



A Matter of Degree

The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking
Among College Students

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NEW STUDY REVEALS REDUCTION IN DRINKING AND ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS AT COLLEGES WITH MULTIPLE PREVENTION POLICIES ON AND OFF CAMPUS

CHICAGO, IL – College students at universities participating in an American Medical Association (AMA) program, “A Matter of Degree” (AMOD), are less likely to miss class, be assaulted by a drunk student or hurt themselves after drinking, according to an evaluation conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and appearing in the October issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. The study also found a decline in the drinking rates themselves at colleges incorporating the most AMOD policies or “interventions.” AMOD, a program funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and managed by AMA, helps universities collaborate with their students and surrounding communities to reduce the environmental factors that lead to high-risk drinking.

The mid-project study found that five of the 10 AMOD colleges implementing the most environmental changes to their campus and community drinking environments saw significant reductions in drinking rates and in the problems caused by heavy drinking, compared to a group of 32 schools with similarly high levels of alcohol consumption and harm at the program’s outset that did not participate in AMOD. The five AMOD colleges employing fewer environmental changes did not see this type of reduction in consumption or harms, when compared to the same group of 32 schools.

“AMOD policies and programs work because they go beyond the traditional prevention efforts that focus solely on the individual drinker,” said AMA President-elect J. Edward Hill, MD. “Today’s college students face powerful social and commercial influences to drink. If we are to reduce the dangerous levels of campus drinking and its consequences, colleges and surrounding communities must cooperate to reduce the numerous environmental factors that contribute to alcohol abuse.”

Studies show that one-third of American colleges have a majority of students who engage in high-risk drinking—consuming four or more drinks in a row. Drinking by college students contributes to an estimated 1,400 student deaths, 500,000 injuries and 70,000 cases of sexual assaults or date rapes each year, according to a 2002 study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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HSPH's study analyzes 42 colleges between 1997 and 2001, of which 10 participated in the AMOD program: Florida State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Lehigh University, Louisiana State University, University of Delaware, University of Iowa, University of Nebraska, University of Vermont, University of Wisconsin and University of Colorado. The AMOD-funded programs continue at all of these schools except for the University of Colorado, which received its last funds in 2001.

Findings reveal that the five colleges that had achieved a high level of implementation by 2001 saw significant reductions not only in actual rates of drinking, "binge drinking" and "frequent drunkenness" relative to the 32 comparison schools, but also in the direct and secondhand harms of alcohol use including reports of:

- missing a class;
- falling behind in school work;
- vandalizing property;
- hurting themselves because of drinking;
- being assaulted by a fellow college student who is drinking; and
- experiencing an unwanted sexual advance by someone drinking.

"Levels of implementation were affected by numerous obstacles common on and around campuses: alcohol industry resistance, little or no cooperation from the community, lack of student support and high drinking rates common in the states themselves. But, the findings in this study validate the environmental prevention model and offer hope to colleges, universities and their surrounding communities seeking ways to confront the academic and public health problems caused by high-risk drinking—the more interventions or alcohol control activities, the greater reductions in secondhand harms," said Richard A. Yoast, Ph.D., Director of the AMA Office of Alcohol and other Drug Abuse, AMOD's national office. "Just as there are multiple reasons behind college binge drinking, there are multiple ways to counter it. The schools that have done the important work of instituting broad changes on and off campus to reduce drinking are being rewarded with a safer environment for students and the communities in which they live."

Some of the interventions that AMOD suggests for campuses, law enforcement and community residents and businesses include:

- alcohol advertising and promotion controls;
- keg registration;
- mandatory training for responsible beverage service;
- stronger, more consistent campus-university enforcement and police collaboration;
- curbs on selling alcohol without a license; and
- alcohol-free activities and residence halls.

"At the five colleges incorporating the most AMOD interventions by 2001, students reported a decrease in the 'ease' with which they could obtain alcohol—signaling a potentially important shift in alcohol availability that may be behind these first program results," said Elissa Weitzman, lead author of the study and Senior Research Scientist in the Department of Society, Human Development and Health at HSPH. "The real promise of the AMOD program is its departure from typical alcohol education efforts and its work to change the specific conditions that expose, encourage and enable college students to drink irresponsibly."

“The trends found in this first AMOD evaluation are encouraging for those interested in the health and well-being of American college students,” said Robin E. Mockenhaupt, Ph.D., Interim Group Director, Health at The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “This preliminary report shows that changing the social context of drinking for our university students may help create an environment conducive to academic progress, reduction of alcohol-related problems, and the secondhand effects of college student binge drinking.”

The research was supported by a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Henry Wechsler (Lecturer of Society, Human Development and Health at HSPH) was Principal Investigator for the study, and co-authors include Toben F. Nelson, MS (Department of Society, Human Development and Health at HSPH) and Hang Lee, Ph.D. (Massachusetts General Hospital).

About “A Matter of Degree” (AMOD)

The 10 campus-community partnerships of AMOD, a collaboration of the American Medical Association and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, go beyond traditional prevention efforts that focus on the individual drinker, recognizing that there are powerful social influences that impact individual decision-making. These collaborations of college administrators, elected officials, students, parents, law enforcement officials, concerned bar owners and community residents are working together to address this complex public health problem. For more information visit www.ama-assn.org/go/alcohol.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to quality health care at reasonable cost; to improve the quality of care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse—tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs. To this end, the Foundation supports scientifically valid, peer-reviewed research on the prevention and treatment of illegal and underage substance use, and the effects of substance abuse on the public’s health and well-being. Further information can be found at: www.rwjf.org.

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