Kansas State Project Wellness

Many questions from students and faculty have arisen regarding the Project Wellness advertisements run in the Collegian throughout this semester. Phrases such as "most K-State students have 0 to 5 drinks when they party" and "most K-State students drink moderately, if at all" have caught the attention of students. These messages have even inspired some students to write letters to the Collegian editors and to call in their comments to the "Campus Forum." Some students seem unsure about the purpose of the ads, and wonder if the information is accurate and who is paying for the ads.

This edition of the Higher Education newsletter is dedicated to exploring the social norms theory, the drinking behaviors of KSU students, and the purpose of Project Wellness. The inside pages of this issue include a guest column from Doug Newton, the Project Wellness coordinator. He explains how the student information was collected, what the ads mean, and why K-State is utilizing the social norms theory. Samples of the ads are also included. The back page contains more detailed information about social norms theory and its implementation.

Doug Newton, Project Wellness coordinator, is willing to provide a brief overview of the grant project to any office, class or department on campus. Also, he could use your feedback. Comments about Project Wellness that you have or that you have picked up from interactions with students could assist the development of appealing and useful messages for the media campaign. If you would like a presentation or have any comments, please contact Project Wellness at 532-6927.

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Guest Column:

Doug Newton, Project Wellness Coordinator

By now many of you have seen our Project Wellness advertisements in the Collegian. We thought you might be interested in knowing more about the media campaign.

Why does it work? The Kansas Health Foundation is funding Project Wellness for four years to conduct a social norms media campaign. The social norms approach to reduce heavy drinking and its associated harm on college campuses has been used successfully at several universities across the nation. For example, Northern Illinois University has seen a 44 percent decrease in heavy drinking over 9 years, the University of Arizona had a 28 percent decrease in 3 years, and the University of Missouri saw a 16 percent decrease after one year.

How does such a media campaign work? Social norms, whether actual or perceived, are potent shapers of human behavior. Regarding alcohol use during college years, students tend to overestimate the percentage of their peers who are heavy drinkers and underestimate the percentage who are moderate drinkers. If students perceive that heavy drinking and drunken behavior are more common and acceptable than they actually are, then they will tend toward this kind of behavior. Conversely, if students become aware of the actual degree of moderate and safer drinking practices of their peers, then they will tend toward this type of behavior. Compared to heavy drinkers, moderate drinkers are more likely, for example, to have positive social relationships, achieve better grades, and ensure their physical safety when partying.

Therefore, the purpose of our ads is to inform K-State students about the ACTUAL drinking behavior of most K-State students through clear and consistent messages, so their behavior is based on fact, not influenced by inaccurate perception.

And what is the actual drinking pattern of most K-State students? The typical K-State student drinks moderately if he or she drinks at all, and knows how to protect himself or herself from alcohol-related harm.

Where do we get the facts in our ads? K-State students are the source of the information in the ads. In the spring of 1999, the Project Wellness staff administered an anonymous and voluntary survey in classrooms to a sample of 1,297 K-State students. The sample was proportionately representative of the student body with respect to gender, year in school, college, age, and GPA. The sample included students who live in residence halls, apartments, or houses, and fraternities and sororities. In the survey, students were asked to respond to questions about their own drinking behaviors and about what they believe are the drinking behaviors of most K-State students. In our ads, we are simply providing the information obtained in the survey.

What does the survey reveal about drinking norms at K-State? The survey reveals a discrepancy between what students report about their own drinking behavior and what they perceive to be the norm. The results are interesting. For example, 81% of K-State students report that they actually have 5 or fewer drinks when they party, but they believe that only 31% of K-State students have 5 or fewer drinks when they party. The amount of alcohol students report they actually drink is considerably lower than the amounts they believe most K-State students are drinking. Also, when asked, “How many nights do you usually party?” most students (54%) report they party 0 nights or 1 night per week, whereas they believe that most K-State students are partying 3 or 4 nights per week. Thus, the majority of students report that they party considerably less frequently than what they believe is the norm at K-State.
The K-State survey findings are remarkably similar to those of other universities and colleges implementing social norms programs on their campuses, among them, Michigan State University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Iowa, Dartmouth College, and the University of North Carolina.

**About the Project Wellness staff:** I coordinate the project, and am assisted by a campus-wide Advisory Task Force of 27 K-State students, faculty, and staff. There is also a core group of advisers that includes Fred Newton, director of University Counseling Services; Bill Ack, director of Alcohol and Other Drug Education Services; Steve Benton, professor of Educational Psychology; and Paul Parsons, professor of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Most K-State students have safe and healthy drinking behaviors. This is good news! Kansas State students are basically a healthy population who have the ability to make good choices and avoid harm when it comes to alcohol use.
Social Norms Theory: A Wellness Model For Health Promotion in Higher Education

Social norms theory provides the basis for a relatively new approach used in behavioral change programs. Well documented in research on college student behavior is the high influence peers have on students, particularly in regard to alcohol and drug use. Social scientists H. Wesley Perkins and Alan Berentson looked further into peer influence to point out a difference between what students actually do and what students perceive to be the norm. In studies considering over 100 diverse college campuses, they found that students regularly and grossly overestimate the drunken behavior of their peers. They termed this overestimation a "false norm." They hypothesized that this false norm of alcohol use creates imaginary peer pressure to drink higher quantities and more frequently than would actually occur. It followed that if a method could be devised to effectively correct the false norm, then the quantity and frequency of drinking could be reduced.

Ten years ago, Michael Haines at Northern Illinois University was the first to apply the social norms theory in a program to reduce heavy drinking and its related harm. His campus-wide social norms media campaign exposed NIU students to multiple messages from many sources, informing them of the actual drinking norms of the student body. After the first year of the program, heavy drinking decreased 18 percent. Since then, several other colleges have had substantial reductions in heavy drinking using similar programs.

Different from past strategies to reduce heavy drinking that focused on drinking bans, punishment, scare tactics, and the unhealthy behavior of the minority of students, the social norms approach takes a more positive and empowering tack to increase healthy behavior. Whereas the former methods exaggerate harm and contribute to the false perception that heavy and problem drinking is normal, social norms media campaigns characterize students as models of behavior. The typical student is accurately portrayed as a moderate drinker who cares about his or her fellow students and makes special efforts to protect himself or herself and others from alcohol-related harm. Moreover, the social norms approach seems to be effective at reducing heavy drinking among college students.

CAMPUS RESOURCES
University Counseling Services
Lafayette Health Center - 2nd Floor (Coffey Building) Phone: 552-9297
Alcohol & Other Drug Education Service
Director: Dr. Joy A. Moreman, 214 Lafayette Health Center Phone: 552-9227
Alcoholics Anonymous
Open Noon Meeting (Milu-Pl.)
Ecumenical Campus Ministry
KU Student Union
Phone: 532-9542
778-0086

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