



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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## A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Case Study

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**Supporting Research and Creating Community Coalitions:** *A Case Study of How the College Alcohol Study, A Matter of Degree, and Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions Built Community Coalitions in Response to Adolescent and College Student Alcohol Use*



## **Abstract**

In the early 1990s, limited scientific research and understanding led many policymakers and the public to view alcohol problems among young people as simply a result of individual choice and consumption levels: higher consumption meant more problems. For the most part, alcohol use—especially among adolescents and college-age students—was viewed as a rite of passage. The focus for policy makers, many people in the medical field, and the general public, was on the use of illicit drugs. But alcohol use among young people, no matter how much, was an issue that had potentially damaging effects to people’s public health and their environments. Far-reaching research and coalition-driven projects yielded landmark evidence about alcohol use and misuse, its impact, and the routes toward prevention. Grantees, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), discovered that public and institutional policies, socio-environmental factors, beliefs, attitudes and norms about alcohol were very powerful in either causing or preventing problems among youth. No place was this more apparent than on college campuses, where excessive drinking was seen as a standard part of the journey toward graduation. Harvard School of Public Health’s College Alcohol Study showed the nation, for the first time, how deep and damaging college high-risk drinking had become. The Study’s results served as the catalyst to support additional efforts to prevent underage alcohol use and abuse. RWJF co-designed the national program, A Matter of Degree, to develop coalitions on college campuses to reduce high-risk drinking, and Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions (RUD), which targeted state legislatures and the media to change policies around adolescent alcohol use. These grantees exemplify how community coalitions educated the public and changed perceptions about the underage alcohol-use problem. This case study reviews the work of the College Alcohol Study, A Matter of Degree, and Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions and how these approaches affected alcohol-related problem prevention.



## Introduction

Over a span of two decades, researchers, practitioners and treatment providers forged new pathways to identify the causes and impacts of addiction and how to best to treat and prevent it. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) recognized the importance of this work and committed support and funding to advance the addiction, prevention and treatment (APT) field. The goal, for RWJF and its grantees, was to cultivate a body of evidence-based research regarding APT that could support and policy changes, media outreach, coalition building and advocacy.

Because of the groundbreaking research and work by these grantees addiction is now understood to be a public health issue and chronic disease. Community coalitions have formed to combat addiction and support recovery and treatment. The environmental and social pressures that drive young people's alcohol use have been exposed. Strong outreach campaigns to educate the public on the dangers of tobacco, alcohol and drug use are standard and memorable.

This case study, one in a series of four, examines the research and public outreach efforts that have made a lasting impact in addiction, prevention and treatment. The purpose of each of these papers is to document best practices, strategies, and research summaries for future use by researchers, policy makers, educators, foundation leadership and thought leaders in the APT field.

**For more information on the grantee programs in this case study, go to:**

AMOD: [www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=amod&src=sw](http://www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=amod&src=sw)

RUD: [www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=rud&src=sw](http://www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=rud&src=sw)

CAS: [www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=college+alcohol+study&src=sw](http://www.rwjf.org/search/gsa/search.jsp?q=college+alcohol+study&src=sw)

Also, visit: URL to come, to view videos highlighting RWJF's legacy in addiction prevention and treatment

The programs profiled in this study—the College Alcohol Study (CAS), A Matter of Degree (AMOD), and Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions (RUD)—each set out to examine the root causes of underage drinking and college high-risk drinking, to understand their direct and residual effects, and to

determine ways to curb the misuse of alcohol. Together, these projects brought the issue of high-risk drinking to the forefront in America, helped change socio-environmental factors around college high-risk drinking, and created coalitions to prevent adolescent access to alcohol. Their work also informed a framework of how alcohol problems would be viewed in the United States.



## College Alcohol Study

### The Problem

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health created the College Alcohol Study to examine the effects of college and community policies on drinking, smoking, and related problems among college students. Heavy episodic or high-risk drinking on college campuses and the problems it caused (e.g., serious injury, sexual assault, alcohol-related accidents or death) highlighted the need for large-scale national research of the issue. At the time, other research and resulting studies focused on heavy, long-term alcoholism or on the effects of illicit drugs.

**Mission:** To examine key issues in college alcohol abuse, including the tradition of heavy drinking on college campuses, the role of fraternities and sororities and athletics, the relationship of state alcohol control measures and college policies to this behavior, and the role that easy access to alcohol and low prices play.

**Goal:** To provide evidence-based research that identifies binge drinking and its secondhand effects in order to raise public awareness of the issue and inform policy changes at the college, state and national levels.

**Award:** 1992–2004: \$6,501,696.

**Years of Operation:** 1992–2005.

### The Solution

Henry Wechsler, Ph.D., and other researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health conducted the first national research effort to view high-risk drink and low-drink threshold drinking levels on a large group of colleges to get a better picture of the problem. The first survey was conducted in 1993 of students at 120 four-year colleges nationwide.

This research was the first to use a large nationally representative sample of college students and was the first to measure and define high-risk drinking differently by gender. Participating students reported drinking patterns as well as personal and secondhand effects of alcohol. The survey also unveiled information on the role school, community, state and regional factors play in college drinking. Similar surveys took place in 1997, 1999 and 2001. Colleges with high levels of heavy alcohol use were resurveyed in 2005.

### The Results

Findings from the first College Alcohol Study report appeared in a 1994 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that drew national attention to the problem of college high-risk drinking and raised public awareness of an issue that then U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher called “the most serious public health problem on American college campuses today.”<sup>1</sup> The initial report also launched a decade of research and debate about college-student drinking behavior.

College Alcohol Study researchers collaborated with researchers at other institutions, from other countries, and from other disciplines, leading to the publication of more than 80 peer-reviewed articles in numerous journals. This research was instrumental in changing policies at colleges and at the state and national levels concerning underage drinking. It shed new light on the impact this type of drinking had on the community surrounding the colleges. And it was supported by a vigorous dissemination campaign, which ensured that research results reached college administrators, federal policy-makers, substance use disorder prevention experts, and the general public.



## Key Results Over the Grant Period

- High-risk drinkers, particularly frequent high-risk drinkers, were found to experience a range of alcohol-related problems affecting their physical, psychological, social and educational status.
- Students who were not high-risk drinkers attending schools with high rates of high-risk drinking were more likely than students at colleges with lower high-risk-drinking rates to experience secondhand effects of high-risk drinking—disruption of sleep or study; property damage; verbal, physical or sexual violence.
- Neighbors of colleges with high rates of high-risk drinking also were more likely to experience negative effects of heavy drinking, such as noise disturbances and vandalism, compared with people living near colleges with low rates of high-risk drinking and with people who did not live near a college.<sup>2</sup>
- Gender-specific definition of high-risk drinking of five drinks for males and four drinks for females. This measure equated the experience of alcohol-related problems for college men and women that reflect a range of gender differences in the effects of alcohol consumption, including body mass and alcohol metabolism rates.<sup>3</sup>

**“[The Foundation] focused on adolescent alcohol use and how to prevent problem use and addiction with alcohol later on in life. The greatest challenge for us was to shine a spotlight on the fact that this is a health problem, instead of just a bad behavior problem.”**

Kristin B. Schubert, M.P.H.  
Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Research from the College Alcohol Study was—and remains—instrumental in changing policies at colleges and at the state and national levels concerning underage drinking.

## A Matter of Degree

### The Problem

Excessive alcohol use is the third leading lifestyle-related cause of death, behind only tobacco use and the combined effects of poor diet and physical activity, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Mission: To foster collaboration between participating universities and the communities in which they are located to address the issue of binge drinking and improve the quality of life for all community residents.

Goal: To reduce high-risk drinking and related harms among college students at ten colleges and their surrounding communities.

Award: 1996–2008: \$17.5 million.

Years of Operation: 1996–2008.

In 1990, college presidents classified alcohol abuse as the campus life issue of greatest concern, according to a Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching survey, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. Concerns about college

drinking escalated in the 1990s in response to the persistence of heavy episodic or binge drinking and heightened awareness of date rape and serious injury and death due to alcohol-related accidents.



## The Solution

In response to the alarming statistics revealed in the College Alcohol Study, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in partnership with researchers from the American Medical Association, launched A Matter of Degree to combat high-risk drinking among college students using environmental approaches. To change university and community environments the program funded 10 university-based coalitions between 1996 and 2008. The goal was to change the focus of prevention from pointing fingers and blaming students to looking at the campus and city environmental factors that lead young people to drink excessively, such as easy access to alcohol and lenient or non-existent penalties for underage drinking.

The program used a multi-level approach to change the socio-environmental factors surrounding college-high-risk drinking. The college community coalitions funded by A Matter of Degree identified numerous environmental factors—alcohol advertising and marketing, pricing and availability, service, institutional policies and practices, social norms, and local ordinances—that may have encouraged alcohol use and focused efforts to change or eliminate these factors.

For example, the coalitions worked to reduce alcohol discounting (e.g., two-for-one drink specials or inexpensive beer pitcher sales), and other promotions in their communities. They also pushed for the reduction of alcohol-industry sponsored social events, including sports, concerts and ethnic celebrations.

## The Results

These efforts encouraged state, local, and university policymakers throughout the nation to enact policies to restrict alcohol sales and promotions to college students and to strengthen and enforce underage drinking laws. The American Medical Association helped educate the media and state and national policy makers about the problem and effective solutions while bringing attention to harmful actions such as alcohol promotions of spring breaks and sponsorship of collegiate sports.

**“[A Matter of Degree and Reducing Underage Drinking] resonated with the media in a way that we didn’t expect. The issue was on the front page. I think some of that was because the heaviest drinking was amongst the best and the brightest. The contradiction between what looked like really juvenile behavior in these people who were supposedly going to be the intellectual and political leaders of our country was really fascinating.”**

Richard Yoast, Ph.D.  
Lead Staff Member for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Issues  
Related to the Public’s Health, American Medical Association  
Program Office Director, A Matter of Degree and Reducing  
Underage Drinking Through Coalitions



### Ron's Story

All the usual milestones marked Ron's first year in college: he moved away from home and into a dorm on campus; he rushed a fraternity and got in; he had an article published in the college newspaper; he almost died from a high-risk drinking episode. Sad, but true. College high-risk drinking is a significant public health problem. Unfortunately, Ron is among one of the most at-risk groups for college high-risk-drinking: a fraternity.

When he arrived on campus, Ron felt grown up because he was on his own, yet isolated because he knew no one. Joining a fraternity helped him find a built-in clique. Heavy drinking was an expected part of that culture. College leaders knew it happened, but turned the other way. After all, they reasoned, drinking in college is just what kids do.

So, when Ron drank all that was offered to him at a football tailgating party, he thought it was no big deal--even when he went with a frat brother to buy more liquor. The owner of the local convenience store in the small town adjacent to the college knew the boys were already pretty drunk, but he sold them more beer anyway. Ron and his friend started drinking a few of the cans on the way back to the frat house.

The car went off the road and into an embankment. The driver died instantly. Ron suffered multiple broken bones and a concussion. It was a tragic, and all too common, occurrence.

A Matter of Degree developed a coalition that engaged administrators and students on Ron's campus along with city officials and other local stakeholders—bar owners, police officials, local legislators and health care professionals—to implement interventions to reduce college high-risk drinking at the college. They aimed to change both the campus' and city's alcohol environments by restricting the number of liquor licenses, thus decreasing the alcohol density close to campus, training alcohol servers about restricting alcohol service to customers under 21, and educating servers on the consequences of illegally serving to minors.

AMOD's success has been remarkable, helped in part, by Ron's participation. Local taverns have decreased the number of drink specials they offer. Business owners are rigorously checking I.D.'s of anyone who comes into their establishments. The college has begun mandatory counseling and academic fines for anyone caught abusing alcohol on campus. Nobody should go through what Ron did...and that's what he tells anyone who will listen.

### Key Results Over the Grant Period

- The approach used by A Matter of Degree increased awareness on campuses and in communities that collaboration could foster change in alcohol abuse on campus. The sites that implemented more of the program's strategies saw significant reductions in drinking and related negative consequences of alcohol abuse.
- Some of the 10 college coalitions experienced significant declines in many measures of alcohol consumption (such as high-risk drinking), alcohol-related harms (such as falling behind in school) and alcohol-related secondhand effects (such as vandalism).<sup>4</sup>



- The program identified integral components of successful campus-community collaborations: investment of prominent campus leaders, such as the president, in the initiative; commitment of full-time staff members; and data-driven assessment and intervention efforts.<sup>5</sup>
- A Matter of Degree (and the RWJF-funded program Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions) led the medical association to focus on alcohol problems as health issues and to involve the medical community in developing and implementing solutions to problem drinking.
- The A Matter of Degree model was replicated by other colleges and campus groups outside of the 10-college study group.

## Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions

### The Problem

Like A Matter of Degree, Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions was also developed in concert with the American Medical Association.

**Mission:** To reduce alcohol-related problems among underage youth by addressing environmental and policy factors that influence youth alcohol consumption.

**Goal:** To help communities across the nation change state policies in order to decrease the number of health, safety and social problems caused by underage alcohol abuse.

**Award:** 1995–2005: \$19.8-million.

**Years of Operation:** 1995–2005.

The Reducing Underage Drinking program focused on changing the socio-environmental factors that encouraged or enabled alcohol abuse among young people, but on a state level.

### The Solution

This youth-focused national initiative made grants to 12 coalitions in 10 states (Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Texas), the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The coalitions included state government agencies, law enforcement organizations, attorney generals' offices, local advocacy coalitions, nonprofit organizations in the alcohol prevention and treatment field, and educational and civic groups. The initiative's coalitions researched the environmental factors that enabled adolescents to drink—availability of alcohol, affordability of alcohol, peer pressure—and used various strategies and tactics to educate the public and change state and local policies. One of the strategies was to effect change on the local level within legislators' districts, so policymakers could see first-hand the impact of the coalitions' efforts. By witnessing the positive impact on their communities, legislators were more likely to advocate for a policy to create broader changes across the state.

**“The common goal for each of these coalitions was to research and decrease the number of health, safety and social problems caused by underage alcohol use.”**

Steven A. Schroeder, M.D.  
Former President and CEO  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (1990-2002)



Additional approaches included using media advocacy, strategic planning, grassroots organizing, and extensive educational outreach based on evidence-based research on the dangers of underage drinking and its consequences. The effort also attracted attention from the national media, healthcare organizations and policymakers to focus on the issues.

### **Key Results Over the Grant Period**

- Increased alcohol-related media coverage on the harms of underage drinking and the impact of alcohol pricing and taxes, and improved state alcohol-related legislation grounded in evidence-based research.
- Raised the issue of underage drinking as a topic of concern in legislation, in law enforcement agencies, among the public and in the media.
- Amended more than 24 state laws and 85 state policy initiatives.<sup>6</sup>
- Passage of local ordinances to reduce underage drinking in many communities.
- Expanded national concerns about underage drinking and the understanding that this was a health issue.

### **Conclusion**

Within health care, understanding and dealing with the issue of addiction and its ramifications were vital to helping a large population in the country. In addition, it was important to educate the public, and policy leaders, to see addiction as a chronic health issue that should be treated as such.

Within the public health arena, clearly articulating the environmental influences and impacts that substance abuse and related problems had on the community were vital to helping the media, community groups and policymakers understand and use new tools to prevent problems. The grantees mentioned here also brought attention to the impacts underage alcohol use and high-risk drinking were having on the health and well-being of young people, the schools and colleges they attend and the communities around them.

The College Alcohol Study, A Matter of Degree, and Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions exemplify the broad outreach to state and local programming that supported sweeping medical and social outcomes. Its partnership with the American Medical Association helped gain media and policymakers' attention to alcohol-related problems and made clear that these were important health concerns. These efforts certainly faced significant challenges in combating the high-risk-drinking problem: the alcohol industry; determining the conditions of alcohol-related problems; the lack of evidence regarding prevention; the public's perception of alcohol consumption. However, they laid the groundwork for future efforts to address alcohol as an individual and community health concern.



## Endnotes

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