



## PREVENTION UPDATE

### Environmental Management Approach to Improve College Student and Community Relations to Reduce Binge and High-Risk Alcohol Use and Other Drug Problems

#### Overview

A central feature of the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention is the promotion of multiple prevention strategies that affect campus and surrounding community environments as a whole and can, thereby, have a large-scale effect on the entire campus community. As described in the [College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide: Environmental Approaches to Prevention](#), this approach reflects a public health perspective. A distinctive feature of public health is that it focuses mainly on communities, not individuals. A public health perspective stresses that problems arise through reciprocal relationships among an individual (host), a direct cause (agent), and the environment. In the case of alcohol problems, the direct cause is alcohol, and the environment is the social and physical context in which drinking occurs. Public health prevention strategies place particular emphasis on ways to shape the environment to reduce alcohol-related problems. Environmental factors influencing individual drinking decisions include how, where, and when alcohol is made available in a given community or setting. These factors are often governed by formal and informal policies, such as customs, traditions, and norms. For example, federal and state tax policies influence the price of alcoholic beverages and help determine their economic availability. A public health approach acknowledges that alcohol problems are ultimately linked to the larger social and economic system. A number of environmental management strategies are also applicable to the prevention of other drug problems. But fundamental differences in public policies governing the sale and use of alcoholic beverages—in contrast with illicit and prescription drugs—allow for a wider range of prevention strategies.

In outlining the [environmental management approach](#), the Higher Education Center has identified five areas of strategic intervention that are effective in altering the environment with respect to alcohol and other drug abuse:

1. Offer substance-free social, extracurricular, and public service options.
2. Create a health-promoting normative environment.
3. Limit availability of alcohol and other drugs.
4. Restrict the marketing and promotion of alcohol and other drugs both on and off campus.
5. Develop and enforce campus policies and enforce laws to address high-risk and illegal alcohol and other drug abuse and violence.

Implementing effective environmental strategies will be more likely if there is strong presidential leadership; a campuswide task force that includes a broad spectrum of faculty, staff, and students; engagement with the community through a campus and community coalition; and the active participation of college officials in public policy debates, especially at the state level. The Center offers an integrated array of services to help colleges implement these prevention strategies.

#### What the Evidence Tells Us

[“Reducing Drinking and Related Harms in College: Evaluation of the ‘A Matter of Degree’ Program”](#) provided the first empirical evidence that environmental prevention strategies can influence drinking among college students. The evaluation divided the AMOD program colleges into two groups based on their level of program implementation as of 2001. At the five program schools that incorporated more of the AMOD-



recommended environmental policies and programs, significant changes were noted in drinking and related harms. These reductions did not occur at the group of sites that implemented fewer of these changes, nor at the group of 32 comparison colleges. Examples of types of policies and programs found effective by the evaluation include the following:

- Mandatory training for responsible beverage service
- Requiring registration for purchasers of kegs
- Prohibiting the selling of alcohol without a license
- Keeping alcohol-related items out of student bookstores
- Expansion of substance-free residence halls
- Promotion of alcohol-free activities

“These initial findings show that when colleges and communities focus their prevention efforts on key environmental influences, they can produce measurable declines in alcohol consumption and harms among both drinkers and those around them,” said Elissa Weitzman, Sc.D., lead author and co-principal investigator of the study.

### Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

At the University of California Berkeley, where underage drinkers slightly edge out legal-age ones for the group with the most “alcohol problems,” such causes are addressed through collaboration between campus stakeholders. “If we all do a little bit, it’s greater than the sum of the parts,” said Karen Hughes, coordinator for [PartySafe@Cal](mailto:PartySafe@Cal), a health services program at Berkeley that promotes environmental prevention efforts and educates students about alcohol risk management, in an [Inside Higher Ed](#) article. The mission of PartySafe@Cal is to reduce harm associated with drinking in the campus area. While the scope of this harm is often underestimated, its unchangeable character is often overestimated. PartySafe@Cal has moved away from the “one-size-fits-all” approach for reducing alcohol problems. Along with an array of city and campus collaborators it puts resources into successful, evidence-based approaches. “The environmental management approach is yielding results nationally and at Cal. Evaluation from a six-year [statewide research project](#) found that Berkeley campus/community alcohol prevention efforts resulted in:

- “7% decrease in underage student alcohol consumption (“in past 30 days”) (2003-2008)
- 30% increase in undergraduates who did not consume alcohol in the past year (2003-2008) . . .
- 8% decrease in undergraduates reporting some kind of minor personal problem (such as missing class, memory loss, hangover, vomiting) at least once during the past semester as a result of drinking (2003-2008)
- 15-60% decrease in students who think it would be easy to very easy to find a variety of sources within two miles of campus where they could buy alcohol without showing an ID (2003-2008)”

### Higher Education Center Resources

- [College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide: Environmental Approaches to Prevention](#)
- [Field Experiences in Effective Prevention](#)
- [Prevention 101 Series](#)
- [Web Pages: Environmental Management](#)

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