

The 2004 National Social Norms Conference: An Overview

The 2004 National Social Norms Conference, which took place July 21-23 in Chicago, provided a wide array of presentations of benefit to practitioners, administrators, and stakeholders at high schools, colleges and universities, and community-based health agencies. The optional, pre-conference seminar, conducted by H. Wesley Perkins and Michael Haines, was the largest ever held, with nearly one hundred participants. This intensive seminar is designed specifically for those conference attendees who are relatively new to the social norms approach and who wish to gain a solid understanding of the underlying theory and its application to the field of health promotion.

With nearly thirty sessions, this year's conference was both large and extremely varied. A number of sessions were devoted to various aspects of project implementation, such as the use and analysis of focus group research, message and media development, market testing, and the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Given the large number of sessions and the wide range of material covered, this overview will be limited to a description of a number of key findings presented at the conference.

1. "Reducing Misperceptions of College Student Drinking Norms Lowers Risk: Results of a Nationwide Evaluation of Alcohol Abuse Prevention Efforts"

Presenters:

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Description of Study

Research conducted over the past two decades has consistently identified a wide range of negative consequences affecting a sizeable minority of college student drinkers, including various injuries to self, injuries to others, and institutional costs. Given the seriousness of the issue and the wide array of prevention initiatives currently available, it is critically important that colleges and universities be able to identify the correlates of alcohol abuse prevention programs that are actually effective in reducing alcohol-related harm. This session reported results of the largest nationwide study to date (data collected from **76,145 students** attending **130 colleges and universities** throughout the United States in the National College Health Assessment Survey between 2000 and 2003) assessing the extent of misperception among students about their peer drinking norms and the effectiveness of reducing these misperceptions in preventing alcohol abuse. Four critical questions were examined in this study:

- 1) How prevalent are the misperceptions of college student drinking norms across campuses nationwide?
- 2) How important are perceived norms in predicting high-risk drinking behavior?
- 3) What impact does exposure to alcohol education information in general have on the perception of campus drinking norms?
- 4) Do schools where alcohol education is associated with less misperception have less personal alcohol abuse among their students?

Results

- 71% of college students nationwide **overestimate** the level of alcohol consumption among their peers. No matter what the individual campus norm for drinking—be it low, moderate, or relatively high—a consistently large percentage of students erroneously believe the norm is to drink more than what is really being consumed by the majority of students.
- Students' **perceptions** of the drinking norm on their campus was the strongest predictor of the amount of alcohol personally consumed in comparison with the influence of all other demographic characteristics that commonly predict personal drinking levels.
- A student's **perception** of the norm is much more influential in determining his or her drinking behavior than is the amount actually being consumed by most other peers on campus.
- At over 90 percent of schools prevention program information is not associated with reducing misperceptions. Many programs actually inflate misperceptions.
- At schools where misperceptions of peer norms are lowered by exposure to prevention information, high risk drinking behavior and **negative consequences are reduced by as much as one-third** in comparison to schools where programs have no impact on or actually inflate misperceptions of the norms.

2. "Using Social Norms to Promote Health among College Student Athletes: Results from the HWS Most Valuable Players Project and the NCAA STARR Project"

Presenters:

H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges
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Sarah Dufresne, Assistant Director of Education Outreach, National Collegiate Athletic Association

Summary of Presentation

Although previous research has revealed higher rates of health risk behaviors among intercollegiate student athletes compare to other undergraduates, student athletes also hold exaggerated perceptions of the norms for student athlete alcohol and tobacco use much as these norms are misperceived in student populations in general. In 2001 two projects were launched as social norms interventions to test the possibility of reducing these misperceptions and promoting health among student athletes at Division II schools. The Most Valuable Players Project (MVP) developed at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS), supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, designed an intensive social norms intervention for student athletes modeled after the highly successful social norms intervention previously developed at HWS for students in general.

The MVP project included: 1) An anonymous web-based survey about personal attitudes, behaviors, and perceived peer norms that was conducted among student athletes at HWS, and 2) Print, electronic, and peer communication strategies promoting accurate positive norms to reduce destructive misperceptions (see <http://alcohol.hws.edu/mvp>). Adopting the HWS MVP model, The STARR MVP Project was implemented by the National Collegiate Athletic Association at five Division III schools throughout the Northeast and Midwest with annual data collection between 2001-2003.

Results are based on 1,1400 student athlete survey respondents in the HWS MVP Project and 3,487 respondents in the five-school STARR MVP Project.

Highlights of the results from the pre (fall 2001) and post (fall 2002/2003) comparison include:

HWS MVP Project:

- 46% reduction in the proportion of student athletes drinking more than once peer week
- 30% reduction in the proportion of student athletes reaching a BAC of .08 or greater when drinking at parties or bars
- 34% reduction in the proportion of student athletes experiencing frequent negative consequences due to drinking during the academic term
- 38% reduction in the proportion of student athletes using tobacco weekly
- A 2.5 hours per week increase in time spent in academic activities, on average, for each student athlete.

STARR MVP Project replication at five other NCAA Division III schools

- 18% reduction in the proportion of student athletes drinking more than once per week
- A reduction of almost 2 drinks, on average, for each student athlete per two week period
- 25% reduction in the proportion of student athletes experiencing frequent negative consequences due to drinking during the academic term
- 31% reduction in the proportion of student athletes using tobacco weekly

- A one-hour per week increase in time spent in academic activities, on average, for each student athlete.

3. "An Integrated Approach to Reduce High-Risk Drinking at Florida State University"

Presenters

Rick Howell, B.S., Project Manager, Florida Center for Prevention Research
Dina Wilke, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Florida State University School of Social Work
Michael P. Smith, B.S., M.P.A., Director, Florida Center for Prevention Research

Program Description

This presentation examined the impact of a three-year integrated approach to high-risk drinking at Florida State University (FSU), a large public institution with 37,000 students. FSU's determination is to change perceptions that drive behavior by revealing a more balanced picture of student life. Baseline data from the National College Health Assessment Survey (NCHA) revealed that 49.4% of students surveyed reported having four or fewer drinks the last time they partied/socialized; however, their perception was that only 24.7% of their peers were drinking a similar amount. In addition, 17.3% reported abstaining from drinking, while they perceived that only 1% of their peers were abstaining.

Primary Normative Messages have included: "Celebrating the University's Strengths," "Typical Student," and "Skeptical Bubble," a concept borrowed from Dr. Linda Hancock of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Primary Marketing Methods have been: Print Media: 1/2 page four-color and B/W ads in school newspaper, 18 - 1/2 x 11 four-color bus cards on campus buses and for use as posters at authorized posting locations around campus, 8x10 four-color prints of ads for distribution in freshman residence halls; Electronic Media: Backgrounds and screen savers on computer in campus computer labs; and billboards at locations around campus with high student traffic.

Project Results (Comparison of 2002-2004 NCHA Data)

Since 2002, high-risk drinking at FSU has declined 13.8 percent overall, with a 15 percent reduction among male students and a 5 percent reduction among female students. In addition, there has been a 21 percent increase in the number of students that reported abstaining from drinking.

4. “MOST of Us Prevent Drinking and Driving: A Successful Social Norms Campaign to Reduce Impaired Driving among Young Adults in Western Montana”

Presenters:

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H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges
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Summary of Presentation

The MOST of Us Prevent Drinking and Driving Campaign is the first demonstration of the potential of applying social norms theory to the problem of impaired driving in a large statewide population. This controlled social norms intervention was designed to reduce risky impaired driving behavior among Montana’s young adults aged 21-34. An initial campaign survey found that while only 20% of Montana young adults had driven within one hour of consuming two or more drinks in the previous month, 92% of respondents *perceived* that the *majority* of their peers had done so. Such a disparity between perception and behavior is precisely what social norms theory predicts, and by correcting this misperception, the MOST of Us Prevent Drinking and Driving Campaign was able to reduce the prevalence of impaired driving in its target population.

With funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), a 15-month media campaign was carried out in a 15-county intervention area in the western portion of Montana. This intervention area is home to half of the state’s 21-34 year old population. This quasi-experimental intervention exposed the selected counties to high doses of the social norms message, and then compared the resulting changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors with the eastern Montana counties that served as the control group. The treatment counties were dosed with high-intensity paid social norms radio and television commercials, theater slides, posters, billboards, local and college newspaper advertisements, and promotional items bearing social norms messages. Most of this media communicated the normative message that, “***MOST Montana Young Adults (4 out of 5) Don’t Drink and Drive.***” Additional messages focused on the use of designated drivers and other protective factors, and some were tailored to particular markets with county-specific statistics. A control area in the eastern half of the state was exposed to low levels of free social norms media, local and college newspaper advertisements, and promotional items as well as the fear-based messages commonly produced by other sources. Specific controls were instigated to eliminate or severely restrict the use of fear-based media efforts in the treatment counties.

A baseline and three follow-up statewide surveys were conducted at various points before, during, and after the campaign with a total of over 3,500 respondents. Analysis of this self-report data showed unequivocally that the high-intensity social norms

campaign improved the accuracy of the target audience's perceived norms and increased their healthy, preventative attitudes and behaviors regarding impaired driving. Compared to data from the control counties, statistically significant results among young adults in the targeted counties showed:

- An 8% relative decrease in the percentage who believed that the average Montanan their age drove after drinking during the previous month;
- An 11% relative increase in the percentage who accurately perceived that the majority of their peers use a non-drinking designated driver;
- A 14% relative decrease in the percentage who reported personally driving after drinking;
- A 15% relative increase in the percentage always using non-drinking designated drivers;
- A 17% relative increase in the percentage who supported passing a law to decrease the Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) legal limit for driving to .08%.

By the end of the campaign, young adults in the intervention counties were seeing the normative environment more accurately in comparison to their counterparts in the control counties. The reduction of their misperceptions about the pervasiveness of impaired driving among their peers led to positive changes in their personal attitudes and to a reduction in risky behaviors. In contrast, young adults residing in the control counties who were exposed to the traditional fear-based messages reported *increased* risks associated with impaired driving.

This research provides practical implications for traffic safety programmers, challenges widely-held assumptions about the efficacy of fear-based media, and signals the need for future research on the behavior-changing potential of promoting positive norms.

5. "A Community-Based Social Norms Campaign to Promote Positive Parenting Practices"

Presenters

William Bacon, Ph.D., Associate VP for Research and Evaluation
Michele Bayley, MPH, Director of Community Initiatives
Planned Parenthood of New York City

Program Description

Planned Parenthood of New York City has recently launched a community campaign targeting parents of teens aged 11-17. The campaign is intended to complement youth-focused programming designed to help young people avoid sexual risk-taking, including early intercourse. The parent campaign takes a social norms approach to promoting

positive parenting practices. An extensive community-based planning process was followed by focus groups with parents in the target community in order to identify specific practices that parents were using to help protect their teens from sexual risk-taking. This information then formed the basis of a parent survey, which was conducted with a randomly selected sample of parents in order to determine actual and perceived norms for each of the identified parenting practices. The survey identified large and pervasive misperceptions of parenting-related norms.

Baseline Survey Findings

- Perceived: 20% of parents always meet their teen's closest friends
- Actual: 65% of parents always meet their teen's closest friends

- Perceived: 25% of parents never allow their teen to go to parties at homes where they know there won't be any parents
- Actual: 78% of parents never allow their teens to go to parties at homes where there won't be any parents

- Perceived: 33% of parents always talk to their teen about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases
- Actual: 80% of parents always talk to their teens about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases

- Perceived: 30% of parents always talk to their teens about what might happen if she got/he got someone pregnant
- Actual: 70% of parents always talk with their teen about what might happen if she got pregnant/he got someone pregnant

- Perceived: 37% of parents always praise their teen when he or she makes good choices
- Actual: 87% of parents always praise their teen when he or she makes good choices

- Perceived: 37% of parents always tell their teen how much they care about him or her
- Actual: 90% of parents always tell their teen how much they care about him or her

The misperceptions found as a result of this survey informed the development of a social norms marketing campaign directed at the community. Follow-up data is planned for fall 2004.

6. "Male College Students' Willingness to Prevent Rape: The Impact of Personal Attitudes, Referent Group Norms, and Peer Educators"

Presenters

Jerold L. Stein, Ed.D. Dean of Students, Stony Brook University
Jeffrey A. Barnett, Academic Advisor, Stony Brook University

Program Description

This session was devoted to a discussion of the predictors of male college students' willingness to prevent rape in the context of social norms and peer influence theories. It included an overview of the theoretical and conceptual socio-cultural models of human behavior reported by Dewey (1916), Astin (1993), Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) and Gladwell (2000) in the context of rape prevention programming. Results were reported of a research study on a college campus examining factors (actual norms; referent group norms; and exposure to peer educators) that contribute to male college students' Willingness to Prevent Rape (WPR). The researchers also examined the difference between actual and the perceptions of referent group norms.

Findings

Consistent with findings of other research studies and through data analysis, seven themes emerged from this study:

- The potent influence of the peer group and other socio-cultural variables
- That most men are uncomfortable with rape supportive attitudes and behaviors
- That many men underestimate their peers' willingness to prevent rape and their disapproval of rape supportive myths
- That most men believe that men need to play a role in rape prevention and are willing to prevent rape
- Men's willingness to prevent rape is consistent with masculine ideals, e.g., being "protective"
- How men define rape may be a critical factor in men's willingness to prevent rape
- Ethnic differences are evident

Ancillary findings

- 71% of the men said that men and women need to share equally the responsibility for preventing rape
- Nearly 86% of the men indicated that either men alone or women and men need to share equally the responsibility for preventing rape