

Social Norms of Alcohol Use at Historically Black University

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Abstract

The authors surveyed 239 volunteer participants at one southern historically Black university using the Core Alcohol and Drug survey. The purpose was to document the overestimation (or misperception) of alcohol and drug usage rates at the selected institution and to compare reported rates to those noted at a predominately White university within close proximity. Analysis of the data indicated that participants' actual responses differed significantly from what they perceived to be the campus norm.

Introduction

Excessive drinking by college students has persisted over the last 200 years (Gehrig & Geraci, 1989; Straus & Bacon, 1953; U. S. Department of Education, 2003). Drinking patterns are noted to vary by demographics of the students and characteristics of the institutional environment. Research conducted in the last decade has demonstrated that college students frequently overestimate the amount of alcohol used by their peers (Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991; Haines & Spear, 1996; Hingson, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Students may justify their patterns of consumption, citing the perceived drinking behaviors of their peers as higher than their own.

Research suggests that students may use alcohol and other drugs as a response to a perceived social norm or environmental

misperception (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Compared to pressure by their peer groups, response to a social norm voluntary and individual-based. If students perceive that most students are engaging in a particular activity, the response is to conform to that social norm. Providing students with accurate and campus-specific information on the rates of drinking among their peers may affect the perceived norm. As a result, overestimations of alcohol use among peers decreases and actual consumption declines as a response to new social norms (DeJong, et al., 1998; Haines & Spear, 1996).

Although studies investigating social norms have been conducted for approximately 10 years at Predominantly White Universities (PWUs), there is a paucity of literature on this phenomenon at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The purpose of this investigation was to examine social drinking norms and students' perceptions regarding campus alcohol consumption at a HBCU.

Ethnic Comparison of Drinking Patterns

Presley, Meilman, and Lyeria (1995) examined students' ethnic backgrounds and identified social drinking patterns unique to each. A national study of 40,000 college students reported that the highest risk factors for alcohol drinking in college

include being White, single, male, and having a parent who drank (Lightenfeld & Kayson, 1994). The same study, African American students reported low alcohol consumption regardless of the institution they attended. White students attending PWUs consistently reported drinking significantly more than White students did at HBCUs.

Mielman, Presley, and Cashin (1995) surveyed over 12,000 students at HBCUs and found that students on average report 1.8 drinks per week compared to a reported average of 4.6 drinks per week at PWUs. Historically Black institutions also reported low rates of binge drinking, defined as five or more alcoholic beverage in one sitting during two weeks prior to completing the survey (Meilman et al., 1995) and low frequency of use compared to predominantly White academic institutions (Debro, 1991; Ford & Carr, 1990; Ford & Goode, 1994). In the Mielman et al. (1995) study, 22 % of students engaged in binge drinking at the HBCUs compared to 38 % of White students at the PWUs.

Social Drinking Norms

The concept of social drinking norms may be defined as a person's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings regarding his/her behaviors on what he/she perceives as normal, agreeable, or even expected within a particular social context (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986). In many situations, people's perception of these norms will influence their behavior (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, (CAMY) 2006). When individuals misperceive the norms of their group or think an attitude or behavior is more (or less) widespread than is actually the case, individuals may decide to engage in behaviors that are consistent with those false norms. Although alcohol

consumption differs by ethnicity on college campuses, a similar pattern of overestimation or misperception of drinking by peers is demonstrated in the current study.

Method

As part of an annual assessment of alcohol and other drug use at a selected HBCU, the Core Drug, and Alcohol Survey (Presley, Harrold, Scouten, Lyerla, & Meilman, 1994) was administered to 239 students. Volunteer participants were recruited through a convenience cluster sampling of the largest classes in the Education department. This strategy ensured a high return rate and a sample representative of the student body. Participants received information regarding the purpose of the study and consent forms were distributed. Data were collected during the 2004-2005 academic year, with Institutional Review Board approval.

Core Alcohol and Drug Instrument

The Core instrument was developed and funded by the U. S. Department of Education. Survey items are designed to identify and measure students' attitudes, social perceptions of use, consequences, background characteristics, and perceptions of the campus environment.

Using a Likert format, the questions ascertained self-reported alcohol use. The Core survey is also used to assess perceptions of alcohol use among students on campus by asking subjects how much they think other students are drinking. Responses are recorded on an individualized scanned form, which is

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analyzed by the Core Institute (1999 located at Southern Illinois University (Presley et al., 1994). Only data on self-reported alcohol use and participant's perception of overall campus alcohol use are presented in this paper. This data were compared and contrasted with national findings between PWUs and HBCUs.

Self-reported measures assessed by the Core Alcohol and Drug Survey indicated that the survey has construct validity. Test-retest reliability was estimated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. For items on alcohol use, the test-retest reliability was high with item correlations above .80 (Presley, Harrold, Scouten, Lyerla, & Meilman, 1993).

Statistical Analysis

Frequency distributions were calculated, cross-tabbed, and used for comparisons. The Kruskal-Wallis (*H*) test was utilized as a one-way analysis between subjects, designed to test mean differences with ordinal ranked data. The value of *H* was tested at the probability levels of .05 or higher by the chi-square (χ^2) distribution table.

Results

Participants

A total of 239 participants were enrolled in the study. Although other ethnic groups were represented, including Hispanic, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other, only data collected from Black and White students are reported here ($n = 219$). Participants' ages ranged from eighteen (18) years to fifty-three (53) years. Nearly half (46%) were in the age range 18-20 years. Eighty-one percent of the students were Black, and were 9.5% White (non-Hispanic).

The majority was single (68.8%) and female (59.7%). These demographics are consistent with data provided by the University's Enrollment Management office, suggesting that the sample was representative of the approximately 10,000 in the student body.

Drinking Patterns and Perceptions

The analysis of self-reported drinking patterns revealed that the average number of drinks consumed per week was 1.4 per sitting within a two-week span. The percentage of respondents who reported binge drinking was 22.4%. The response to the question about alcohol consumption within the last year (last 12 months) indicated that 98 (40.8%) did not drink or consume alcohol. In contrast, 59 (25.5%) of the respondents perceived that student's peers drank everyday.

Discussion

The results of this study support previous findings by Meilman, Presley, and Cashin (1995) that alcohol use at HBCUs is lower than at Predominately White Universities. The present study also demonstrates a notable disparity between actual alcohol consumption and the perceptions students' hold of their peers' usage. The authors found no comparable studies documenting this disparity at HBCUs. The findings are consistent with the numerous studies of PWUs (Presley, Lechliter, & Meilman, 1999; Presley, Meilman, & Lechliter, 2002). A study completed at a PWU in the same state as the present study noted that student norms and activities influenced the perception, frequency and amount of alcohol consumed by peers resulting in a higher consumption "to keep pace with their friends" (Wheeler, Wright, & Frost, 2006).

The Education Development Center (EDC) reported in 2002 that 89.2 % of students perceived a higher level of alcohol use among peers than actual drinking levels when students socialize with each other. In the same study, students perceived their peers to be drinking an average of nine drinks a week when the actual reported amount was 4.7 drinks. Results indicated that most students perceived peers “party” drinking with an average of 6.5 drinks, when actually the number was 3.4 drinks. Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) found the same disparity between actual drinking norms and perceived drinking norms on campuses nationwide. Studies evaluated by the CORE Institute (Meilman, Presley, & Lyerla, 1994; Presley, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1995) have also reported this finding and evaluated possible causes for these

lower alcohol rates on HBCU’s since the 1990’s, these results suggest a more recent and prevailing trend.

Research at other HBCUs on social norms associated with alcohol consumption is clearly needed. Use rates by students at these institutions remain below national averages. Advertising initiatives by brewers, local marketing, and distributors targeting African Americans may affect future drinking patterns and usage, however.

Implication for Counselors

College students may benefit from counseling to reduce or eliminate risky alcohol consumption. Students may establish a skewed schema or perception of college life and college drinking, believing that drinking is an integral part of the college experience, more so than reality. This skewed or inaccurate perspective is often times based on friends’ exaggerated stories and/or the portrayal of college life in the media (Strote, Lee, & Wechsler, 2002). This perspective,

built on misperceptions, combined with the often desperate need to “fit in” experienced by many late adolescents and young adults, frequently has a negative affect on alcohol consumption (Johnston, O’Malley, & Bachman, 2002). Students believe that if they drank, as they perceive other students do (following the norm); they will fit in and be accepted. The decision to drink while in college may be more challenging to students as HBCUs who are the first in their families to attend college and who have no point of reference. Counselors may emphasize the negative consequences of drinking that may adversely affect a student’s academic progress, graduation, and career prospects, the very goals that the family is supporting them to achieve.

Problematic drinking is a behavior with known genetic links and environmentally reinforced habits (Lightenfeld & Kayson, 1994). For this reason, it is suggested that counselors invest in resources necessary to identify and refer students needing assistance with alcohol related problems. Opportunities to provide information about alcohol and other drug counseling and education available to students include orientation programs for incoming freshmen and transfer students, welcome back to campus weeks, alcohol awareness month, alcohol-screening programs, and other outreach programs sponsored by university counseling and health education offices. School representatives may also share the campus policy on alcohol use on campus in their recruitment efforts.

Culturally sensitive media presentations, guest lectures, and classroom instruction and activities at HBCUs may prompt students to identify problematic family drinking and allow a forum to discuss physical, legal, and environmental

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challenges. Information about drinking and perceived norms should be shared with targeted groups such as student athletes, members and pledges of sororities and fraternities, and other student organizations. Such sessions can be facilitated by former athletes or distinguished members, respectively, who may also relay personal stories. Programs may need to be targeted for part-time and commuting students who do not avail themselves of resources on campus due to work conflicts or family obligations. Such programs may be created with students individually or at different venues and times which are more convenient to their schedules. All students regardless of traditional or non-traditional status should be informed of the campus health services or community resources available to them for alcohol and other drug problems. These strategies are currently being implemented or developed for use at the HBCU where the present study was conducted.

In addition to identifying problem drinking, it is helpful to consider psychosocial factors that lead students to problematic alcohol consumption. Issues such as the transition from high school, living away from parents, and wanting to fit in are all major concerns of nearly every new college student (Astin, 1993). Although alcohol may appear to be an easy way to contend with these adjustments, safe alternatives to drinking (i.e. intercept-group interviews, focus groups, and media influences along with exercise, reading, hobbies, volunteer activities, and socializing with peers in non-alcoholic environments) should be provided to students in both formal and informal college settings (Krueger & Morgan, 2005).

Conclusion

College counselors are in an ideal position to help educate students about actual alcohol related behaviors on campus and prevent student alcohol misuse. The personnel at college or university counseling and health centers should provide accurate information to students regarding actual student behaviors in a number of subject areas to avoid misperceptions. These topics could include alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, and sexual activity rates and practices. Newly released findings by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) reported that although African American students drink less, they suffer higher rates of alcohol related problems and behaviors (2006, July). CAMY's 2006 report also found that the misuse of alcohol, other drugs, and related behaviors decrease once students had accurate information and developed a more realistic perception of use.

High school and college preparatory counselors could also play a role in correcting student's misperceptions of campus behaviors. Frequently, students (or their alumni parents) choose a particular school due to its social outlets or "party" reputation (Astin, 1993; Colthurst, 1998). Sharing accurate information on actual alcohol use and misuse rates, as well as campus specific alcohol policies could assist in minimizing alcohol consumption and associated risky behaviors before students enter college. ♦

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