

## ***Social Norms: The Background***

There are two different but related kinds of norms.

One type, behavioral norms (also known as descriptive norms), refers to the most common actions or behaviors actually exhibited in a social group. Thus, the behavioral norm is what most individuals of a social group actually do.

The other type, attitudinal norms (also known as injunctive norms), refers to the most widely shared beliefs or expectations in a social group about how people in general or members of the group ought to behave in various circumstances.

The study of the powerful impact that norms have on both thought and behavior is a well established area of research in the social sciences, most especially in the fields of sociology and social psychology.

The specific application of social norms theory to college drinking was first suggested by H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D. and Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D. in 1986.

The findings from their college-based study<sup>1</sup> revealed a consistent pattern of misperceptions held by students regarding the norms of alcohol use among their peers. Specifically, students typically thought that the norms for both the frequency and the amount of drinking among their peers were higher than they actually were, and they generally believed that their peers were more permissive in their personal attitudes about substance use than was in fact the case. Correcting such misperceptions, these researchers suggested, might reduce heavy drinking and related harm.

These findings, along with concurrent research in the field of Wellness identifying resilience and protective factors and behaviors, revolutionized the field of health promotion and spearheaded the development of the approach now widely known as Social Norms. For many years, prevention efforts had focused almost exclusively on the problems and deficits of particular populations. The work emerging from those employing the social norms approach, however, began to demonstrate the effectiveness of promoting the attitudinal and behavioral solutions and assets that are the actual norms in a given population.

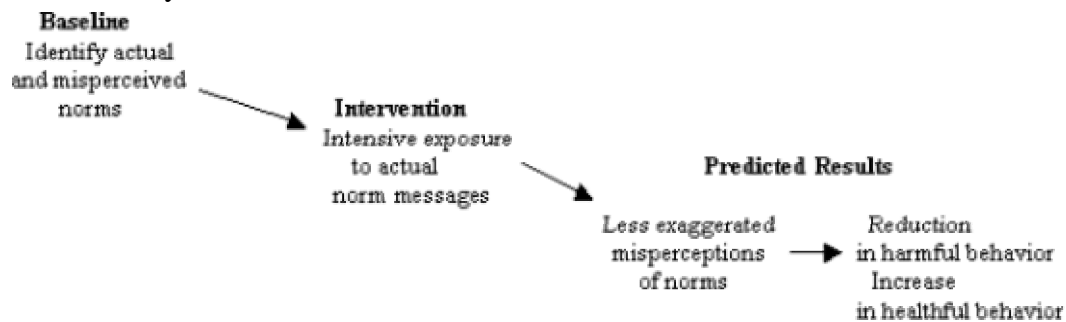
<sup>1</sup> H. Wesley Perkins and Alan Berkowitz. "Perceiving the community norms of alcohol use among students: Some research implications for campus alcohol education programming." *International Journal of the Addictions*, 1986:21, 961-976.

## ***Social Norms: The Model***

A growing body of research shows that a person's behavior is strongly influenced by incorrect perceptions of how other members of his or her social group think and act.

Essentially, the strategy of the social norms approach is to gather credible data from a specific population and then consistently communicate the truth about its actual norms of health, safety, and protection. With repeated exposure to a variety of positive, data based messages, the misperceptions that help to sustain problem behavior are corrected, and the population begins to adhere to a more accurately perceived norm of health and safety.

Schematically, the model works like this:



## ***The Effectiveness of Social Norms: Alcohol***

When properly conducted, the social norms approach is an evidence-based, data-driven process, and a very cost-effective method of achieving large-scale positive behavior change and harm reduction. This is especially appealing to those who work in the field of college health, many of whom have struggled for years trying to implement politically popular but ineffective programs.

As noted in the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's (NIAAA) Task Force Report on College Drinking (2002), "several institutions that persistently communicated accurate norms have experienced reductions of up to 20 percent in high-risk drinking over a relatively short period of time. Together these findings provide strong support for the potential impact of the Social Norms approach."

Examples of social norms projects at colleges and universities that have documented reductions in high-risk drinking by promoting the fact that most students drink moderately, if at all, include:

- Hobart and William Smith Colleges — 32% Reduction over 4 years
- Northern Illinois University — 44% Reduction over 9 years
- Rowan University — 25% Reduction over 3 years
- University of Arizona — 27% Reduction over 3 years
- University of Missouri at Columbia — 21% Reduction over 2 years
- Western Washington University — 20% Reduction in the first year

(For further information on these projects, see the [Case Studies](#) section of the Social Norms web site.)

The social norms approach has also been effective in reducing alcohol use among high school students. To date, two projects in this fast-emerging area have documented effectiveness:

- DeKalb & Sycamore High Schools — 30% Reduction in last 30-day use
- Evanston Township High School — 11% Reduction in last 30-day use

(For further information on these projects, see the [Case Studies](#) section of the Social Norms web site.)

## ***The Effectiveness of Social Norms: Tobacco***

The social norms approach has also been used to address tobacco use, not only in colleges and universities, but in high schools and in one statewide application as well.

Examples of effective projects include:

- University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh — 33% Reduction in students who report smoking
- DeKalb & Sycamore High Schools — 30% Reduction in last 30-day use
- Evanston Township High School — 25% Reduction in last 30-day use
- Montana Most of US — Significant reductions in uptake among 12-17 year-olds

(For further information on these projects, see the [Case Studies](#) section of the Social Norms web site.)

## ***Funding***

A small but growing number of U.S. colleges and universities—ranging from large, public institutions to small, private colleges—are using or have used the social norms approach to address a range of issues related to college student health.

Historically, all of the initial funding in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s in support of social norm interventions at institutions of higher learning came from the federal government. Specifically, federal support for social norms projects included:

- Replication studies funded by the **U.S. Department of Education (DOE)**
- Demonstration grants funded by the **U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP)**
- Research grants to test social norms from the **National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA)**
- Risk-reduction funding from the **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)**

As the number of social norm interventions grew throughout the country, additional funding sources were identified. Among them have been:

- The National Science Foundation
- Illinois Department of Human Services
- Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control
- California State University System
- Montana Department of Transportation
- New Jersey Department of Health
- Kansas Health Foundation

Lastly, the Anheuser-Busch Foundation currently provides funding to seven universities for the prevention and reduction of alcohol abuse problems among college students through the implementation of the social norms approach.

For a more extensive examination of the funding of social norms programs, including a discussion of the level and impact of the support provided by the alcohol beverage industry to a small number of universities, see:

[Social Norms: A Publicly Funded, Cost-Effective Approach](#). (Note: This is a pdf file.)

## **Research**

The research that has been published in peer-reviewed journals and other publications about various aspects of the social norms approach is extensive and continues to grow. The relevant research literature falls into three principal areas:

### **Over 37 peer-reviewed studies documenting misperceptions of peer behavioral norms.**

Many of these studies report college students' overestimations of peer alcohol use. These are studies based on both large and small size individual campuses, as well as on multi-campus studies. Misperceptions are prevalent among all members of the campus community—students, faculty and staff, and administrators. Misperceptions have also been reported for tobacco use, as well as for marijuana and other illicit drugs. The same pattern prevails among high school students, and has also been reported in statewide populations of young adults.

### **Over 14 peer-reviewed studies have documented that misperceptions (i.e., overestimations of peer use) correlate strongly with personal drinking behavior.**

These are studies based on both large and small size college campus populations, as well as on multi-campus studies. In addition, some of these studies are based on middle and high school populations, and one study reports the predictive effect of the misperception of peers' driving (DWI) and/or riding while intoxicated (RWID).

### **Over a dozen published studies documenting the positive effect of using the social norms approach to correct misperceptions.**

Many of these studies report on successful campus-wide projects using the social norms approach to reduce high-risk drinking among college students. Several studies report on successful projects targeted at specific segments of campus populations, focused on both alcohol and tobacco. One study reports on reductions in alcohol and cigarette use in two high schools. There are also several studies that report the use of the social norms approach to improve tax compliance.

In 2003, the first single-volume compilation of case studies and research articles was published by Jossey-Bass. Edited by H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians* is an essential compendium for those who want to know more about the social norms approach to health promotion.

For complete citations of the peer-reviewed research articles, case studies, and other literature related to social norms that are summarized above, see the [Research](#) section of the Social Norms web site.