

SOCIAL NORMS OVERVIEW

As the disease prevention/health promotion program of the University Health Service, Health Enhancement Services (HES) participates in the academic mission of the university by working to improve academic performance by removing or minimizing identified health threats to students. Topic areas addressed include cold and flu prevention & self care, sex and health concerns, and substance abuse issues. Our goal is to provide accurate and complete information to prevent disease and promote health.

HES has a theoretical approach to mass behavior change which uses a social norms model. This model asserts that student behavior is affected by their perceptions of their peers behavior. Specifically, if students perceive that their peers are drinking more than they actually are, there will be pressure to follow this imagined or false norm. In addition, there will be less support for the healthy norm already present within the population.

In order to identify these already existent healthy norms, HES has collected data that identifies behaviors associated with decreased likelihood of harm. HES, in turn, uses media to highlight these protective behaviors and norms. In this way, we are bringing attention to the protective behaviors students already exhibit. Described in another way, HES focuses media attention on the mostly full glass, instead of concentrating on the partly empty glass.

This social norms model has been used at NIU for 9 years resulting in a 44% reduction in heavy use of alcohol and corresponding reductions in harm (47% reduction in harm to self, 76% reduction in harm to others, and a 75% reduction in fighting). Other institutions including the University of Arizona, The University of Washington, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges have also successfully used this method.

More information is available on the HES web site at <http://www.stuaff.niu.edu/uhs/norms.htm> If you would like us to mail you additional information, please contact us at 753-9755.

YOUR PART IN A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH

1. Everyone can support the true norm of moderate alcohol use by NIU students.

Example:

True norm: most students drink moderately —————> False norm: most students were drunk last weekend

2. Faculty can participate in our spring assessment: Each Spring since 1989, HES has conducted an assessment of health related behaviors of NIU students. The results of this survey are used to support the health behaviors that are healthy and normative. Also, the survey results help HES decide about how to use a portion of the student health fee. The extensive HES data base on college health information provides opportunities for faculty to collaborate in analyzing, interpreting, and publishing the results of our annual assessment.
3. Faculty or student organizations can invite us to their class or meeting for a guest lecture: HES is able to address a variety of health and wellness issues. Call 753-9755 to discuss how we can work together to best meet the educational needs of NIU students.

REPORTING DATA

As is stated above, HES generally presents data from a "glass mostly full" perspective. We do this to support the majority of students who are practicing safer behaviors. Please be assured that this approach does not deny that there are alcohol-related problems for some NIU students. The glass is not full. Some students do need services from mental and physical health care providers, from law enforcement agencies, and others. We appreciate the work done by the individuals charged with serving those students who may require additional services for alcohol-related difficulties.

From the perspective of the mostly full glass, we are working to increase the "fullness" of the glass. We present this information to you in order to bring attention to and to support the safer behaviors that are already being practiced by most NIU students.

DATA HIGHLIGHTS: HES SPRING 1999 ASSESSMENT

The following data highlights from the 1999 HES Spring Assessment are not unlike many national findings regarding college student health. Other sources which identify national health norms include studies done by the American College Health Association, The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Harvard School of Public Health, and the Institute for Social Research (University of Michigan).

ALCOHOL

Students are more moderate with their alcohol use than what is often perceived or spoken of in public conversation.

- The mean “drinks at a party” for NIU students is 4 drinks.
- The mean “hours at the last party” is 4 hours.
- Most men drink an average of 5 drinks when they “party.”
- Most women drink an average of 3 drinks when they “party.”
- Most students did not experience physical injury to themselves as a consequence of drinking within the last school year (84%).
- Most students did not physically injure another person as a consequence of drinking within the last school year (93%).

When students drink alcohol they do the following in order to keep themselves safe:

- drink with people they know (96% always/usually),
- keep track of their drinks (53% always/usually),
- watch out for friends who may have had too much to drink (85% always/usually), and
- use a designated driver (74% always/usually).

SEX AND HEALTH

NIU students make healthy choices regarding safer sex. Each year, more and more students are choosing no sex or safer sex options, and fewer are experiencing STDs or unintended pregnancies.

Safer sex trends include the following:

- Condom use increased (60% use condoms always or mostly for protection during intercourse);
- STD rates dropped (98% did not experience STD during the last school year);
- Unintended pregnancy rates dropped (98% did not experience unintended pregnancy during the last school year); and,
- The number of students choosing not to have intercourse increased (up from 15% in 1996 to 28% in 1999).

Based on survey data collected by the University Health Service from a representative sample of NIU students (n =1,234). Do not cite without permission.

COLD & FLU

Although colds and flu are common, the good news is that most students make an extra effort to help prevent colds and flu by washing their hands more often (80%) and getting extra rest (80%). The Health Service also provides flu shots to protect students.

HEALTH & ACADEMICS

Although health status can affect academics, most students do not experience academic difficulties related to their health. The following shows the percent of students who reported experiencing an academic problem brought on by a health issue. The effect on academics most often meant receiving a lower grade on an exam or project, but also may mean receiving a lower course grade, an incomplete in the course, dropping the course or dropping out of school.

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|------------------------------|-----|
| Sleep Difficulty | 31% |
| Cold/Flu | 29% |
| Cold/Flu Complications | 18% |
| Alcohol Use | 17% |
| Sexually Transmitted Disease | 5% |
| Injury | 4% |
| Eating Disorder | 3% |
| Pregnancy | 1% |
| Sexual Assault | 1% |

TOBACCO

Most NIU students do not smoke at all. Of those who do smoke, more of them are episodic and/or non-addicted smokers.

- 66% do not use cigarettes
- 19% are episodic and/or non-addicted smokers
- 15% are daily and/or addicted smokers

For more information about survey administration or data analysis methodology, contact Health Enhancement Service at 753-1834 or 753-9745.