New Tactics in Battle Against Binge Drinking Tried by Colleges

A high school teacher and a graduate student at Northwestern University headed the Red Watch Band program, an attempt to save students from themselves.

Red Watch Band teaches students to recognize the warning signs of alcohol poisoning - vomiting; cold, clammy skin; the inability to wake up - and to call for medical help.

The program is part of a wave of college initiatives meant to quell a chronic problem – binge drinking on campus.

The percentage of college students who binge drink - defined as five drinks for men and four drinks for women in two hours - has held steady at about 40 percent for most of the past decade, consistently more than non-college students, federal surveys show. Combining alcohol with energy drinks has fueled students' ability to drink more and longer.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) blames binge drinking for more than 1,800 college student deaths a year, mostly from drunken driving. Research shows that frequent binge drinkers are more likely to miss classes, get hurt, engage in risky sex and have problems in class.

At Northwestern, the issue has particular resonance. Nineteen-year-old freshman Matthew Sunshine died of alcohol poisoning in 2008 after a party in his dorm hall. As part of a settlement with his family, the school agreed to review its alcohol policy. The next year, Northwestern started the Red Watch Band program, developed at Stony Brook University in New York, where Sunshine's mother worked.

NU also has joined the Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking, in which 32 schools across the country are trying short-term changes to alcohol policy and monitoring the results. As part of its efforts, Northwestern employs BASICS, an assessment of students who get involved in alcohol-related medical or police incidents, and lowered the time for treatment from 30 to 20 days.

Some freshmen are subject to the new procedures even before they get to school. At DePaul

University in Chicago, for example, students are required to take an online self-assessment to analyze their alcohol use before they get to campus. Loyola University Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago also use the online program, called e-CHUG, or electronic Check-Up to Go.

Meanwhile, schools are working to offer alcohol-free events, like the Beer Free Zone at UIC, and NU Nights at Northwestern, which offered a showing of the movie "Chicago" with related dance lessons, or bingo with prizes such as iPods. Harper College in Palatine offers a new class about drug and alcohol abuse in college, taught by a teacher who admits drinking once affected her own performance in school. Some schools even offer alcohol-free spring breaks.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, binge drinking has been notorious on dates such as Halloween and Unofficial St. Patrick's Day, a daylong drunkfest sponsored by bars that were losing money when March 17 fell within spring break. In response, the school and city have tried to crack down on such events, including steps to limit alcohol availability and installing surveillance cameras.

All these efforts are a response to a study by the National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism that identified binge drinking as a top problem on campuses across the country a decade ago. Since then, a survey of 747 college presidents reported by the Center for Science in the Public Interest found that nearly all colleges had implemented some form of alcohol education, with efforts targeting high-risk populations such as first-year students, sorority and fraternity members, and athletes.

Thirty-four percent of colleges banned alcohol for all students, and four in five colleges offered an option for alcohol-free residences.

Still, success has varied. At some colleges, nearly 70 percent of the students were identified as binge drinkers; at others there were none.

Research by the Harvard School for Public Health found that underage students in states with extensive laws restricting underage and high-volume drinking - such as keg registration, 0.08 driving laws and restrictions on happy hours, pitchers and advertising - were less likely to binge drink.

To learn more about Underage and College Drinking,click here.

Source: The Chicago Tribune