



## PREVENTION UPDATE

### The Role of Media in Prevention

#### Overview

Tobacco control efforts in the early 1990s, such as the [ASSIST](#) program, recognized the importance of mass media intervention in the environmental model, along with community organization and mobilization through coalition building and policy advocacy. Since 1998, the [Higher Education Center](#) has recommended that colleges and universities embrace an environmental prevention model, which provides a framework for campuses and surrounding communities to create effective and sustainable change regarding problems related to alcohol and other drug use and violence. [Media-focused interventions](#) can be regarded as structural-level approaches insofar as media affect the environment in which people live. Media activities to support policy initiatives use well-designed media campaigns, especially campaigns that generate news coverage (sometimes termed *earned* media coverage), although the paid media approach is sometimes preferred to ensure prime-time and adequate coverage. Engaging the media strategically to bring attention to an issue or to promote a policy is known as media advocacy. Evidence from a [community trial](#) on alcohol problem prevention suggests that training in media advocacy can increase electronic and print media coverage of news events generated by local individuals, resulting in greater public and leader attention paid to specific issues as well as to local policies aimed at reducing alcohol-involved injury. Results indicated that (1) framing in media advocacy can increase coverage of news events generated by local community members, including volunteers; (2) increased news coverage can be generated for both electronic (television) and print media; (3) increased news coverage did focus public attention on specific issues in support of prevention components; (4) while there are different audiences/readers for the print (newspaper) and electronic (TV) media, both audiences are affected; and (5) media advocacy can be more effective than a paid public information campaign in increasing public awareness of alcohol issues.

[Campus media and communication](#) channels range from the formal channels of on- and off-campus newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts to the informal word-of-mouth communications that reflect campus norms and values. The media and communication environment on and off campus also influences perceptions about the role of drinking in college life. Media strategies are often key components of programs and projects aimed at preventing problems related to alcohol, other drug use, and violence. Typical activities can include information campaigns that try to raise awareness of the problem, usually with the intent of motivating students to avoid engaging in high-risk alcohol use, drug abuse, or violent behavior; social norms marketing campaigns that try to correct misperceptions of current norms regarding alcohol and other drug use and violence; and advocacy campaigns that attempt to stimulate support for institutional, community, or public policy change. Media strategies are also used to support enforcement activities. For example, the [2007 Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking](#) calls for communities to implement "an ongoing media campaign that makes people within the jurisdiction aware of existing policies and laws designed to restrict underage access to alcohol and the penalties for violating such laws." The 2002 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) report [A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges](#) points to the role that publicity plays in supporting implementation and enforcement of laws to reduce alcohol-impaired driving as well as underage drinking laws.

#### What the Evidence Tells Us

The NIAAA-funded [Safer California Universities](#) research study of college and community alcohol prevention strategies at 14 large public universities in California found that highly visible cooperative projects,



in which colleges and their surrounding communities target off-campus drinking settings, can reduce harmful alcohol use among college students. Policy and enforcement interventions were implemented in 2005 and 2006 at half of the universities, with the other half also monitored for comparison. Interventions included nuisance party enforcement operations, surveillance to prevent alcohol sales to minors, drunken driving checkpoints, social host ordinances, and use of campus and local media to increase the visibility of the interventions. The researchers measured the proportion of drinking occasions in which students got drunk in various settings. They found significantly greater reductions in the incidence and likelihood of intoxication at off-campus parties and at bars and restaurants for students at the intervention universities. Students at intervention universities also reported a lower likelihood of drinking to intoxication the last time they attended an off-campus party, a bar or restaurant, or other drinking settings. The greatest reductions were found at universities with the highest intensity of intervention implementation, achieved through heavy publicity and highly visible enforcement activities.

An evaluation of [Common Ground](#), a media campaign–supported prevention program featuring increased enforcement, decreased alcohol access, and other environmental management initiatives targeting college student drinking, showed that the media campaign’s phased design was quite effective in limiting student reaction to environmental initiatives. The increased awareness of formal alcohol-control efforts suggests that the media campaign and environmental management initiatives were successful in altering students’ perceptions of the alcohol environment and could serve as a model for future efforts in this regard. The substantial decreases in student-related noise complaints support the utility of this approach for positively affecting quality-of-life outcomes in off-campus neighborhoods.

### **Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities**

In 1996, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched an initiative called [A Matter of Degree \(AMOD\): The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students](#), an \$8.6 million program to reduce high-risk drinking among college students. The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study collected data on the AMOD projects from their inception and found that some sites were successful in reducing alcohol-related problems among students and in surrounding communities. One of eight key elements to the success of the AMOD coalitions was the use of media advocacy and communication strategies to raise both public awareness and support for environmental approaches to prevention. It was very important for the success of the AMOD coalitions to get people, both on and off campus, to understand that changes in the physical, social, and economic environment can, in fact, influence drinking behavior and related problems. The most successful AMOD coalitions understood the power of the media and used media advocacy and communication campaigns around different themes related to alcohol use to gain attention to both problems and solutions. It also helped coalitions with the political process necessary to effect policy change.

### **Related Higher Education Center Resources**

- [“A Campus-community Coalition to Control Alcohol-related Problems Off Campus: An Environmental Management Case Study”](#)
- [Last Call for High-Risk Bar Promotions That Target College Students: A Community Action Guide](#)
- [Raising More Voices than Mugs: Changing the College Alcohol Environment through Media Advocacy](#)

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