What Campuses Can Do to Fight High-Risk Drinking?

Frostburg State has set an example that other schools can follow in light of publicity surrounding the Huguely-Love case. An opinion by Jonathan Gibralter, president of Frostburg State University.

Recent coverage of the trial of a young man accused of killing a fellow student at the University of Virginia while under the influence of alcohol brings necessary attention to a cultural problem that most college and university leaders feel at a loss to change. High-risk drinking among our nation's college students has become an epidemic and, in fact, is getting worse.

High-risk drinking takes the lives of some 1,800 students each year, while tens of thousands more are harmed or harm others. This behavior puts students at risk of being victimized by assaults, especially sexual assaults, and vastly decreases their ability to succeed as students. The severity of this problem has forced American higher education institutions everywhere to dedicate precious resources to addressing it.

But campus culture can change — and there are solutions available.

University of Maryland, College Park At Frostburg State University in Western Maryland, a member of the University System of Maryland, our campus community has developed a comprehensive education and prevention program, and it is making a significant difference to curb binge drinking among our students.

Through a concerted and directed effort, we have reduced our high-risk drinking rate by 25 percent over five years, and now more than 50 percent of the students who enroll at Frostburg report that they abstain from alcohol consumption completely.

We have built partnerships in this effort that engaged a broad range of people with differing opinions on the topic and differing stakes in the outcome: students, faculty, community members, law enforcement and business owners. Together, we agree on the goal of keeping students free from harm.

Through our combined efforts at education, heightened enforcement and prevention, those students who drink do so more responsibly — consuming fewer drinks per episode and more often watching out for their peers rather than encouraging them to engage in high-risk behavior.

Our results have been so striking that in 2008, I and Frostburg were awarded the national Presidential Leadership Award from Outside the Classroom (now EverFi), the Gordie Foundation (now the Gordie Center for Substance Abuse Prevention) and five other national higher education organizations for creating an environment that de-emphasized on the role of alcohol on campus. I have worked with all of our fellow institutions within the USM to share these strategies.

Frostburg is one of 32 institutions nationally asked to join the National Collegiate Health Improvement Project, and our involvement has yielded enormous success educating students about high-risk drinking. We are joined in this endeavor by our colleagues from UMBC and University of Maryland, Eastern Shore. State support was crucial in the ability of our three institutions to participate.

Currently, I serve as one of the presidents on the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism President's Working Group. Our goal is to highlight the best strategies for college and university presidents to utilize to reduce high-risk drinking on our campuses.

Excessive and high-risk student drinking is an enormous public health problem and one that college and university presidents must stand up and speak out against. Reversing what has become status quo is possible, but only if collegiate leadership is willing to devote the necessary resources and communities are willing to partner to end risky behaviors.

Our efforts matter. Together we can change behaviors and save lives.

To gain a better understand of Alcohol and Alcoholism, click here.

Source: Jonathan Gibralter, The Baltimore Sun, February 21, 2012