holding students accountable for off-campus behavior. Since the preponderance of high-risk parties take place off campus, letting students know that if their behavior at these events violates the student code of conduct they will be held accountable for possible campus sanctions can be a powerful prevention measure. Of course, as the checklist points out, policies without enforcement will not have the desired effect of reducing problems related to high-risk parties.

This checklist provides a structure and a process based on research to implement specific measures to respond to specific problems. It is the hope of the Higher Education Center that campuses and communities will find this tool helpful as they develop strategies to reduce the multiple problems associated with off-campus parties to protect the health and safety of students and residents alike.

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Overview of Research on Effective Off-Campus Party Interventions

Two research studies that examined highly visible cooperative projects, in which colleges and their surrounding communities target off-campus drinking settings, found that these strategies can reduce harmful alcohol use among college students.

The Safer California Universities Project (SAFER) was a large-scale research project designed, implemented, and evaluated by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) with funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). This comprehensive community-based program focused on the first weeks of the academic year and was composed of several alcohol control measures (enforcement of underage sales laws, roadside DUI operations, social host party patrols with local ordinances) along with a multifaceted media advocacy campaign via channels unique to college student audiences. The program was implemented among campuses in the two California public university systems (University of California and California State University) and proved efficacious in reducing intoxication and alcohol-impaired driving among college students.

SAFER interventions were based on two guiding principles. First, universities cannot and should not “stand guard” over students—they are independent young adults who must take responsibility for their actions. Second, universities and surrounding communities have a responsibility to be absolutely clear about their expectations for every citizen's behavior, including students' behavior.

SAFER activities included educational campaigns that help students and others host safe social gatherings and know their responsibility as host for the safety and well-being of their guests and neighbors. SAFER also relied on fair but firm enforcement of existing laws that protect the community from alcohol-related harm through

driving under the influence (DUI) enforcement, party patrols to disperse dangerous crowds, and enforcement of laws prohibiting alcohol sales to minors. One important factor in supporting the interventions was accomplished by placing the burden of costs to those who repeatedly require community or police response—a “response cost” ordinance to allow police departments to recoup costs associated with responding to nuisance complaints.

To assess the effectiveness of the interventions, the researchers measured the proportion of drinking occasions in which students got drunk in various settings. They found significantly greater reductions in the incidence and likelihood of intoxication at off-campus parties and at bars and restaurants for students at the intervention universities. Students at intervention universities also reported a lower likelihood of drinking to intoxication the last time they attended an off-campus party, a bar or restaurant, or other drinking settings. The greatest reductions were found at universities with the highest intensity of intervention implementation, achieved through heavy publicity and highly visible enforcement activities.

“Nearly as significant was that we saw no concurrent increase in drinking at non-targeted settings such as parks, beaches, or residence halls,” said Robert Saltz, a senior research scientist at the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley and principal investigator for the study, in an NIAAA press release. “Some fear that more rigorous alcohol control measures will merely drive college student drinking to other, presumably more dangerous, settings, but that was not the case here.”

The Study to Prevent Alcohol Related Consequences (SPARC) was a randomized community trial involving 10 universities in one Southeastern state (five intervention sites and five comparison sites). The study, which was funded by NIAAA, sought to reduce high-risk drinking behaviors and alcohol-related consequences among students. This occurred by mobilizing a

campus and community coalition to use a community organizing approach for planning and implementing environmental strategies focused on modifying social norms, policies, and enforcement practices.

“We realized that high-risk drinking is not just a campus problem, and it’s not just a community problem. You have to look at the entire ecosystem,” said Mark Wolfson, professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Health Policy at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, Winston-Salem, N.C., and lead researcher for the study, in an NIAAA press release.

Each campus was asked to select and implement specific strategies that addressed alcohol availability, harm reduction, social norms (i.e., correcting misperceptions about the rate of high-risk drinking among peers), and alcohol price and marketing.

Several strategies were common to all campuses. These included approaches to restrict the provision of alcohol to underage or intoxicated students, increase or improve coordination between campus and community police, and establish consistent disciplinary actions resulting from policy violations.

Researchers found that a comprehensive environmental intervention implemented by campus and community coalitions reduced students’ scores on an index of severe consequences of college drinking. The index included items such as car accidents, DUIs/DWIs, the need for medical treatment as a result of drinking, physical fights, and sexual assaults.

The coordinated strategies of SPARC helped colleges and their communities protect students from the harms of high-risk drinking. The benefits extended campuswide, affecting not only the drinkers themselves but also those around them. Alcohol-related injuries caused by students decreased by 50 percent on participating campuses.

“This study adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting that strategic changes to the environment on campus and in the surrounding community can have an impact on high-risk drinking and its consequences among college students,” said Kenneth R. Warren, Ph.D., acting director of NIAAA, in a press release announcing the study findings.

Q&A With Toben Nelson

Toben F. Nelson, Sc.D., is assistant professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on health policy, organizational change, social determinants of health, prevention of alcohol-attributable harm, physical activity promotion, obesity prevention, and motor vehicle safety. He served as associate director of the College Alcohol Study at Harvard School of Public Health. Nelson is a Center Fellow at the U.S. Department of Education’s Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention.

Q: As a researcher who has been involved in evaluating alcohol problem prevention and interventions, especially in higher education settings, from your perspective, which have the most evidence regarding problem reduction?

A: In the field of alcohol problem prevention in higher education, we are fortunate in that there are a number of excellent reviews of the research literature. There are two that I think are the most relevant. First are the NIAAA [[National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#)] [College Drinking Task Force](#) recommendations, which were released in 2002 and updated in 2007. Those reports provide very clear guidance to colleges on what strategies and interventions are likely to be effective in reducing the harms that result from student drinking, which is our primary prevention interest. While those recommendations have been criticized for being somewhat outdated, the underlying research evidence is very strong, compelling, and current. Even so, the vast majority of prevention efforts at colleges and universities do not meet the criteria of having a strong research base—meaning those interventions that actually work. Colleges really do

need to pay closer attention to those recommendations.

In addition, the [[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)] [U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Community Guide](#) recommendations include two sets that are relevant for reducing the consequences of heavy drinking among college students—one on binge drinking and the other on alcohol-impaired driving, which is the leading cause of mortality and morbidity of college students. There is a tremendous amount of overlap between the NIAAA College Drinking Task Force and the CDC recommendations, underscoring where the evidence lies in terms of what is effective for reducing student drinking.

Q: Do you think that there is enough research evidence regarding these prevention strategies to warrant specific directives regarding what campuses and communities should implement when it comes to resource allocation and funding? Should the funders tell colleges what they should do?

A: For those who have resources to address the problems associated with student drinking, there is absolutely crystal-clear evidence on what ought to be pursued. Directives can come from outside groups or agencies that are funding prevention initiatives. They can also come from within campuses when they set institutional priorities. We now have a menu of options that are the most effective, have the broadest reach, and have the most potential for changing those factors that contribute to problems.

Q: In your study on how campuses are doing when it comes to implementing the NIAAA task force recommendations, you found that few campuses were implementing the Tier 2 evidence-based strategies that focus on environmental change. Why do you think campuses have been slow to implement these strategies?

A: Tier 2 strategies are those with strong evidence of effectiveness in community settings but have not been implemented or tested thoroughly in a college setting. There is, however, a lot of promise for implementing them in a college setting, even

though they primarily address alcohol availability in college communities and really fall outside the direct control of campuses. Colleges need to use different kinds of influence to implement those strategies. I think that is the major barrier in the way of getting some of those strategies implemented. Colleges are education institutions. In terms of prevention, they tend to focus on education approaches and creating peer social environments that may be less conducive to heavy drinking. Colleges have rarely focused on alcohol availability, which is what really drives the patterns of not only consumption among college students but also the negative consequences associated with that consumption.

Q: Nevertheless, colleges and universities often exercise political influence when it comes to zoning or other issues related to campus and university needs, such as expansion of facilities. They are not naive when it comes to understanding what kind of influence they have on the communities in which they exist. It seems that they are willing to exercise influence in some areas, but not so much when it comes to alcohol problem prevention. Why do you think this is the case?

A: Colleges tend to deal with prevention by assigning that task to a prevention or education coordinator, whose skills often lie in event planning and educational interventions, rather than locating it in the office of a president, for example. A chief of staff is rarely tasked with addressing problems associated with student drinking. What is needed are political skills and the ability to advocate beyond the walls of the university to effect changes in the wider community to make alcohol less available to students. Those skills and expertise are rarely brought to bear on this issue.

Q: What needs to be done to encourage campuses and communities, because this certainly a community problem, to implement those strategies?

A: First, it is important to recognize that problems associated with student drinking are problems of alcohol availability. Such recognition allows

colleges and universities to address that issue in their communities. But colleges face some important barriers to embracing that perspective. Again, colleges are education institutions with educational perspectives and they have not brought the right players with the right skills to the table in order to effect recommended changes. Other important barriers to implementing environmental, community-based change strategies are political. Often, university leadership—and those down the administrative chain—feel that there is nothing that can be done, or they are not willing to invest their political capital to really take on the issue of student drinking. But student drinking impacts the bottom line of a university and the standards of living in the university community and surrounding neighborhoods. Recognizing this may lead to more colleges embracing evidence-based prevention efforts and a greater willingness to expend political capital because of the potential gain for the university and surrounding community.

Q: Are there ways that researchers can better translate their findings on effective prevention strategies to encourage campuses and surrounding communities to move away from continuing to do those activities that are not effective?

A: It is challenging for researchers who have demonstrated large effects of interventions when community or campus representatives, who are considering implementing them, ask more nuanced questions about politics, strategy, and how to get things done in the messiness of the real world. Such questions do not lend themselves very cleanly to research. Researchers need to find ways to provide specific guidance and recommendations on how to navigate that real-world process to implement strategies on the ground. If there were more guidance documents to help people working on these issues connect those dots they may be more likely to take on those interventions that actually can work.

That said, there are some resources to help campuses and communities implement effective policies. For example, the [Higher Education Center](http://highereducationcenter.org) has developed resources that can help

colleges and college communities implement environmental interventions. At the [University of Minnesota Alcohol Epidemiology Program](#) we have guidelines on NIAAA Tier 2 recommendations on conducting effective compliance checks for preventing illegal alcohol sales and reducing alcohol outlet density in communities. These are a good start, but more needs to be done. Guidance is needed on the process of advocating for effective interventions around the low cost of alcohol available to college students, such as discounted alcohol prices or alcohol excise taxes. Campuses and communities need information on the nuts and bolts of how that works as well as how to make the strong case that those strategies, if implemented, will be effective.

Higher Education Center Resources

- [“College Party Intervention Checklist”](#) (April 2012)

Prevention Updates

- [Changing Policies on Campus](#) (May 2011)
- [Environmental Management Approaches to Reduce Binge and High-Risk Alcohol Use and Other Drug Problems](#) (June 2011)
- [Presidential Leadership for Prevention](#) (February 2010)
- [Social Host Ordinances and Policies](#) (January 2011)
- [Update on the NIAAA Task Force on College Drinking Recommendations](#) (December 2010)

Publications

- [Experiences in Effective Prevention: The U.S. Department of Education’s Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Models on College Campuses Grants](#) (2007)
- [Field Experiences in Effective Prevention: The U.S. Department of Education’s Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Models on College Campuses Grants](#) (2010)
- [The Off-Campus Environment: Approaches for Reducing Alcohol and Other Drug Problems](#) (2008)

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