

Changing the Culture of College Drinking

The Student Voices Project

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Dr. Linda Lederman, in conjunction with students in her health communication seminar and Karen Moses and the staff of the Department of Wellness and Health Promotion, recently conducted a study of ASU students' perspective on the University's alcohol use policy as well as the general culture of college drinking at ASU. Members of the Student Voices Project (SVP) used questionnaire data and rhetorical analyses of myspace.com and other websites as well as focus group interviews conducted at the Institute for Social Science Research to analyze students' drinking-related experiences and the general culture of college drinking.

Analyses of the data revealed six themes; the first three are related to the general context and culture of drinking on ASU's campus, and the last three describe students' needs in relationship to alcohol use. These themes are:

Avoiding consequences – Fear of getting in trouble is a primary reason why students do not seek help during dangerous drinking incidents. Participants recounted incidents where they sought help for friends who experienced alcohol poisoning only to discover *they* would be punished -- behavior which forces students to confront the dilemma of whether to look out for their own well-being and reputation or the health and safety of another.

The spectacle of drinking – Another problem associated with student drinking is the spectacle that often accompanies it. This includes lack of clothing and inappropriate sexual behavior on the part of students as well as the spectacle created by law enforcement personnel. One student explained that when her boyfriend experienced alcohol poisoning, 4 fire trucks, 3 ambulances, 8 police cars and every RA in the dorm were called to respond to the situation. Such behavior also discourages students for reporting problems.

Safety issues – Students were not convinced that safety is the University's and law enforcement's real concern when they put rules about alcohol into place. Participants explained that students were not socialized regarding how to drink safely, and they believed that campus police were more concerned with issuing drinking tickets than responding to safety calls.

Recognizing alcohol poisoning – When asked about dangerous drinking, students focused on the topic of alcohol poisoning. They believe that excessive vomiting and incoherence were signs of alcohol poisoning, though few actually knew the signs associated with it.

Policy backlash – Participants said they believe University policy that forbids all drinking in the dorms and identifies ASU as a dry campus actually encourages students to break the rules and to drink. They also expressed frustration that dorm personnel indicated that they knew students would drink but that they shouldn't do it on campus.

Need for improved resources – Many participants expressed a need for improved resources for students, including better education for students and smarter decisions about dorm assignments as well as the provision of information about the health consequences of dangerous drinking and the political consequences of violating alcohol policies.

Based on their report, the SVP provided ASU with a list of five recommendations for responding to students concerns and experiences. These include:

- Review the social activities that complement the dry campus policy and design a campaign to promote a new use of the phrase “party school” to capture them.
- Continue to collect data on the effectiveness of the alcohol ban on the campus policy position, including data on drinking and driving to determine if it is an unintended consequence of the alcohol ban.
- Make the campus alcohol policy, including the ban on drinking on campus, work to protect the students consistently and to help students see why the policy works to their benefit.
- Provide more comprehensive information about alcohol poisoning and what students need to do to when they encounter it, including a clear understanding of the consequences for calling for help versus the consequences of not doing so.
- Examine the complex issues of the role of the University in socializing students who are of legal age and want to drink into safe drinking-related behaviors, and invite interested administrators to join into an examination of the role of the University in educating its students to make healthy life choices, including the use of alcohol, one they are of legal age.

A complete copy of this report is available at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/communication/people/faculty/lederman/documents/SVPWhitePaperPolicyfinal.pdf>.

* Members of the SVP team included Marianne LeGreco, Beth Babin, Lisa Farinelli, Bree McEwan, Jessica Nay, Tara Schuwerk, Jade Williams, Layne Owens, Alison Trego, Jian Yang, Christina Colp-Hansbury, and Sarah O'Colmain.

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