

Social Norms is Effective: Wechsler Study Flawed

A study just published by Henry Wechsler et al. in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*¹ claims to question the effectiveness of using the social norms approach to address high-risk alcohol consumption among college students.

The professed aim of this study was "to determine whether schools that use social norms marketing campaigns experience reductions in students' heavy-drinking behaviors and to compare any observed changes with the experience of schools that do not use such programs." However, the method used to identify schools that employ social norms marketing programs was methodologically unsound. The only criterion used to identify such programs was the response to one item on a survey sent to school administrators in 2001. This sole relevant question "asked whether or not each school had 'ever conducted a "social-norms" campaign to decrease alcohol use and related problems on campus'; and if it had, the time period during which the program was conducted."

There are some obvious criticisms that can be made of a study that is based on such an ill-defined response category.

First, and most significantly, no other survey data was collected about the extent or quality of these reported programs, and the authors themselves admit that they made no additional efforts, such as campus visits, "to determine the content, scope and duration" of them.

For an administrator to report that it his or her institution has "ever conducted a social norms campaign" is *not* the same as saying that the school has conducted a comprehensive social norms marketing campaign. Increasingly, colleges and universities routinely incorporate positive norm messages regarding a variety of issues into student orientation programs, health education sessions, etc., and it is both important and appropriate that they do so. However, "using social norms" in this limited way is qualitatively different than conducting a comprehensive social norms marketing campaign. The latter necessarily requires a larger commitment of institutional resources. Both are valid, of course, and reflect the fact that each institution can only operate within the context of what it deems possible. Nevertheless, the fact remains that these important qualitative differences will be masked when a school administrator merely responds that his or her institution has "ever conducted a social norms campaign."

This point is additionally important because no attempt was made to assess what other programs or initiatives were in place at each school, some of which may well have mitigated if not actually counteracted the effect a properly conducted social norms marketing campaign.

¹ "Perception and Reality: A National Evaluation of Social Norms Marketing Interventions to Reduce College Students' Heavy Alcohol Use." Henry Wechsler, Toben F. Nelson, Jae Eun Lee, Mark Seibring, Catherine Lewis, and Richard Keeling. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 484-494, July 2003.

Second, the method employed in this study is arguably susceptible to the Rosenthal effect, where investigator expectancies inadvertently communicated to study participants may effect how respondents score in a study (Rosenthal, 1966), as well as to so-called demand characteristics, where participants in a study may reply to questions based on their perception of the goal of the investigation (Orne, 1962). Thus, an number of administrators—given the high-profile nature of the issue of alcohol on college campuses—may have felt compelled to respond affirmatively to an inquiry from the Harvard School of Public Health about whether or not they ever conducted "a social-norms campaign to decrease alcohol use and related problems on campus."

These two criticisms cast serious doubt as to whether this study actually does what it purports to do: i.e., measure the effectiveness of *social norms marketing interventions* in reducing college students' heavy use of alcohol. In the face of growing evidence of the effectiveness of the social norms approach, college administrators and health educators would do well to base their programmatic efforts on a full review of the literature.

The social norms approach remains the most effective, science-based intervention with an extensive and growing literature documenting its success.

Examples of successful programs with documented reductions in high-risk drinking and negative consequences include:

Hobart and William Smith Colleges — 32% reduction over 4 years

See: Perkins, H. W. and Craig, D. (2002) [A Multifaceted Social Norms Approach to Reduce High-Risk Drinking](#). Newton, MA: The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, Education Development Center, Inc.
Provides a comprehensive presentation of the Hobart and William Smith Colleges' Social Norms Project, which achieved a 30% reduction in high-risk drinking over 5 years. Contents include a complete description of program components, including data collection, print media campaigns, electronic media campaigns, curriculum development, and campus presentations.

Northern Illinois University — 44% reduction over 9 years

See: Haines, M. and G. Barker. "The NIU Experiment: A Case Study of the Social Norms Approach," (2003) in *The Social Norms Approach To Preventing School And College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook For Educators, Counselors, And Clinicians*, Ed. H. Wesley Perkins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
This book chapter presents the first applied experiment using the approach in a college student population. The experiment used print media and co-curricular activities publicizing actual norms to change perceptions and, in turn, documented a dramatic and continuing decline in heavy drinking among students.

See also: Haines, M., & Spear, A. F. (1996). ["Changing the perception of the norm: A strategy to decrease binge drinking among college students."](#) *Journal of American College Health*, 45, 134-140.

Rowan University — 25% reduction over 3 years

See: Jeffrey, L., P. Negro, D. Miller and J. Frisone. "The Rowan University Social Norms Project," (2003) in *The Social Norms Approach To Preventing School And College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook For Educators, Counselors, And Clinicians*, Ed. H. Wesley Perkins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book chapter reports a replication of the social norms intervention approach with print media at an East Coast university. Assessment results demonstrate that as exposure to campaign materials increased each year a corresponding reduction in high risk drinking was the result.

University of Arizona — 27% reduction over 3 years

See: Johannessen, K., "The University of Arizona's Campus Health Social Norms Media Campaign," (2003) in *The Social Norms Approach To Preventing School And College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook For Educators, Counselors, And Clinicians*, Ed. H. Wesley Perkins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book chapter reports on a replication of the Northern Illinois University print media strategy to reduce misperceptions that refined and further developed the production of media images and applied the strategy in a large southwestern university context. Again, a significant reduction in heavy drinking was the result.

See also: Johannessen, K., Collins, C., Mills-Novoa, B., & Glider, P. (1999). [A Practical Guide to Alcohol Abuse Prevention: A Campus Case Study in Implementing Social Norms and Environmental Management Approaches](#). Tucson, AZ: Campus Health Service, The University of Arizona.

References

Orne, M.T. On the social psychology of the psychological experiment: With particular reference to demand characteristics and their implications. *Amer. Psychol.* 17:776-783, 1962.

Rosenthal, R. *Experimenter Effects in Behavioral Research*, New York. Appleton Century Crofts, 1966.

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