

Changing the Culture of College Drinking: The Student Voices Project

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Executive Summary

Background: The Student Voices Project (SVP) at Arizona State University grew out of two groups with an interest in college drinking on ASU's campus. First, the Alcohol Task at Arizona State University was given the job of better understanding ASU's alcohol use policy. This group identified the need for comprehensive data and recommendations for implementing the alcohol use policy on ASU's campus. The second group emerged to meet that need. This group came out of a project led by Dr. Linda Lederman in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication. Along with students in her health communication seminar, Dr. Lederman collaborated with Karen Moses and the staff at the Department of Wellness and Health Promotion to form the Student Voices Project. The SVP sought out and analyzed the student perspective on ASU's alcohol use policy as well as the general culture of college drinking.

Conduct of Inquiry: The SVP used a multi-methodological approach to obtain the student perspective on college drinking at ASU, including questionnaire data from the 2004 National College Health Assessment which made available through ASU's office of Wellness and Health Promotion; rhetorical analyses of websites, primarily myspace.com, to gain a better understanding of how alcohol use at ASU is discussed in public forum; and focus group interviews. The bulk of the SVP report consists of data from the focus groups regarding drinking-related experiences, including perceptions of ASU's alcohol policy.

Findings: Six major themes are discussed in the SVP report. The first three themes relate to the general context and culture of drinking on ASU's campus: *avoiding consequences*, *the spectacle of drinking*, and *safety issues*. The remaining three themes address specific needs of students in relationship to alcohol: *recognizing alcohol poisoning*, *policy backlash*, and *the need for improved resources*.

First Recommendation: ASU review the social activities that complement our dry campus policy and design a campaign to promote a new use of the phrase "party school" to capture them.

Second Recommendation: ASU continue to collect data on the effectiveness of the ban on alcohol on the campus policy position, including data on drinking and driving to determine if it is an unintended consequence of the alcohol ban.

Third Recommendation: ASU make its alcohol policy, including the ban on drinking on campus, work to protect the students consistently and to help students see why this policy works to their benefit.

Fourth Recommendation: ASU provide more comprehensive information about alcohol poisoning and what students need to do when they encounter it, including a clear understanding of the consequences for calling for help vs. the consequences of not.

Fifth Recommendation: ASU Alcohol Task Force should examine the complex question of the role of the University in socializing students who are of legal age and want to drink into safe drinking-related behaviors, and that the Task Force invite interested administrators to join into an examination of the role of a university in educating its students to make healthy life choices, including the use of alcohol, once they are of legal age.

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For Karen Moses, Director, Wellness and Health Promotion

Background

In early 2006, the Alcohol Task Force at the Arizona State University (ASU) was alerted to President Crow's continuing concerns about drinking on the ASU campus and what needed to be done to address the issue. One of his sources of information about the use of alcohol was a story that circulated about a conversation that the President had with a janitor who described the empty beer bottles that he routinely came across in his maintenance duties in one of the residence halls. This brief encounter became the critical incident (Flanigan, 1954) that was a pivotal factor in the impetus to address the issue of drinking on campus and to determine what the alcohol use policy ought to be on campus and how to implement and enforce that policy.

To address his concerns, the President formed a committee to review all aspects of the issue in their attempts to provide the President with a set of recommendations within a thirty day time period. One part of the efforts was a project led by Professor Linda Lederman of the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication together with the Ph.D. students in her seminar on Health Communication. Dr. Lederman and her students, in collaboration with Karen Moses, the Director, Wellness and Health Promotion and her staff, set out to identify what ASU students' alcohol-related behaviors and perceptions were in relation to University policy. Because of the powerful impact of the janitor's 'story,' a critical incident which became emblematic of concern

that administrators of institutions of higher education have nationally, the collaborators sought to see how, and in what ways, they might quickly capture another important set of perceptions on the campus: students' stories. The project was accordingly named the Student Voices Project. The purpose of this white paper is to trace the process through which the research was undertaken to address these concerns the methods used, the findings and the resultant implications. More specifically, this paper recounts the efforts of what became the Student Voices Project (SVP) at Arizona State University. Starting in March 2006, the SVP sought to identify and communicate the perceptions of college drinking, in relation to policy, through the eyes of college students. The specific research question guiding the Student Voices Project (SVP) was to examine how college students talk about their drinking behaviors, alcohol policies specific to their college campus, and ways to promote safer drinking practices.

One of the important contextual considerations of the impetus behind the study was Arizona State University's culturally-manifested image as a party school. ASU has consistently been named on lists of top party schools in the country, including being named #1 on the 2002 list and #3 on the 2006 list of Playboy's Top Party Schools. Closer inspection of these lists of top party schools revealed that it was only the Playboy Magazine list on which ASU appeared, creating a highly sexualized image of what was meant by party school (Thompson, 2006). This led the SVP research team to use multiple methods to attempt to answer the research question systematically. Using qualitative, quantitative and rhetorical methods, the SVP research team triangulated student voices in order to develop recommendations for the committee. In the following sections, this paper outlines the Student Voices Project along with a description of the research methods used. Additionally, because of the primary concern with student stories, this paper focuses most specifically on the perceptions, suggestions, and experiences that college

students communicated during qualitative focus groups. Finally, this paper concludes with some research-based recommendations for the ASU Alcohol Task Force.

Adapting to Student Voices

The Culture of College Drinking

Institutional perspectives on college drinking have already been well-documented. The Surgeon General indicates that the excessive use of alcohol continues to increase on college campuses nationally. In 1998, the National Advisory Council to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) established the Task Force on College Drinking. Reports commissioned by this task force confirm that alcohol-related problems continue to plague college campuses across the United States. The most recent information from this task force states that 54% of their 9,894 student participants had engaged in heavy episodic drinking, or consuming five or more drinks in one sitting (Hingson et al., 2003). Other, more current estimates from the Core Institute, a research and development organization for alcohol prevention, indicate that well over 80% of all college students nationwide drink and that half engage in dangerous drinking (Core Institute, 2006). Even more specifically, Nelson, Naimi, Brewer & Wechsler (2005) found that 46.5% of college students reported a recent episode of “binge drinking” (using Wechsler’s standard measure of five or more drinks in one sitting for males and four or more drinks for females).

Although this institutional perspective has been useful for establishing baseline data, the institutional perspective alone cannot account for how to communicate the dangers of excessive drinking and might even contribute to growing misperceptions about how much college students actually drink. By listening to student voices, researchers hoped to capture a clearer understanding of the *culture of college drinking* at ASU. Lederman (1993, 2002) developed this

construct to illustrate the shared images, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions that create a culturally-specific sense that drinking heavily in college is an inherent and inevitable part of the college years. In the culture of college drinking, heavy drinking is viewed as a rite of passage rather than a health issue or social concern. In this view, drinking excessively is simply something that exists, has existed, and will always exist as part of growing up.

Ultimately, the culture of college drinking is clearly a shared reality learned through drinking-related experiences, stories shared among students with one another, perceptions and many misperceptions of the behaviors and expectancies of one another, and a sense that belonging and bonding are so connected with drinking that the negative consequences are merely the admission price to belonging to the college culture. In turning to student voices as a means to understand the culture of college drinking, researchers can gain increased insights into college students' actual behaviors, their perceptions of alcohol rules and policies, and their knowledge of health outcomes including alcohol poisoning (Workman, 2005). In the following section we will describe how we went about collecting our data.

Methodological Considerations

The Student Voices Project used multiple methodological approaches in order to gather as many student voices as possible. By drawing from quantitative, qualitative and rhetorical traditions, researchers in the SVP used three different methods of collecting data in order to compare the findings: survey responses, focus group data, and persuasive strategies used to construct the culture of college drinking on ASU's campus. In doing so, the research team adopted a multi-method approach in order to understand more comprehensively what it means to consume alcohol as a college student.

Initially, quantitative analysis focused on questionnaire data from the 2004 National College Health Assessment (NCHA). Data was made available through ASU's office of Wellness and Health Promotion which collects data on this national survey on an annual basis in order to be able to compare drinking behaviors at ASU with those at institutions nationally. For purposes of our analysis, we focused on measuring the amount and frequency of alcohol consumed. The sample ($N = 532$) consisted of 105 first-year undergraduates (19.7 %), 91 second-year undergraduates (17.1 %), 134 third-year undergraduates (25.2 %), 125 fourth-year undergraduates (23.5 %) and 77 fifth-year or more undergraduates (14.5 %). Four hundred ninety three participants (92.7 %) were fulltime students. In addition, participants consisted of 338 females (63.5 %) and 193 males (36.3 %). Finally, participants had a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 76 ($M = 22.91$, $SD = 6.20$).¹

To add insight into our findings with the survey data, focus groups were conducted through which we could generate qualitative data regarding college drinking on ASU's campus. In conjunction with ASU's office of Wellness and Health promotion, participants were recruited to attend a 1.5 hour focus group interview to discuss ASU's alcohol policy, dangerous drinking behaviors including alcohol poisoning, and general college experiences in ASU dorms. Originally, the SVP focus groups called for a 2 x 3 research design [split between gender (male, female) and drinking habits (non-drinkers, moderate alcohol drinkers, heavy episodic alcohol drinkers)]. The research design was collapsed into two focus groups: female non-drinkers/moderate alcohol drinkers and female heavy episodic drinkers. This decision was made as a result of the time frame within which the interviews had to take place and the students who

¹ It should be noted that any analyses using the NCHA data should be interpreted cautiously. The questionnaire was not designed to answer our research questions, but the research questions of the NCHA. The selections provided to participants did not represent equal increments. In order to run the statistical tests to answer our research questions, we were forced to treat this data as interval level data, which assumes equal increments between selections. Please keep this in mind when interpreting analyses using participants' reports of 30-day alcohol use.

could be recruited. The students were interviewed using a structured interview guide. The guide focused on 5 major questions, each of which was probed to get full responses.

Finally, a rhetorical analysis was conducted to examine specific persuasive strategies and mediated representations used to construct the culture of college drinking on ASU's campus. Like so many students nationally, ASU students have become increasingly familiar with communicating via the Internet. As such, researchers focused on the relationship between ASU and alcohol as communicated on very popular Internet sites such as myspace.com. Moreover, rhetorical researchers also examined online discussion threads that referenced ASU and alcohol consumption. In the following section, the results of this multi-method study are reported. The data that provided the best insights into students' thinking came from the focus group interviews in which students reported on their understanding and use of ASU's alcohol policy, their reactions to incidents of dangerous drinking, and their suggestions for ways to improve students' use of alcohol.

In Their Own Words: An Analysis of Student Voices

Laying the Groundwork

The necessary background information to understand the data collected in the focus group interviews came from the analyses of the quantitative and rhetorical data generated in the National College Health Survey and the analysis of Internet sites. To provide the context to understand the analysis of the focus group data, the paper begins with key findings of the quantitative and rhetorical portions of the SVP. In terms of quantitative results, analyses were conducted to determine whether participants' year in school was related to their drinking behavior. More specifically, researchers were interested in determining whether participants' year in school was related to their reported alcohol use. Previous research has found that 1st year

students tend to be at much greater risk of partaking in dangerous drinking behaviors because they do not know their limits and use alcohol as a social lubricant when attempting to make new friends (Lederman & Stewart, 2005). To examine the relationship between year in school and drinking behavior, a series of analyses was conducted.

First, participants were asked to report the number of days they used alcohol within the 30 days prior to data collection. 1 meaning never used, 2 meaning have used but not in the last 30 days, 3 meaning used 1-2 days in the last 30 days, 4 meaning used 3-5 days in the last 30 days, 5 meaning used 6-9 days in the last 30 days, 6 meaning used 10-19 days in the last 30 days, 7 meaning used 20-29 days in the last 30 days, and 8 meaning used 30 days in the last 30 days.²

In order to test whether or not individual differences in participants' year in school were related to their 30-day alcohol use, a one-way ANOVA was computed. Results revealed that second-year undergraduates ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.91$) significantly differed on 30-day alcohol use from first-year undergraduates ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.90$), fourth-year undergraduate students ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.91$), as well fifth-year undergraduate students ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.57$), $F(4, 523) = 3.03$, $p < .05$. Assessment of the aforementioned mean values indicated that second-year undergraduates drank less days in a 30-day period than first-year undergraduates, fourth-year undergraduates, and fifth-year undergraduates. Specifically, second-year undergraduates reported drinking alcohol before but not in the last 30 days, whereas all other undergraduate grade levels reported drinking approximately 1-2 days in the last 30 days.

To conduct more in-depth analyses of ASU students' drinking behavior, participants were grouped into low, moderate, and heavy drinking groups based on the amount of drinks they

² It should be noted that any analyses using this scale should be interpreted cautiously because the selections provided to participants did not represent equal increments. In order to run certain statistical tests, we were forced to treat this data as interval level data, which assumes equal increments between selections. Please keep this in mind when interpreting analyses using participants' reports of 30-day alcohol use.

reported consuming the last time they socialized. Participants who reported drinking between zero and 1 drink the last time they socialized were categorized as low drinkers, individuals who reported 2-4 drinks were categorized as moderate drinkers, and individuals who reported 5 or more drinks were categorized as heavy drinkers.³

Participants were asked to indicate the number of days they used alcohol. Overall 15% of participants reported never using alcohol, 17% reported using 1-2 days, 13% 3-5 days, and 35% reported using alcohol between 6-30 days. A one-way ANOVA was run to determine whether low, moderate, and heavy drinkers differed in the amount of days they reported using alcohol in the 30 days prior to data collection. The ANOVA revealed a significant result, $F(2, 519) = 218.879, p < .05$. Post hoc analyses found that all groups were significantly different from one another. Heavy drinkers reported drinking most frequently (6-9 days), followed by moderate drinkers (3-5 days) and individuals in the low drinking group (0 days). These results provide some support that the classification system used in this analysis and subsequent analyses maybe more representative of students' typical drinking behavior than initially perceived.⁴

Additionally, participants reported the number of occasions within the two-weeks prior to data collection that they consumed five or more alcoholic drinks at a sitting. Logically, one would expect that heavy drinkers would report having consumed five or more drinks on more occasions than low or moderate drinkers. To test this assumption, a one-way ANOVA was computed. The results revealed significant differences among groups, $F(2, 523) = 144.543, p < .05$. A post-hoc test revealed that heavy drinkers ($M = 3.37, SD = 2.22$) reported drinking 5 or

³ It is important to recognize, however, that any conclusions drawn from analyses using this classification system is limited because it reflects participants' drinking behavior on *only one* occasion, which may or may not be representative of their typical drinking behavior.

⁴ It should be noted that any analyses using the 30-day use scale should be interpreted cautiously because the selections provided to participants did not represent equal increments. In order to run certain statistical tests, we were forced to treat this data as interval-level data, which assumes equal increments between selections. Please keep this in mind when interpreting analyses using participants' reports of 30-day alcohol use.

more drinks at one sitting on significantly more occasions during the two-week time period than did low ($M = 1.02$, $SD = .14$) or moderate drinkers ($M = 1.34$, $SD = .83$). The low and moderate drinking groups did not significantly differ from one another. These results suggest that heavy drinkers participate in dangerous drinking behavior more so than do low and moderate drinkers.⁵

Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether low, moderate, and heavy drinkers differed regarding their perceptions of the amount of alcohol the typical ASU student drank the last time they socialized. The ANOVA revealed significant differences among all groups, $F(2, 713) = 94.593$, $p < .05$. Heavy drinkers ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 3.52$) reported that the typical ASU student drank the most amount of drinks, followed by moderate drinkers ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 2.12$), and low drinkers ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 2.83$). This finding is consistent regarding the previous finding that participants perceived that the typical ASU student drinks more than they drink, with the exception of heavy drinkers. On average, heavy drinkers reported consuming 8.38 drinks the last time they socialized, while they perceived that the typical ASU student consumed 7.50 drinks. Moderate drinkers reported consuming 2.89 drinks, while they perceived that the typical ASU student consumed 5.44 drinks. Finally, low drinkers reported consuming .21 drinks the last time they socialized, while they perceived that the typical ASU student consumed 3.80 drinks. These findings support previous research that has found that individuals tend to think they drink less than others (Lederman & Stewart, 2005; Lederman, Stewart, Golubow, 2003).

These quantitative results suggest several insights about students at ASU. First, there is some support for Lederman and Stewart's (2005) claim that first-year students are more apt to drink. They posted significantly different scores from second-year students and similar scores to

⁵ However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously since the drinking groups were formed based on the number of drinks they reported drinking the last time they socialized. Although some support has been found for the classification system used in this analysis, we cannot be entirely confident that participants' last drinking occasion is representative of their typical drinking behavior.

third and fourth-year students. Moreover, these results also suggest that students at ASU who report heavy levels of drinking are also more likely to engage in dangerous drinking behaviors. Finally, these results support Lederman and Stewart's claim that perceptions of drinking are often over-exaggerated. In other words, ASU students perceived that most students drank more than they actually reported in the NCHA data. This is a key finding because it reflects that the image of ASU as a party school is not based in reality. These data at ASU are quite comparable to the data reported at Rutgers University, known as a safe school. More will be discussed about this in the section on recommendations.

Rhetorical analyses of online communities, namely myspace.com, also provided some necessary background information. Currently, ASU has the largest myspace college community, beating out other institutions like UCLA and the University of Central Florida. With 60,977 myspacers affiliating themselves with ASU, this online resource can offer great insights into how students rhetorically frame their experiences at ASU. That is to say, how students talk about their experiences at ASU regardless of the actual information they report on surveys. Not surprisingly, the topic of alcohol appears frequently. For example, Tony, a 24 year old male, serves as the leader of a group dedicated to all things ASU. His page includes a personal blog, a fact sheet, his interests, and all of the schools he has previously attended. As the group creator and leader, Tony frames the picture of ASU life that other members will view and perhaps recreate in their own posts. Tony's fact sheet reads: "Most missed memory: College life and everything about it. Ever drank: I went to ASU. Any other questions about drinking?" It is this sort of data that provides the backdrop for the focus groups because these sorts of messages are part of the rhetoric of drinking stories at ASU.

Another important aspect of myspace.com is the use of pictures. Members are able to post several pictures of their choice to which other members can respond. In addition, a picture usually follows a member throughout the site by appearing next to every post or comment that a member makes. Tony's pictures portray him in various college settings: drinking beer with his buddies at a toga party with a caption that reads, "This is what a pimp toga looks like." Other pictures include Tony vomiting in the toilet with a caption that reads, "Half a handle of Capt. Morgan" and a female friend with Tony at the beach with a caption that reads, "I'm wasted. Me and Dre, Mission Beach 8-19-05." It is clear through his picture selection, blogs, and personal fact sheet that Tony chooses to frame his time at ASU as a period of fun and partying centered around alcohol. His use of pictures and narratives acts as a story board of his experiences at ASU. Tony employs these stories strategically to attract other ASU students and alumni who share similar narratives. Moreover, his comments reinforce perceptions that ASU is a place for partying, consuming alcohol, and general debaucherous activities. An interesting parallel to this selective presentation of student life is the observation of many college health educators that the students who stand out are the party animals. Lisa Laitman, the Director of Alcohol and Other Drug Assistance Programs at Rutgers University, describes this as "the loud and highly visible drunk syndrome. No one notices the guy who nurses one beer. It just isn't as good a story to tell the student culture (Laitman, 2005)."

In addition to displaying personal pages and pictures, myspace.com also serves a site to make connections and learn more about life at ASU. For example, in a forum devoted to residential life on campus, one finds the following interchange. Blonde Bombshell posted "Any suggestions on dorms?" on February 21, 2006. Jay Ro responded, "I'll be drinking in pv east....it's nice, I got a tour in it." Blonde Bombshell responds, "East and west are pretty much

the same right? I toured it Friday and it didn't seem to bad...I think I might like it." Kevin responds, "Whatever you do, don't pick Manzi. Try to stay on north campus as possible, because most of your classes will be there. If you don't mind living in the prison, then you can think about staying in San P."

Finally, myspace.com also features public group pages where students can find out information regarding community events, parties, and weekend hotspots. For example, BGPartyGuyS posted on November 17, 2005:

WOW, last week we didn't even bother updating because nobody sent us any good parties, this week we have too many. We have 6 parties posted for Friday, and 2 for Saturday. We have more for Saturday but we have no room to post them. So we will post them Saturday morning after the Friday parties come and go. So go ahead and visit our myspace and read our blogs, and view our party boxes for the parties. All of them have mapquest/google map directions...we had so many we bumped off all the ones w/ just phone numbers. Have a fun weekend.

Individual members as well as clubs and bars post party information of the site that includes date, time, music, and driving directions. These parties are open to everyone who may happen to see them posted in the forum.

These rhetorical insights regarding online communities help to frame an understanding of ASU's drinking culture. For students who participate on myspace.com, drinking appears to be an important part of college life. Attending parties, finding the right dorm, and even spending time with your head in a toilet are all associated with attending this institution. With this background information in mind, the remainder of this paper focuses on the voices of students as communicated in qualitative focus groups.

Drinking and Campus-Life

The qualitative portion of the Student Voices Project reflects the results of two focus groups. Groups were recruited systematically and screened using an interview to determine inclusion/exclusion criteria. All of the recruiting procedures, screening interview questions, and focus group interview questions were reviewed and approved by the Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board before any of the interviews were conducted. To further protect students' identities, each participant was asked to select and use a pseudonym throughout the interview process. Seven female ASU students participated in one of two focus groups. The first focus group was comprised of three students who fell into the non-drinkers/moderate drinkers category. The second group consisted of four students who fell into the heavy episodic drinkers category. Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. Groups were interviewed using a structured focus group guide in which a series of questions were asked about ASU's alcohol policy, experiences with dangerous drinking behaviors, and the secondary effects of alcohol consumption. The questions were:

1. "What have been your observations about the use of alcohol in residence halls, and what are your reactions/thoughts/opinions about that alcohol use?"
2. "What have been your observations about the how students respond to alcohol intoxication emergencies, and what they consider in deciding how to respond?"
3. "In what ways do you think how some students drink affects others living in residence halls?"
4. "One of the issues that concerns some people is what types of strategies would work with students to decrease alcohol use in residence halls. Let's talk about your sense of the ways in which college students react to the current ban on alcohol use in the residence halls, and what needs to be done to reduce drinking in the halls. Will somebody tell us their thoughts on this?"
5. "What strategies do you suggest would work to make ASU a safe campus on which dangerous drinking was reduced?"

Using an iterative, constant comparative method of analysis, six dominant themes were mined from the focus group interviews. Of these six themes, three reflected general cultural norms and descriptions of drinking on ASU's campus. These themes included *avoiding consequences*, *the spectacle of drinking*, and *safety issues*. The remaining three themes focused more specifically on the needs of student in the context of alcohol. These themes included *recognizing alcohol poisoning*, *policy backlash*, and *the need for improved resources*. In the following pages, each of these themes will be considered in turn.

Avoiding Consequences. Initially, focus group participants expressed strong opinions about drinking on campus and avoiding consequences. They recognized the fear of getting in trouble as a primary motivator for not seeking help during dangerous drinking incidents.

Consider the following story related by Cameron, a participant in the non/moderate group:

I have an experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. I went to a Halloween Party. It was pretty far away. It was a big party in the middle of the hills at some house. One of my friends who is 6'5", a male, a 20 year-old male, was just ridiculous. Had alcohol poisoning for sure, like for sure. I knew he had alcohol poisoning...because he was throwing up for hours and hours. He couldn't talk. He couldn't see. His eyes were rolled back in his head. We had to carry him down the stairs. He couldn't lift...he had five people trying to help him walk, and he still couldn't walk, all because he was throwing up the entire time. There was nothing left to throw up and he's still throwing up and throwing up for hours and hours and hours, and he just didn't stop....That's alcohol poisoning...But, nobody would call the police. I was like, 'we need to call the police. We need to get an ambulance here right now, because we are far away and we need to get him to a hospital. He has alcohol

poisoning.’ I’m like freaking out and crying hysterically, but nobody will listen to me because nobody wants to get in trouble. Nobody wants to get in trouble, so they would rather have someone die than get in trouble... [No one wants to] get a \$500 drinking ticket – which I have – which is the only reason that he lived. People just don’t want to get in trouble, so they’ll do anything not to get in trouble, which does not make any sense to me at all. People drink, especially in college. After you turn 18, I don’t think that you should have to worry about calling the police.

Cameron’s story clearly demonstrated that some students will risk the life of a fellow student simply because they do not want to get in trouble. She revisited this idea later in the interview when she said, “People are afraid to do the right thing.”

Similar stories were shared in the other focus group. For example, Jennifer recounted an experience when her boyfriend had alcohol poisoning in her dorm room. Both she and her roommate were written up for the incident, even though neither of them had been drinking and her roommate came home in the middle of the commotion. She said, “They wanted to put *me* in alcohol rehabilitation. I was like, I did the right thing. He was gonna die, and now I’m being punished.” She said that other students have been put in the situation where they have to question if they are going to get in trouble for doing the right thing.

As these examples illustrate, students are concerned about the consequences for drinking underage and drinking in the dorms. In fact, they are so concerned about their own well-being and reputation, that some students will ignore another student who needs help. Although both Cameron and Jennifer took on the risk of paying fines and attending alcohol classes, they both suggested that they are the exception to the norm.

The Spectacle of Drinking. Participants in focus groups also mentioned the spectacle of college drinking as a concern on ASU's campus. The spectacle is perpetuated by both students and law enforcement agents. Regarding student behaviors, several participants mentioned that alcohol consumption is not the only problem associated with rampant partying on and around ASU's campus. For example, Casey, an exchange student from Mexico mentioned that she felt uneasy when a bus full of 40 scantily clad people spilled out on the lawn of her dorm. She said, "You do see drunk kids getting out of cars...but I had never seen a bus with 40 drunk kids coming out of it." She noticed that most of the female students were half-dressed and that the male students continued to touch them inappropriately. Other students also mentioned the spectacle that accompanies alcohol. Cameron said that she's seen everything from people throwing up to people sitting naked on a toilet while throwing up in a bathtub. Cameron also noted that "the themed parties are the ones that really get out of control." She continued, "The last party that I went to was called 'Dirty Disney.' Basically, you had to dress like a slutty Disney character." She also mentioned that at toga parties, "togas" turn into "tiny drapes" as she makes a draping motion across her chest and hips. Thus, the consumption of alcohol is not the only concern regarding student behaviors. The focus group participants seemed to suggest that other actions that accompany alcohol, including a lack of clothing and obnoxious behaviors, contribute to the spectacle of drinking and partying.

In addition to the spectacles perpetuated by college students themselves, several participants also referenced the spectacle created by law enforcement agents who are supposed to bring things under control. Jennifer commented on the spectacle made by the ASU police when her boyfriend had alcohol poisoning. She mentioned that 4 firetrucks, 3 ambulances, 8 cop cars, and every RA in the building were called in to handle one person. Furthermore, the Tempe

police eventually asked the ASU police to leave the scene because they were not helping the situation. She found problematic the way that everyone who walked by her room felt that they needed to be involved. Jennifer said that the structure and the commotion of making the call forces people to really think “at what point do I absolutely have to call?” Ultimately, focus group participants argued that drinking alcohol is not the only issue at play when students gather to party. Both the behaviors of students and the actions of law enforcement agents often escalate the situation and turn problems like alcohol poisoning into a spectacle.

Safety Issues. The perception of focus group participants is that both parents and university officials put rules about alcohol in place to protect the safety of their students. However, because students are not socialized safely about how to drink and because law enforcement agents appear to have mixed priorities, focus group participants were not convinced that safety is really the issue. Initially, several participants mentioned that students are not socialized into safe drinking habits. For example, Danielle, a dorm RA in the non/moderate group argued that there is no effective way for students to learn their limits when it comes to drinking. She said, “When you start drinking, you don’t know your limits. You’re not sure how far you should go before you’re really messed up. Especially if you’re taking shots, because that will really hit you later.” Jennifer suggested that this problem of unsafe socialization is exacerbated by rules about the drinking age, which set up the assumption that drinking is the most important thing that you will do. She says, “it’s bigger than voting; it’s bigger than driving; it’s so big that you’ll have to wait until you’re 21 before you can do it.” Lanka, an exchange student from Europe, echoed this idea, claiming, “When people get 21 here, they are so, they just get so crazy.” These comments allude to the idea that few students are taught how to drink safely. As such, institutions like ASU often face problems with dangerous drinking behaviors.

Participants also called into question the mixed priorities of ASU police, who seemed to be more interested in distributing drinking tickets than responding to safety calls. Cameron offered the most explicit example. She explained that she was never upset or angry for being written up or being required to attend classes. However:

I was more angry with the police, because I think they don't understand what is the most important thing – that is people's safety. They're main priority is giving drinking tickets and making money, when it should be the safety of the students. One time this year, my friend – we had just gotten home from a social, and she was in her bed. I don't even think that she was that drunk anymore...and her boyfriend came over. He was obliterated, but he's 23, so that's fine. He started being abusive, and hitting doors, and throwing things in our room. It was really scary, and we didn't know what to do, so we called the police. So, the police didn't do anything to him at all, nothing...nothing at all. And they gave everyone drinking tickets. So, the police leave. He comes back and starts doing the same thing. How does that help anything? They gave everyone drinking tickets and yelled at everyone for drinking, when that's not even the reason that we called them. We called them because we need them to get him away from us, because he was going to hurt us. And I feel like that happens way too much with the police around here – their priorities are not in order.

These examples reinforce the idea that safety is a concern on ASU's campus; however, neither students nor university agents understand what it means to be safe. Because there are few outlets for students to learn how to drink responsibly and because law enforcement officials appear overly concerned with issuing citations, meaningful discourse about safety seems to be lost.

Recognizing Alcohol Poisoning. The topic of alcohol poisoning was a key focus of the focus group interviews. When students were asked to recount any experiences involving dangerous drinking behaviors, many of the participants discussed their experiences with alcohol poisoning. Some of these experiences were personal, while others involved close friends and even strangers. When focus group facilitators asked participants to clarify how you “know” when someone has alcohol poisoning, myriad symptoms were offered. For example, Danielle said that “there’s such a difference between having 1-2 beers in the course of 3-4 hours and having 3-4 beers in the course of 2 minutes.” She referenced symptoms of alcohol poisoning later in the interview, claiming:

They’re not making any sense. They’re eyes aren’t focusing. You can usually tell by the eyes...you know, throwing up, yeah, I have a really sensitive stomach, so I throw up easily, but especially, if you ever get the dry heaves, really bad. Like I say, even if you yourself are intoxicated, you just know right when someone is way too drunk. It’s scary, and you, it’s just, I don’t know.

In an example used previously in this essay, Cameron pointed to symptoms like throwing up for hours, being unable to walk, and eyes rolling back in the head as clear signs of alcohol poisoning. Finally, Jennifer recognized signs of alcohol poisoning when she noticed the following symptoms in a friend: “he started sweating, he wasn’t coherent, he wouldn’t stop throwing up even though all of the alcohol was pretty much out of his system, he had extremely dilated pupils.”

Although there is some consistency in the symptoms recognized by the participants, namely excessive vomiting and incoherence, there is still much room for interpretation regarding the signs of alcohol poisoning. Participants suggested that vomiting might be one person’s

response to alcohol, while it might be a sign of alcohol poisoning in someone else. Moreover, as Danielle suggested, sometimes ‘you just know’ when someone has alcohol poisoning. Because of the gray area associated with signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning, there is a clear need for increased education about recognizing and reporting alcohol poisoning.

Policy Backlash. Aside from alcohol poisoning, discussion of ASU’s drinking policy was also a key component of the focus group discussions. Currently, ASU has a zero-tolerance policy regarding alcohol in the dorms and is considered to be a dry campus. However, the majority of participants in the focus groups suggested that students continue to drink in the dorms. Both Cameron and Danielle expressed problems with the alcohol policy. As Cameron suggested, “rules make you want to do it.” Danielle supported this argument, stating, “maybe enforcing these rules are gonna stop some people from drinking, but they’re gonna encourage other people to drink.” These statements start to call into question the extreme nature of ASU’s alcohol policy.

Similar comments were raised in the heavy drinkers group. Lanka stated explicitly, “if something is prohibited, people are going to do it even more.” Katie agreed with this assessment, claiming, “the more you tell someone not to do something, the more they want to do it.” Finally, Jennifer argued that making rules and punishments stricter will not decrease the consumption of alcohol in the residence halls. Rather, “kids will just get more sneaky...if you want to do something bad enough, you’re gonna find a way to do it.” Jennifer also questioned the apparent double standard regarding how alcohol is talked about in the dorms. She stated, “at my opening RA meeting, it was – when they got to the alcohol policy, they’re like, ‘now we’re not stupid. You’re in college. Most of you who are here for the first time, you’re probably gonna drink. But, if you’re gonna drink, don’t do it here.’” She expressed frustration at this

message, claiming “we’re a dry campus, don’t drink. But if you’re going to, here’s how to get around it.”

While ASU’s policy might be in place to bring dangerous drinking under control, the participants suggested that the policy actually serves as a point of resistance. Because ‘rules make you want to do it more,’ the zero-tolerance position that ASU has adopted might actually encourage some students to drink more dangerously. Thus, an extreme policy position is not the only resource on which ASU can rely to promote a safe relationship with alcohol.

Need for Improved Resources. Considering the previous themes of safety, recognizing alcohol poisoning, and ineffective positions on campus drinking, many of the participants expressed a need for improved resources. These improved resources took on a variety of forms including better education and smarter decisions about dorm assignments. In terms of better education, many of the comments revolved around the health consequences of dangerous drinking and the political consequences of violating alcohol policies. Amber, a participant in the heavy drinking group, suggested that education materials need to be “kind of like safe sex. You can’t keep us from having sex, but you can teach us the consequences.” Jennifer also brought up the need for better resources about recognizing alcohol poisoning. She said that after her boyfriend’s incident, signs were posted around the dorm. However, no one made a very big deal about them. She said, “it was a little sign on the front desk that said ‘signs of alcohol poisoning.’” Thus, ASU could continue to explore more effective methods of disseminating health information in a way that is meaningful the students they are attempting to reach.

Danielle also suggested that ASU needs to explore the idea of offering a safe place to learn your limits regarding alcohol. She suggested that ASU “have a place on campus where people can go and socialize and have fun. Have it be structured well to where if there is

alcohol...people aren't getting in trouble." She says that she does not mean that ASU should have a drunken cafeteria, but students need an outlet where they can go on campus to have fun where alcohol might be involved. She continued, "[Students need] a place to go and drink socially, but have it monitored so that if it ever gets out of hand, people can see right away what out of hand is....The biggest problem that I've always seen is that people don't know their limits when they first start drinking." While campus officials might not be open to the idea of offering alcohol to students on campus, ASU could provide a great service to students by helping them learn how to drink responsibly.

Finally, several comments from the heavy drinking group suggested that ASU needs to make smarter structural decisions about alcohol. The participants found ASU's position on alcohol problematic when everywhere they turned, alcohol was being advertised. Katie, a participant in this group, said "maybe if they don't want as many people drinking, one of the things that you can do is get rid of the liquor store that's right on campus." Jennifer added, "let's get rid of the drive-through liquor store that we can walk to from campus." The participants also mentioned that Mill Avenue has a lot of bars in close proximity to campus, which also encourages students to drink. They said that the issue is not that establishments like Jerry's Drive-through Liquors increases access, but that they create the allure of wanting liquor. These places remind you that you can drink – almost like these establishments are taunting you.

Moreover, the participants identified a significant problem in the way that ASU assigns housing. Jennifer noted that most dorms are mixed together in terms of sex/gender and age. There are 21-year-olds living on the same floor as 18-year-olds. Amber mentioned that this mixing is probably a big reason that underage students can get alcohol into the dorms. They just

send out the 21-year-old to buy it. Jennifer concluded, “if you want to decrease it, don’t let the 21-year-old live next to the 18-year-old.”

Clearly, the student voices who participated in these focus group interviews have a sense of both the use of alcohol on ASU’s campus as well as some suggestions for how to improve the health, safety, and drinking practices of ASU students. Although some of their suggestions might mean changes to ASU’s position on alcohol, they do raise meaningful arguments as to why that policy might not be as effective as ASU officials had hoped. Furthermore, they provided some immediate strategies that ASU health, wellness, and communication specialists can start to implement regarding the recognition of alcohol poisoning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the focus group interviews, in conjunction with an analysis of the data from the National College Health Survey and the rhetorical analysis of myspace.com, there are several ideas that we can recommend to the Alcohol Task Force:

First Recommendation: ASU review the social activities that complement our dry campus policy and design a campaign to promote a new use of the phrase “party school” to capture them.

Rationale: The first recommendation resulting from the student voices project involves ASU’s image as a party school. Based on the data from the NCHA survey, rates of alcohol consumption are very similar to those at other institutions in both frequency and amount, in that approximately 35% drink dangerously and almost 25% don’t drink at all, with most falling in the range of moderation. Take, for example, Rutgers University, an institution with which the first author of this paper is quite familiar. Rutgers is often referred to as a “safe” school as opposed to the “party” school image of ASU. However, when we compare both statistical data and qualitative experience between Rutgers and ASU, we find more similarities than differences.

The majority of students at both institutions do *not* drink dangerously, and almost 20% do not drink at all. Those who do engage in excessive, episodic drinking (i.e., dangerous drinking, Lederman et al, 1998) are approximately 1/3 of the students. While there is no doubt that the drinking behavior of 1/3 is a problem and needs to be addressed, it is far less widespread than the image of a party school would suggest. Thus, in creating – and possibly changing – an image or a culture on a college campus, our data suggests that alcohol is not the only issue at play. For example, ASU’s image as a party school is also tied to our climate, scantily clad students, and our ranking in Playboy magazine – a publication related much more to sex than to alcohol. Students who attend this university appear to value having a good time just as much as they value their education, and this characteristic manifests itself in everything from sex and alcohol to begging a teacher to have class outside. Our data supports the Wellness and Health Promotion Department’s hypothesis that it might do well to survey the social activities that complement our dry campus policy, and use them as the basis for a campaign designed to change the image associated with “party” from drinking to the wide variety of activities and events in which students engage at ASU to relax and have fun. As such, instead of fighting the image of ASU as a party school, administrators, policymakers, and health educators would be capitalizing on ASU’s image as a “party school” by linking it to an active and healthy image of the student population.

Second Recommendation: ASU continue to collect data on the effectiveness of the ban on alcohol on the campus policy position, including data on drinking and driving data to determine if it is an unintended consequence of the alcohol ban.

Rationale: We recommend that ASU policymakers and health administrators continue to collect data on the effectiveness of this policy position to ensure that the policy in place is the best

possible policy to ensure a safe campus. Within the literature on campuses that ban or allow alcohol on campus, there are data that support both positions. For example, Wechsler, Lee, Gledhill-Hoyt & Nelson (2001) found that colleges that ban alcohol do report fewer students who drink dangerously. Yet, the students who do drink heavily, drink even more heavily and engage in even riskier behaviors including violence, drunk driving, and alcohol abuse. Wechsler and his co-authors noted, however, that the results from their research should be interpreted cautiously, because they cannot be sure that there is a selection bias occurring at schools with an alcohol ban where students who prefer not to drink to begin with self-select for schools with a ban on alcohol. Because there is, therefore, no clear cut answer when it comes to banning or allowing alcohol, we recommend that close attention is paid to see if this policy actually works for the students on our campus and for our larger culture. In other words, we don't want to unintentionally encourage activities like drinking and driving simply because of our policy position. While we are well aware that considerable thought goes into the decision of whether to ban alcohol use on a campus or to allow those who are legally able to use alcohol to have safe campus places to drink, we suggest that continuous data collection and analysis on the topic are warranted.

Third Recommendation: ASU make its alcohol policy, including the ban on drinking on campus, work to protect the students consistently and to help students see why this policy works to their benefit.

Rationale: The next recommendation concerns ASU's alcohol policy as well. The students who participated in the focus group interviews expressed a clear resistance to the dry campus policy. In short, they didn't understand why it was in place; they felt that it is not enforced properly; they showed concern that it confuses the priorities of ASU police; they offered examples of how

people consistently work around the policy. Thus our focus group data led us to believe that students are often more engaged in finding ways to get around the policy than in understanding why it exists. And so if the University's data indicate that it is best to ban alcohol at ASU, it becomes imperative to help students understand why the policy exists. Should ASU administrators choose to stand by the ban on alcohol, then we, as a campus, need to do a significantly better job of making the policy work to protect the students and promote an active and healthy lifestyle. Students need to see why this policy works for their benefit. We recommend that the Alcohol Task Force review the ways in which policy is implemented and created a means for assuring consistent application of the policy.

Fourth Recommendation: ASU should provide more comprehensive information about alcohol poisoning and students need to do when they encounter it, including a clear understanding of the consequences for calling for help vs. the consequences of not.

Rationale: The fourth recommendation is related to the topic of alcohol poisoning specifically. Students in the focus group interviews noted several experiences where a friend or loved one had alcohol poisoning. They also reported mixed messages about the signs of alcohol poisoning and when you "know" you need to call for help. Because of the seriousness of alcohol poisoning, and the frequency with which students are faced with others who have had too much to drink, students need to know how to recognize the signs of alcohol poisoning. They also need to know what must be done and how to realistically assess the consequences of which they are afraid (e.g., getting into trouble, getting a friend into trouble, costing a friend a lot of money at the ER) against the consequences for leaving their friends who may suffer fatal injury from the alcohol in their systems. Since ASU does not subscribe to medical amnesty it must find some other way to help students know how to make choices that protect life.

Fifth Recommendation: The ASU Alcohol Task Force should examine the complex question of the role of the University in socializing students who are of legal age and want to drink into safe drinking-related behaviors, and that the Task Force invite interested administrators to join into an examination of the role of a university in educating its students to make healthy life choices, including the use of alcohol, once they are of legal age.

Rationale: Finally, our data suggest a recommendation that at once involves a complex issue and also requires examination of the University's role in the subject: socializing students who choose to drink into healthy drinking behaviors. Although a University that is public has to be quite careful to allow for the various values of its constituencies, there is a compelling reason to attempt to address this complex question: the majority of students become of legal age to drink while they are in college. As noted both in this focus group data and previous data collection (Lederman, 1998; Lederman & Stewart, 2005) students learn to drink from one another and what they learn is based on a "trial and error" basis which is fraught with danger. As such, students often go through an unpredictable and sometimes dangerous learning curve as they learn their limits with alcohol. We have a key opportunity to reach students and help them learn how to use alcohol safely, should they choose to drink. We are well aware that our Wellness and Health Promotion Department includes in its health education programs designed to encourage healthy choices. We suggest that it is worth asking the question what else needs to be done to examine the question of the role of the University in educating students who choose to drink when they are legally able to drink into healthy alcohol-related choices. While we are well aware that this is a thorny question, we also believe that it is a question that if addressed systematically might have impact on the dialogue at ASU and other institutions whose concern for the student body goes beyond what they are learning in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This report is respectfully submitted to the Alcohol Task Force in the hopes that the research we have been able to conduct helps the Task Force to advance the hard work it continues to do to make ASU a safe university and one that meets the public's expectations for an institution that takes pride in helping its students learn enough while at the University to become educated citizens of Arizona.

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