

Reducing Youth Drinking: *The “A Matter of Degree” and “Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions” Programs*

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Editors' Introduction

Drinking among young Americans is a serious health problem. Yet the familiar refrains of “Boys will be boys” and “We did it when we were young” make it difficult to focus attention on behavior that is a central factor in automobile fatalities, rape, unsafe sex, and suicide. In many ways, alcohol is the hidden health issue of the younger generation, obscured by the publicity given to tobacco, teenage pregnancy, and illegal drugs. The difficulty of bringing the issue to the public’s attention is compounded by a number of other factors: this country’s history of prohibition, which makes it easy to label those concerned with youth drinking as neoprohibitionists; the strength of the beer and alcohol industry; and the evidence that wine, taken in moderation by adults, is beneficial to health.

There have, however, been efforts—some of them successful—to raise public consciousness. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, spearheaded by mothers whose children were killed or injured by drunk drivers, had a stunning success in changing public attitudes toward drinking and driving. Along with Remove Intoxicated Drivers and Students Against Drunk Driving, Mothers Against Drunk Driving can take credit for legislation lowering the legal drinking age to eighteen and the legal limit of alcohol in the blood to .08 percent.

It was in this complex environment that The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation began, in the early 1990s, to address the harm caused by underage drinking, first by financing a survey of alcohol use and abuse in colleges and then by funding a series of programs aimed at reducing drinking from elementary school age through university level. In this chapter, Susan Parker, a freelance journalist specializing in health, religion, and business, examines the Foundation’s programs to curtail drinking among the young, particularly its two flagship programs: *A Matter of Degree*, and *Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions*. *A Matter of Degree* has provided funding to ten universities to develop programs that would make the environment on campus and in surrounding communities less hospitable to underage drinking and binge drinking. *Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions* has supported state-based coalitions of citizens working on youth leadership programs, public awareness campaigns, and innovative uses of public policy to reduce underage drinking. In this chapter, Parker looks at the history and the rationale of these programs, how they operate in practice, and the early findings from evaluations. She concludes by drawing lessons based on site visits and interviews with national experts, program evaluators, and participants in the programs.

It was Thursday night, the beginning of the weekend for many college students. Corey Domingue, a nineteen-year-old chemical engineering major at Louisiana State University, or LSU, and his friends headed to a nearby grocery store, where they bought hard liquor. When they arrived back at their off-campus apartment, Domingue was interested in partying. He opened a bottle of rum and began to drink rum and coke steadily. At around 12:30 A.M., he began to feel sick and started throwing up. A friend dragged him into the bathroom, where he fell asleep. At 4:30 A.M., a friend returned to the bathroom and found that Domingue was having trouble breathing. He called 911. Paramedics arrived and tried to revive Domingue, to no avail. He was rushed to a hospital, but workers there were unsuccessful as well. Domingue died of acute alcohol poisoning. He had consumed about a fifth of rum in just a few hours. His blood alcohol level was .43—five times the .08 legal limit for driving. He died in spite of having received warnings about the dangers of alcohol from his father, who is a recovering alcoholic. Corey Domingue himself had warned his younger sister not to drink.

Domingue was a former high school honor student and football star who was the first in his family to attend college. His death, in October 2003, was a senseless end to a promising young life. It was also a blow to LSU. The university has fought its image as a party school, and in recent years had been part of a national demonstration program, A Matter of Degree, funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to reduce binge drinking and the harm associated with heavy drinking among college students. LSU decided to join the program in part because of the negative nationwide publicity it had received over the alcohol-poisoning death in 1997 of twenty-year-old Benjamin Wynne, who died after consuming an estimated twenty-four drinks in celebration of a bid to his fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

At the time of Domingue's death, LSU Chancellor Mark Emmert told reporters, "We have spent so much time and so much energy trying to educate our students about the risks of binge drinking, and it was particularly painful to lose someone in such an obviously preventable way... We're seeing more and more students already engaged in binge drinking. They're not learning this in college. In many ways, they're already binge drinkers by the time they get here."¹

Drinking is the hidden problem of young people, obscured by the sight of kids smoking cigarettes and ads that target illegal drug use among adolescents. But alcohol is the most frequently used drug among young Americans. In 2003, some 75 percent of high school students had experimented with alcohol, compared to 58 percent who had tried cigarettes and 53 percent who had tried any illegal drug (including marijuana and cocaine).²

The consequences of alcohol use among underage young people are stark:

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for young people ages fifteen to twenty, and more than one-third of those fatalities involve alcohol. In 2000, alcohol-related fatality rates were nearly twice as high for eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds as for people ages twenty-one and older.³

- Alcohol is a central factor in most college rapes. About one in twenty women reported being raped in college and nearly three-quarters of those rapes (72 percent) happened when the victims were so intoxicated that they were unable to consent or refuse.⁴
- Alcohol has been associated with the early initiation of sexual activity and risky sexual behavior that places young people at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection, and unplanned pregnancy.⁵
- Among college students, almost half of the frequent drinkers reported five or more binge drinking–related problems, such as blackouts, fights, and missed classes.⁶
- The suicide rate among young people is increasing at an alarming rate. Alcohol use among adolescents has been associated with considering, planning, attempting, and completing suicide. In one study, 37 percent of eighth-grade females who drank heavily reported attempted suicide, compared with 11 percent who did not drink.⁷
- The earlier children start drinking, the more likely they are to be harmed by its use. Those who start drinking before age fourteen are twelve times more likely to be injured while under the influence of alcohol sometime in their life than those who start later.⁸

Binge drinking—defined by Harvard School of Public Health researchers as five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more for women—is a matter of particular concern. Students who binge drink frequently tend to get into fights, damage property, engage in unprotected sex, become victims of sexual assault, miss classes, and fall behind in schoolwork. Students who do not drink heavily but attend colleges where a lot of drinking takes place report that their property has been damaged by drunk students; that they have been pushed, hit, or insulted, or have experienced an unwanted sexual advance; and have had to cope with the aftereffects of someone else’s drinking, such as cleaning up a roommate’s vomit. Despite an overall decline in drinking in the United States, there has been no decrease in binge drinking on college campuses since 1993, when the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study first measured it nationally. “On many campuses, drinking behavior that would elsewhere be classified as alcohol abuse may be socially acceptable, or even socially attractive, despite its documented implication in automobile crashes, other injury, violence, suicide, and high-risk sexual behavior,” Harvard researcher Henry Wechsler and his colleagues wrote in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.⁹

Why the Importance of Addressing Underage Drinking Is Not Appreciated

Even though underage drinking, particularly binge drinking, has serious health consequences to the drinker, his or her roommates and neighbors, and the community, these consequences are not widely appreciated. One reason is that excessive drinking is sometimes seen as a normal part of late adolescence or, perhaps, a rite of passage. This “boys-will-be-boys” attitude is pervasive. One college administrator noted that when his school decided to participate in the A Matter of Degree program, alumni complained that the tradition was being sucked out of fraternities—that students should be left alone to have fun. Alums vilified college officials as trying to cut the spontaneity out of the place and hurting the campus climate. Students donned T-shirts saying that the program “sucks.” Parents worried that if the school succeeded in reducing drinking, their kids might turn to drugs.

At the University of Colorado at Boulder, students rioted over the program. At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Kevin Koss ran for student body president on the platform of getting rid of NU

Directions, the school's A Matter of Degree program. "I like to party and drink and I don't think it should be other people's job to legislate and regulate how we do it," said Koss, a junior who plays for the school's rugby team. Koss lost the election.

As these comments imply, those who seek to curtail drinking among young people are accused by some of being neoprohibitionists. John Doyle, executive director of the American Beverage Institute and a frequent critic of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded programs, wrote, "This movement is eerily similar to the movement that gave us Prohibition. Like the early 20th century movement, it is well-organized, it is self-righteous, and it has sympathetic ears in the media. And considering that nearly all of its supporters seem to be bankrolled in some way by the \$8 billion Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, it's even better funded than its pre-Jazz Age forbear."¹⁰ Dan Mindus of the Center for Consumer Freedom, a coalition representing restaurants and the food and alcohol industry, wrote that The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has turned alcohol providers into "public enemy number one, burdening them with restrictions and taxes to make their business as difficult and complex as possible."¹¹

It is probably not surprising that members of the alcohol industry have attacked these programs, since cutting down on the drinking of college students and other young people threatens their bottom line—as it does the bottom line of manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers (liquor stores and others who sell alcohol), bars, and restaurants. Together they make up a formidable opposition at local, state, and national levels.

The alcohol industry has been a daunting opponent at several Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded program sites. At Florida State University, for example, the local beer industry used its money and clout to derail a coalition to curb student alcohol abuse. Anheuser-Busch and others in the alcohol industry successfully challenged the coalition's plan to end underage access to bars, increase penalties for serving underage drinking, restrict alcohol marketing, and eliminate low-priced drink specials.¹²

Finally, unlike tobacco and illegal drugs, alcohol is not necessarily dangerous in limited amounts. In fact, the benefit to health of a daily glass or two of wine has received much publicity. Thus, it is the abuse, not the use, of alcohol that is dangerous. In addition, for minors, any consumption of alcohol is, of course, illegal.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Programs to Reduce Youth Drinking

In 1990, at the behest of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's new president, Steven Schroeder, the staff and the Board of Trustees re-thought the Foundation's broad goals. As a result, in 1991 the Foundation adopted as one of its goals reducing the harm caused by substance abuse. The following year, Henry Wechsler, of Harvard School of Public Health, came to the Foundation with a proposal. He had conducted small studies at New England colleges that showed an alarming percentage of college students were drinking heavily and harming themselves and others. He wanted to conduct a national study to see if these problems occurred at campuses around the country. At about the same time, a poll of college presidents named drinking as the number-one problem on campuses.¹³

As a result, the Foundation commissioned the College Alcohol Study, the first nationally representative survey of college drinking. Wechsler and his colleagues surveyed more than 17,000 students at 140 colleges about their drinking habits. They found that nearly half of the college students (44 percent) were binge drinkers and almost a fifth (19 percent) were frequent bingers. The study found that one of three binge-drinking students was already a binge drinker the year before college.¹⁴

The findings from the survey—which became the first in a series of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation–funded College Alcohol Studies carried out by Wechsler and his colleagues—generated nationwide media coverage. The studies were the first to document the extent of heavy drinking in colleges across the country. According to Wechsler, the findings influenced the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to give attention to this issue and the Surgeon General to make a reduction of heavy drinking in college a national goal.

In response to the College Alcohol Study findings and other data, in 1996 the Foundation funded two new National Programs to address drinking by young people. The first was A Matter of Degree, an \$8.6 million program designed to reduce binge drinking among college students by fostering collaboration between universities and the communities where they are situated. The program, which is scheduled to run through 2007, targets universities with a high percentage of students who are heavy drinkers. The second, Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions, an eight-year, \$10.2 million initiative, addresses the problem of drinking among even younger people, those in junior high and high school. The American Medical Association serves as the National Program Office for both programs.

Experts in the field of preventing alcohol abuse among young people tend to favor either an educational or an environmental approach. The former focuses on teaching young people, often through peer education, about the potential harm of alcohol use to themselves and others. If people have the facts about the problems that alcohol can cause, advocates of the educational approach say, then they may be willing to change their behavior. This approach is a comfortable one for educational institutions, including colleges, which believe in the power of education. It is also touted by the alcohol industry, which stresses individual responsibility.

A variation of the educational approach is a social-norms strategy. According to William DeJong, a professor of social and behavioral sciences at Boston University School of Public Health and a leading researcher on this approach, this strategy assumes that students have inaccurate and inflated perceptions of how much drinking is going on. Social-norms campaigns give students information about the realities of drinking, thereby reducing the influence of peer pressure to drink and reinforcing the behavior of most students, who purportedly drink either moderately or not at all.¹⁵

Both A Matter of Degree and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions largely employ an environmental approach. While education remains an important part of the programs, they primarily look to change the factors that influence young people to drink, such as easy access to alcohol and the failure to penalize illegal drinking. Both programs have relied on the establishment of local coalitions. “Conceptually, each program was based on the understanding that a public health approach had to be

at the core,” said Marilyn Aguirre-Molina, a former Robert Wood Johnson Foundation program officer who helped design the programs. “These are community issues and community problems that have community roots. You can’t do this in isolation.” According to Aguirre-Molina, research shows that educational programs, at least the traditional individually oriented ones, make little or no impact on drinking behavior. She noted that the Foundation hoped that the new programs would provide models of approaches that might work to reduce underage and binge drinking.

In designing these programs, staff members built on the Foundation’s previous experience, especially with tobacco-control initiatives that focused on changing environmental factors (by enforcing laws prohibiting sales to minors, banning smoking in public places, and raising tobacco taxes) and anti-substance abuse initiatives spearheaded by community-based coalitions.^{16, 17, 18}

A Matter of Degree and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions are the largest and most visible components of a more wide-ranging Foundation strategy to reduce young people’s drinking. The College Alcohol Study and A Matter of Degree focus on college students. The Center for College Health and Safety, also funded by the Foundation, uses the results from A Matter of Degree to create prevention projects at other colleges and universities. Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions concentrates largely on junior high and high school students. Another program, Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free, a coalition of thirty-four governors’ spouses and about thirty public and private organizations that the Foundation funds jointly with the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, looks to curb drinking among even younger children—those ages nine to fifteen. The Foundation also provides grants for a biannual national alcohol policy conference, where results and lessons learned from Foundation-funded programs are shared with policy-makers, opinion leaders, and experts in the field. Another program, The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, funded jointly with the Pew Charitable Trusts, monitors and analyzes the alcohol industry’s advertising practices targeted at young people.

A Matter of Degree

In A Matter of Degree, colleges with high rates of binge drinking were given the chance to apply for grants of up to \$700,000. The schools would form partnerships with their local communities to address alcohol abuse. The program also funded a media campaign that was aimed at deglamorizing student binge drinking. Between 1997 and 1999, grants were awarded to the University of Colorado at Boulder and the city of Boulder; the University of Delaware and the city of Newark, Delaware; Florida State University and the city of Tallahassee; Georgia Institute of Technology and the city of Atlanta; the University of Iowa and the city of Iowa City; Lehigh University and the city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Louisiana State University and the city of Baton Rouge; the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the city of Lincoln; the University of Vermont and the city of Burlington; and the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the city of Madison.

The universities and communities engaged in a wide variety of activities, among them working toward these ends:

- Eliminating alcohol-industry sponsorship of athletics and other campus social events.
- Eliminating the sale of alcohol during sporting events, limiting tailgate parties to pregame only, creating alcohol-free tailgate zones, and restricting alcohol sales at concerts and other on-campus events.
- Establishing higher standards for Greek organizations, including academic achievement, community service, and adherence to campus and community alcohol policies.
- Adopting policies requiring that parents be notified if their son or daughter violated campus alcohol policies or was arrested for an alcohol violation off campus.
- Addressing loud house parties and the disruption they created for residents of the community.
- Educating, in conjunction with area high schools, prospective students about the university's alcohol policies.
- Creating alcohol-free alternative social activities for students and expanding substance-free housing options.

The University of Nebraska's NU Directions

NU Directions, the project at the University of Nebraska's Lincoln campus, illustrates the range of activities taking place on one campus and in the surrounding community as well as the difficulty of trying to change deeply rooted social norms of heavy drinking in college.

Lincoln is in the middle of farmland, where, even though the university has a world-class music program and the city boasts a thriving arts community, the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers football team dominates conversation. The NU Directions coalition consists of more than seventy members, including university staff members, students, the Lincoln police chief, neighborhood activists, bar owners, and members of local nonprofit alcohol-prevention organizations, such as the city's detoxification center. The coalition is headed by James Griesen, vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Tom Casady, Lincoln's chief of police.

School and city officials knew that they had a major drinking problem to address. The College Alcohol Study had revealed that 62 percent of the students were binge drinkers. In Lincoln, liquor licenses were easy and cheap to come by, with more than 400 licenses registered in a city of 232,000 residents and 22,500 students. Students could choose from about fifty bars within walking distance of campus. When the Cornhuskers played at home, the city transformed itself into one big tailgate party. The university, which was a dry campus, had begun to crack down on parties at fraternity houses, but many students simply moved them off campus. In 1997, the year the program began, city police received 133 citizen complaints about parties at off-campus residences within a mile of the university. City police felt that they had little support from the community or the university in breaking up these parties, according to police chief Casady. "For ten years, we abandoned doing anything about drinking parties other than try and keep the cruisers right side up," Casady said.

NU Directions started with several advantages. The university had a long history of cordial relationships with the community. The original project director, Linda Major, was a long-time community

organizer whose contacts ran deep into Lincoln. Once the grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was approved, the coalition met for a year and created a strategic plan of thirteen goals and sixty objectives. It spent the next four years putting the plan into effect. The coalition worked in four broad areas described below, with varying degrees of success in each:

Social Environment

The coalition sought to provide alternatives for students who relied on heavy drinking as their social outlet. It sponsored events that proved popular on campus, including a homecoming party featuring a well-known band that attracted hundreds of students, and a Back to School Bash that included free pancakes at midnight, sumo wrestling, and dancing. The coalition also created a Nutodo.com Web site that provided information about Lincoln restaurants, theaters, nightclubs, recreation centers, sports arenas, and events. Vendors listed had to sign a “Responsible Hospitality Agreement,” in which they promised to work to prevent sales of alcohol to minors by training their staff in responsible hospitality practices, such as not serving intoxicated patrons and avoiding promotions that encourage high-risk drinking, such as offering cheap pitchers of beer.

Kevin Koss, who lost the election for student body president on a platform of eliminating NU Directions, was later appointed to the coalition by the incoming president, who felt that the group needed more of the perspective of the students that the project targeted. Koss’s opinion of the coalition has shifted, at least somewhat. “They have been pushing nonalcohol things at night, which is good because it makes the community more interesting,” Koss said. “They bring in bands and movies. There are nice things you can do at the student union. That way, a lot of people are not getting bombed. A lot of people show up having had a few drinks but at least they are not drinking while they are there.”

Neighborhood Relations

The coalition instituted a “party patrol” of off-duty Lincoln police officers, some of whom work undercover, to find large parties with underage drinkers. The police issued citations to students and others for violations such as selling alcohol without a license, procuring alcohol for a minor, and maintaining a disorderly house. The coalition began the party patrol after its data showed that most students did their heavy drinking at off-campus parties. In one weekend, the party patrol issued more than 134 citations—about half to University of Nebraska students. The police followed up each weekend sweep with a press conference with details on the citations, including the names of those who received citations.

Not surprisingly, this turned out to be one of the least popular activities of the coalition among University of Nebraska–Lincoln students. Emmy Thomas, an editorial writer for the student paper wrote of the party patrols, “Yes, just as they’ve done each of the past three years I’ve been a student here, Lincoln’s police force has again pledged to ‘crack down’ on ‘wild parties.’ And they are keeping that promise this time around, despite what seems to be a complete absence of anything wild on this campus...In other words, the cops in this town have decided to sniff out any group of more than five people listening to anything other than classical music at a decibel level over 10.”¹⁹

On-Campus Policy and Enforcement

The University of Nebraska also stepped up enforcement of state law and its policies against underage drinking on campus. Campus police began writing more citations for students caught with alcohol. The citation, called Minors in Possession, carries a \$124 fine, a trip before the school's judicial affairs board, and mandatory attendance at an educational program on alcohol use and abuse. "We have a philosophy that if you make a conscious decision to violate policy and laws, it should be a conscious decision to accept the consequences," said Owen Yardley, the campus chief of police.

Yardley also began cracking down on tailgating before Cornhuskers games. About 80,000 people descend on Lincoln for the games, many of whom get ready to cheer for the Cornhuskers by drinking in the parking lots. It sent a mixed message to students that while they were being targeted for drinking, all sorts of alcohol-fueled rowdiness and damage was overlooked on game day, Yardley said. Campus officials sent out letters to all season ticket holders that alcohol was not allowed on university property. According to Yardley, the enforcement has made alcohol consumption less visible during game day. Additionally, for the first time, fraternities violating the university's policy on alcohol lost their privilege to have freshmen—the lifeblood of any fraternity—live in the fraternity house.

Education and Information

One element of the Nebraska program was a "social norms" campaign that aimed at correcting misperceptions among students that all of their fellow students were drinking heavily. The coalition put out pamphlets and other material stating, among other things, that 71 percent of students have zero to four drinks when they go out drinking. Another educational activity took aim at twenty-first-birthday bar "crawls," in which students go from bar to bar, sometimes consuming ten or twenty drinks or more. An ad campaign called Adults Don't Crawl pointed out that most students don't participate in these birthday crawls.

The social-norms approach was controversial among students, researchers, and community members. The student body president, Kyle Arganbright, called it "condescending." James Baird, a coalition member who runs Cornhusker Place, Inc., a detox and alcohol rehabilitation facility in Lincoln, said the campaign irked him for another reason. "It sent a mixed message to the community," said Baird, a former assistant chief of police in Lincoln. "As you go around the community, the public schools, and the courts, it's not OK to drink if you're under twenty-one. Young high school kids interacting with friends at the university see billboards that say 70 percent of people drink four or fewer drinks. They see the message as it's OK to drink."

NU Directions and the Bottom Line

The coalition also attempted, with no success, to limit the number of liquor licenses, to institute mandatory server training, and to reduce certain kinds of marketing, such as the promotion of cheap drink specials. The lack of success is typical of moves by coalitions that could affect the bottom line of businesses. "We can stop one high-risk promotion and there will be another one behind it," said Tom Workman, NU Directions' assistant director for information strategies.

Matt Vrzal, a former player for the Cornhuskers football team, who now owns several bars on O Street catering to University of Nebraska students and is a member of the NU Directions coalition, offers a unique perspective on the tensions and the promise of A Matter of Degree. As a college student, the 330-pound former center frequented the bars using fake IDs, and admits to downing more than thirty shots on his twenty-first birthday, which sent him to the hospital. Now, he said, he watches out for students who drink too much in his bars, limiting service and even paying for taxi rides home.

Vrzal supports the work of the coalition and similar programs. “What a message to send to parents,” he said. “This university cares enough about your kids to keep them safe. They don’t want them to misuse alcohol, and they don’t want them in harm’s way.” He has noticed a difference in the students who come to his bars. “When the program first started, the kids thought it was a big joke, just another group telling them what to do,” Vrzal said. “But NU Directions has done a nice job in distributing the research to the kids. Recently there was this one kid who was taking his friend out for his twenty-first birthday. He said, ‘We know what’s going on, he’s only on one shot an hour. NU Directions said this and that.’”

Yet Vrzal is also critical of the coalition for being out of touch. When he was in college, Vrzal said, “kids took the bars for what they were, places to have fun, not get falling-down drunk and have fights in the street. Now the people in authority positions at NU Directions think it’s a debacle down here...They think that O Street and the bar owners are just a bunch of raging alcoholics and people puking in the streets. In reality, they’re a bunch of social drinkers having a good time.”

The Nebraska project leadership can point to some accomplishments. Data from the Nebraska site shows a decrease in binge drinking rates, from 62 percent in 1997 to 47 percent in 2003. There were also fewer problems experienced by students who drink. Students who reported engaging in unplanned sex declined from 32 percent to 20 percent, and students who reported being insulted or humiliated by another student who was drunk dropped from 43 percent to 24 percent.²⁰

Louisiana State University

At Louisiana State University, vice chancellor Neil Mathews says that the university has come a long way since the highly publicized death in 1997 of Benjamin Wynne during pledge week. He said that since A Matter of Degree began there, the university has set up substance-free residence halls, cracked down on the long-standing tradition of bringing alcohol into the football stadium, and tightened enforcement for fraternities violating alcohol policies, including removing some of them from campus. He pointed out that the October 2003 death of Corey Domingue led to the discovery of a false ID ring, which in turn led to felony charges against several students who allegedly sold the IDs. As a result, the LSU Campus-Community Coalition for Change, as LSU’s A Matter of Degree program is called, successfully advocated for increased penalties for the production and use of false IDs and for the vendors who sell or distribute alcohol to underage students. Still, Domingue’s death, in the face of all of that the university has done to change the environment and attitudes about binge drinking, points to the limits of these programs in the face of such an intractable problem.

Preliminary Evaluation Results

Harvard's Henry Wechsler, who is the principal investigator of the evaluation of A Matter of Degree, said that overall the program was "working at a modest level. Our expectations always were that you're not going to make a major change overnight." Early results from the evaluation did not find significant changes in drinking habits, including changes in the rates of binge drinking, for the ten schools in the program when measured against the schools used for comparison purposes. However, the results also indicated that the schools most fully implementing the program model of environmental change showed declines in alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harm, and secondhand effects. Schools that employed fewer environmental measures and less program implementation showed no such declines.²¹ "This tells us that the original design of the program and its rationale—to change the upstream determinants of heavy and harmful drinking—was well conceived," notes Elissa Weitzman, also from the Harvard School of Public Health, who is the co-principal investigator and the director of the Matter of Degree evaluation.

Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions

Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions addresses the problem of drinking among younger students—those in junior high and high school. It was born in part out of the recognition that for many adolescents, drinking starts much sooner than the day they set foot on a college campus. The program provides grants to statewide coalitions that could include law enforcement, youth organizations, the faith community, governmental agencies, alcohol prevention organizations, civic organizations, and businesses. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation required each program to have four elements: (1) youth leadership development, (2) coalition development, (3) alcohol policy development, and (4) a public awareness campaign. It funded coalitions in Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Texas, and Washington, D.C. The various coalitions sought to

- Ensure by working with law enforcement agencies that store clerks and alcohol servers do not provide alcohol to minors.
- Reduce the availability of alcohol at sporting and community events.
- Initiate compliance "stings" of merchants who sell alcohol to minors.
- Establish statewide hotlines to report underage drinking and outlets selling alcohol to minors.
- Create a statewide keg registration law, which ensures that keg purchasers are held responsible if minors are served.
- Tighten ID checks, train alcohol beverage servers, and reduce the use of special pricing that encourages overconsumption.
- Train youth leaders, who serve as media spokespersons and testify before state legislatures about the harm of underage drinking.
- Enact ordinances to increase the distance of billboards advertising alcohol from schools, churches, and rehabilitation centers.

A Variety of Approaches

The Reducing Underage Drinking coalitions spent much of their time in efforts to educate legislators about the problem of youth drinking and ways that state policies could reduce the problem. These efforts were often made more difficult by the fact that many legislators received substantial campaign contributions from the alcohol industry. To counteract the influence of the powerful alcohol industry, coalitions employed a variety of tactics to bring the issues to the attention of the public. For example, they mobilized constituents, organized demonstrations, held press conferences, and fed information to the media.

Some coalitions used a divide-and-conquer approach. The Minnesota Join Together Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking, for example, found ways to work with some alcohol industry groups while fighting others. The Minnesota Grocers Association wanted grocery stores to be allowed to sell wine, a move opposed by the coalition as providing another easy way for young people to get alcohol. The coalition found an ally in the retail liquor industry, which did not want competition from grocery stores, according to Jeff Nachbar, the Minnesota project director. Coalition members agreed to do public education that would help the liquor industry defeat the proposal. In return, the liquor industry worked with the coalition on keg registration—a mandatory tagging system that enables police to trace the purchaser of a keg of beer—something many liquor store owners had opposed as being onerous. The keg registration effort was successful.

Several coalitions focused on eliminating alcohol advertising in certain publications, billboards, and other venues that young people would see. This has proved to be a difficult task. In Texas, the coalition spent three years in an ultimately successful effort to eliminate alcohol and tobacco advertising from the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's hunting and fishing guide. Anyone who is older than eight must take a quiz on the guide to get a fishing or hunting license. About 40 percent of the ads were alcohol or tobacco promotions. In 1999, Jim Haire, who is an avid outdoorsman and works at a sporting-goods store, noticed that the guidebook was filled with alcohol and tobacco ads. Worried about the effect of these ads on children, including his own, he went to Texans Standing Tall, the state's Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions site, to talk about his concerns.

Coalition members took up the issue, and in their research learned that the state legislature would be reviewing the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department to determine whether it should be reauthorized—a process that all state agencies must undergo every ten years or so. They saw the reauthorization as their opening to push for the elimination of the advertising. Using Texas's open records law, coalition members learned that Anheuser-Busch, which produces Budweiser beer, had contributed millions of dollars to the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and had created a Parks and Wildlife Foundation of Texas, which played a major role in the production of the hunting and fishing guide. Coalition members pointed out that this collaboration generated conflicts of interest, among them that the department in charge of reducing alcohol-related boating accidents was accepting alcohol advertisements. Coalition staff and members testified that the department's authorization should be renewed, provided that the department be prohibited from accepting alcohol and tobacco ads. It won a partial victory when the reauthorization specified that the Parks & Wildlife Department could no longer carry tobacco ads and that it create guidelines for appropriate advertising of alcohol.

For the next two years, coalition members hounded the department to create those guidelines and to prohibit alcohol advertising, according to Ellen Ward, executive director of Texans Standing Tall. It took until 2001 for the department to issue the guidelines, which prohibited the department from accepting ads for tobacco or alcohol products. While Ward is pleased with the results, she said that since the guidelines went into effect Anheuser-Busch has found another venue in which to advertise: the Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine now carries a full-page advertisement from Budweiser, which it had not done in the past. Despite the apparent inconsistency with the department's own code, coalition members have not yet been able to persuade it to get rid of the ads in a publication that is distributed to middle school and high school libraries.

The Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking is located in one of the country's most affluent states, where many adolescents have plenty of money and parents supply alcohol to their underage children. Children in Connecticut start drinking, on average, at age eleven—the youngest age of any state in the country. According to the project director, Gary Najarian, the rates of drinking among young people are almost 30 percent higher than the national average.

The Connecticut coalition, like others, worked to change alcohol policy at the state level, with varying success. According to Najarian, the coalition gathered several state organizations that had not worked together on underage drinking before and brought attention to the issue through press conferences and news coverage. That public education work contributed to three of the coalition's objectives becoming state law: (1) keg registration, (2) underage participation in compliance checks (sending young people to liquor stores to try to buy alcohol), and (3) banning alcohol sales at convenience store drive-up windows.

Early Assessment of Results

Alexander Wagenaar and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota are evaluating the Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions program. In the first phase of their evaluation, they compared public opinion, coalition formation and activities, and state-level alcohol legislation in the coalition states and in the rest of the country. Preliminary results indicate that few states—whether they had a Reducing Underage Drinking coalition or not—passed laws aimed at reducing young people's access to alcohol. The evaluators and the site directors pointed out that the evaluation did not capture all activity on the local level, such as ordinances that change penalties for sales to minors or alter local enforcement procedures. The preliminary findings indicated that the coalitions focused most of their policy work on commercial access policies (compliance checks, false identification, minors not allowed in bars, outlet density, and server training) and the least on pricing (excise taxes, licensing fees, and price discounting).

Observations

A Matter of Degree and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions are emblematic of a new approach to battling the problems of adolescents' drinking and hurting themselves and others. Rather than focus just on educating individuals, these programs seek to change the environment in which alcohol is depicted as sexy, glamorous, hip, and easily available. It is an approach that relies on

coalitions of sometimes uneasy allies. These programs, which have been in effect for only about eight years, are trying to shift mores and norms that have existed for decades. It is still too early to tell whether they will have an effect. However, participants, national experts, and evaluators made several observations about what can be learned to date from the programs.

- *There were unrealistic expectations in some quarters about what could be accomplished in a short time.* According to Joan Hollendonner, a former senior communications officer at The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation who oversaw its programs to reduce college high-risk drinking and underage drinking, there were unrealistic expectations on the parts of some Foundation staff and Board members, reporters, and members of the public about what the programs could accomplish in the original grant periods. (A Matter of Degree was initially funded for four years and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions for five years.) She stated:

To expect to see significant drops in the actual rates of college binge drinking or underage drinking in those timeframes was naïve. The programs used a new approach to change social norms, policies, and practices. It was anticipated that in turn drinking rates would be lowered and harm reduced. First, however, the sites had to plan their efforts and learn, educate, and create buy-in for this very different (environmental) approach to prevention. Then you are talking about changing an extraordinarily deep-rooted norm in this country that tolerates youth drinking and overcoming resistance to shifts in policies and practices. Just for people to grasp the environmental approach was difficult. The entire task at hand was enormously challenging, and it required time and patience. Fortunately the programs were renewed.

- *The complicated interactions that lead many adolescents and college students to drink or drink to excess cannot be addressed through one program or narrow approach.* The environmental approach has been shown to work in areas such as drinking and driving, but has not been fully tested in an area as complex as underage drinking. Educational programs may still have their place, and there may be other approaches not yet discovered. “We’re starting to see over time that there is a cumulative effect of the interacting of many factors,” said Richard Yoast, of the American Medical Association, who is the national director of A Matter of Degree and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions. “There is not going to be one thing that will make the change. It’s not like we can suddenly introduce a vaccine.”
- *The programs take on powerful, entrenched economic interests that are difficult to dislodge.* Both of these programs challenge the economic interests of the alcohol industry, from manufacturers to retailers to bar owners. It is always a tough fight to make changes that threaten an industry’s bottom line.
- *It is difficult to break out of the educational approach and embrace the environmental one.* Taking an environmental approach promised and proved to be difficult for universities and prevention agencies, both of which were steeped in the world of education, not advocacy. “It’s much easier to think about gathering up kids and talking to them about the evils of drinking than talking to adults and telling them they are doing things that make the environment easier for kids to drink,” said Eileen Harwood, an evaluator at the University of Minnesota of the Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions program.

- *Coalitions provide a promising way to tackle long-standing social problems, but it is also difficult for them to take tough stands.* In many cases, the programs brought together groups with diverse interests that had never collaborated before, and it was hard to persuade them to take controversial stands. Broad-based coalitions are more inclined to work in areas where reaching consensus is comparatively easy, such as providing alternative activities for students, than in more difficult areas, such as raising taxes on liquor and enforcing underage drinking laws.
- *It is difficult to mobilize a movement around the harmful effects of alcohol on others as tobacco control advocates have done around cigarettes.* It is still hard for many people to see heavy drinking by young adults as anything other than an inevitable rite of passage into adulthood. “We have yet to effectively promote a movement around secondhand effects of alcohol,” said Harvard’s Elissa Weitzman. “It’s hard to argue that a single cigarette is good for you. But a glass of wine for most people is not a problem. Alcohol occupies a unique place. It’s not altogether bad. But that makes it hard for people to come up with a position on it or find themselves willing to change important aspects of its availability.”

While alcohol plays a complex role in our society, young people need to know that their community has set a standard for behavior around drinking, several project directors said. Evaluators and project directors said that adolescents and college students saw no adverse consequences for their excessive drinking and so had no reason to stop. John Bishop, the project director for Building Responsibility, the A Matter of Degree site at the University of Delaware, conducted focus groups with students about drinking. He found that at the beginning of the project “students really didn’t believe that the university was serious about enforcing alcohol regulations.” Now the university has set up a “three strikes and you’re out” policy for alcohol violations that include parental notification, monetary fines, and possible expulsion.

Focusing on the harms that alcohol use causes others may prove effective in the long run just as it has for the tobacco control movement. One of the biggest changes that program directors note is an awareness of the effects of drinking on others, through increased fights, sexual assaults, and disturbances. “Initially, the main focus of A Matter of Degree was on reducing the binge-drinking rate,” the American Medical Association’s Richard Yoast said. “That’s not something we’re shying away from, but most people are less concerned about how much is drunk than what happens when too much is drunk. If you tell students we are going to reduce the amount of alcohol you are drinking, many will have no interest in that. If we talk about the problems they and their peers are having, most students—drinkers and nondrinkers alike—are very interested. They are the ones who are subjected to fights, disruptions, and vomit. They are the ones who are sexually harassed.”

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