



The U.S. Department of Education's

**HIGHER
EDUCATION
CENTER**

for Alcohol,
Drug Abuse, and
Violence Prevention

E-FACT SHEET

Presidential Leadership for Prevention

Most of the colleges and universities that have received U.S. Department of Education Models of Exemplary, Effective, and Promising Alcohol or Other Drug Abuse Prevention Programs on College Campuses grants credit strong presidential leadership for the success of their prevention efforts. In a widely disseminated report to academic leaders, the Presidents Leadership Group (a national group of college and university presidents that came together in 1997 to review various approaches for curbing student substance use and to develop a comprehensive plan of action) stated that college presidents should “use every opportunity to help keep the issue of student alcohol abuse at the top of the school’s agenda . . .”

With many colleges and universities currently facing budget crises, cutting classes, and reducing faculty sizes, getting a president’s attention on alcohol, drug abuse, and violence prevention can be a real challenge. But presidential support is now even more important if colleges and universities are to make headway in implementing evidence-based prevention strategies.

What Science Tells Us

While no research studies have been conducted on the role of presidential leadership in mounting effective prevention efforts *per se*, experiences from colleges and universities across the country led the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism’s Task Force on College Drinking to state that “although research can provide useful guidance to colleges and universities in addressing the consequences of high-risk student drinking, presidential leadership is crucial to set plans in motion and support the actions needed to reverse the culture of drinking on campus.”

What I Have Learned as a University President

At a meeting of the Ohio College Initiative to Reduce High-Risk Drinking on Dec. 10, 2009, Roderick J. McDavis, president of Ohio University offered his suggestions for addressing high-risk drinking based on what he has learned as a university president. They are as follows:

1. “Know the data for your campus as it relates to high-risk drinking. Work with your office of institutional research (if you have one) or division of student affairs to capture your campus’ statistics related to this issue.
2. Set clear expectations for addressing high-risk drinking on your campus.
3. Communicate these expectations to the campus community, to parents, to the student body, to incoming students, to your alumni and to the surrounding community.
4. Know the environmental factors that affect high-risk drinking on your campus. Every campus is unique and has different considerations.
5. Appoint a senior level person to be responsible for addressing high-risk drinking on your campus and for providing data consistently. Charge this individual with establishing a campus/community coalition to address high-risk drinking and to identify staff who will oversee the implementation of environmental change strategies.



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6. Develop measurable goals for reducing high-risk drinking. Involve students and others in developing these goals as we did through our day of dialogue.
7. Know that addressing this issue through policy alone will not bring about a long-term reduction of high-risk drinking behaviors. Students must feel included in this process from the beginning.
8. Hold students accountable for their behavior once clear expectations have been developed.”

McDavis exercised a leadership role in late 2005 when he appointed and charged a universitywide task force with making recommendations on responses to violations of the student code of conduct in regard to alcohol offenses. This report from the task force was shared at a “day of dialogue” held in late February 2006. This event was coordinated by the office of the dean of students, with over 150 people participating.

McDavis said, “We honestly discussed high-risk drinking at Ohio University and evaluated potential new or altered strategies for reducing it. As a result of the work of the task force and the day of dialogue, we decided that, rather than just focus on violations of the student code of conduct, our comprehensive strategy would need to encompass” areas such as discipline, intervention, communication, positive student engagement, and community development.

For more information on Ohio University’s prevention efforts, go to <http://www.ohio.edu/alcohol/>.

Presidential Leadership Award

Mark A. Nordenberg, chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, is the 2009 recipient of the Presidential Leadership Award, which is sponsored by the [Gordie Foundation](#) and [Outside the Classroom](#).

The \$50,000 award recognizes a college or university president who has given freely of time and energy to create an environment where learning and campus life are not undermined by alcohol abuse and underage drinking.

Under the leadership of Chancellor Nordenberg, the University of Pittsburgh has experienced significant progress addressing student alcohol problems in recent years. Its most recent outreach programs include [Pitt’s PantherWELL](#) peer health education program, featuring student-to-student programming; the Alcohol Task Force, leading to a new student recreation area, serving as an alternative location to night clubs and bars; and the launch of two successful public awareness campaigns encouraging students to celebrate responsibly when the university’s men’s basketball team advanced to the Elite Eight of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) tournament. These efforts led to a 61 percent increase in students who reported receiving information from the university on alcohol use and related problems.

A Recommendation for Higher Education

“Presidential leadership (both at individual colleges and in national higher education) is necessary to focus attention on college drinking and raise it higher on college and higher education agendas. The associations that make up the [Washington Higher Education Secretariat](#) should take a fresh look at this issue and not just let a few such as [NASPA](#) and [NCAA](#) do all the heavy lifting. College drinking is a problem for all of higher education.” (George W. Dowdall, professor of sociology at Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, and the author of *College Drinking: Reframing a Social Problem* [Praeger, 2009])

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