

Kent State University currently has three grants that address undergraduate drinking.

Current Support from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism/National Institutes of Health

Principal Investigator: Dennis L. Thombs, PhD – Kent State University

Co-Investigators: R. Scott Olds, HSD – Kent State University
Juergen T. Rehm, PhD – University of Toronto
Susan Bondy, PhD – University of Toronto

Grant Number: 1 R01 AA014004-01A2

Title: A Prospective Study of Drinking and Academic Performance

Amount: \$1.0 million

Project Period: 08/01/2004 – 07/31/2007

Abstract

The existing research on the relation between undergraduate alcohol use and academic performance is fraught with design and measurement problems. As a consequence, there exists no strong policy rationale, based on academic considerations, for institutions of higher education to attempt to deter alcohol misuse among students. The research project will address this knowledge gap and hopefully establish a strong rationale for pursuing Health People 2010 national health objective 26-11b.

This prospective study examines the short-term relations between alcohol use and academic performance in freshmen and sophomore students, the years in which academic problems and dropping are relatively high. The study relies primarily on objective measures, rather than self-report measures, to assess both night-time drinking and academic performance. Throughout each of the five semesters of the study, breath samples will be collected from distinct panels of residence hall at night. In exchange for financial compensation, the night-time intoxication patterns of these panels of students will be linked to institutional measures of their academic work. The study will characterize nighttime drinking patterns based on repeated BAC observations collected over the course of a semester. Academic performance will be weighted to account for course difficulty and course load in the semester. The study will generate the best information available to date, on the extent that nighttime drinking impedes the academic progress of freshmen and sophomore college students.

Current Support from the U.S. Department of Education

Principal Investigator: Dennis L. Thombs, PhD – Kent State University

Co-Investigators: R. Scott Olds, HSD – Kent State University

Cynthia J. Osborn, PhD – Kent State University

Grant Number: Q184H030040-04

Title: Web-Based Delivery of Normative Feedback to Deter High-Risk Drinking in Residence Halls

Amount: \$298,772

Project Period: 07/01/2003 – 06/30/2005

Abstract

This research project tests an innovative social norms intervention designed to reduce high-risk drinking in two freshmen residence halls at Kent State University. Using web-based feedback, the project is assessing the effectiveness of providing anonymous, normative feedback to freshmen based on their blood alcohol concentration (BAC) data from the previous night. BAC data and other self-report data are being collected from students at night. Unique, anonymous identifiers are used to track the drinking in the intervention and control residence halls, without obtaining any identifying information from individual students.

Motivated by a weekly lottery incentive, students in the intervention residence hall can visit an access-restricted website the next day to obtain personalized feedback about their level of intoxication the night before and compare it to the BAC norm for their residence hall. The website has features that allow intervention students to ask questions about the project and about their drinking, without being linked to their BAC data. In addition, specific website pages exist to motivate ambivalent students in the intervention hall to seek help for alcohol problems, if necessary.

The evaluation of the project will focus on analyzing the differences between the intervention and control residence halls. The specific process and impact evaluation questions to be addressed in the proposed project include:

- a) to what extent will students in the intervention residence hall retrieve anonymous feedback from the website?
- b) is there a relationship between the frequency of feedback retrieval and nighttime BAC?
- c) does the web-based feedback system increase the number of students in the intervention residence hall who will seek assistance at the University Counseling Center?
- d) does the web-based feedback system reduce intoxication levels in the intervention residence hall?

Current Support from the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services

Principal Investigator: Dennis L. Thombs, PhD – Kent State University

Project Director: Scott Dotterer, MEd – Kent State University

Grant Number: 99-03402-HEDUC-P-05-0007

Title: Use of Normative Feedback to Reduce Alcohol Use Among University Students

Amount: \$50,000

Project Period: 07/01/2003 – 06/30/2005

Abstract

Alcohol misuse is prevalent among undergraduates at Kent State University (KSU). An April, 2001 survey of a random sample of KSU classes (N = 625 students) found that 55% had consumed five or more drinks (4 for women) on at least one occasion in the previous two weeks, 34% had missed class at least once in the current academic year due to drinking, and 28% reported a blackout at least once in the current academic year. These rates are quite high. *However, it should be noted that a majority of KSU students do not routinely engage in alcohol risk behavior.* Our social norm feedback intervention, known as the “Thinking About Your Drinking?” Campaign has been disseminating this important message to the KSU student body.

Important risk factors for alcohol misuse at KSU are the misperceived drinking norms that continue to be held by many students. This finding is consistent with a substantial body of research on adolescents and college students, and has led to the development of a social norms theory for health promotion. This theory contends that health behavior, including substance use, is influenced by the biased perceptions members of social group(s) have about how their peers think and behave. The theory predicts that when young people overestimate (or exaggerate) the prevalence of problem or risk behavior in their social environment, they are likely to change their own behavior to approximate the misperceived norm.

The social norms theory for health promotion is the conceptual framework used to design and implement KSU’s “Thinking About Your Drinking?” project. This intervention relies on social marketing techniques to deliver messages about the “true” norm, based on campus (local) data. Campus survey data are fed back to students in an “upbeat,” non-coercive manner using health promotion ads feature smiling, attractive students from the campus.

Our evaluation data show that prior to the initiation of the “Thinking About Your Drinking?” Campaign at KSU, 94% of the undergraduates overestimated their peers’ drinking behavior. After the first year of the campaign, the rate of

misperception decreased to 81% (based on our annual campus survey). After the second year, the rate of misperception decreased dramatically to 41%. The change from baseline to April, 2001 represents a 66% reduction in the overestimation rate among KSU students.

These changes in perceived drinking norms have not yet been accompanied by a detectable decrease in the amount of alcohol consumed by KSU undergraduates. The lack of measurable effect may be attributed to substantial changes in the characteristics of the last two freshman classes admitted to KSU. Since 2000, KSU has increased academic admission standards and has intentionally recruited more students who live two or more hours from campus. The result has been a sharp increase in residence hall students who take a full load of classes and stay on campus for the weekends. Furthermore, there are fewer part-time commuter students who live at home with parents. It is possible that these demographic changes have inadvertently contributed to higher rates of alcohol misuse, thereby masking positive effects of the "Thinking About Your Drinking?" Campaign. Regardless, the preliminary findings suggest that the "Thinking About Your Drinking?" Campaign has much promise for reducing high-risk drinking at KSU.

This application seeks renewal funding (totally \$50,000) to continue the "Thinking About Your Drinking?" Campaign at KSU, and to rigorously evaluate its impact on high-risk drinking using both self-report (anonymous survey) and objective (late-night, breath test) measures.