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Alcohol and College Life

Many individuals operate under the assumption that drinking is a “rite of passage” into college life, where young adults are free from parental supervision for the first time in their lives and environmental and peer influences create an expectation that tolerates, approves and promotes the culture of drinking.

However, the drinking style often seen on campuses throughout the United States is one of excess. Henry Wechsler, Ph.D., Director of Harvard School of Public Health, made a powerful statement, “If you are a traditional college student and you drink, the odds are seven in 10 that you are a binge drinker.” Binge drinking has been defined as men who have five or more, or women who have four or more drinks in a row at least once within a two-week period.

Both the short-term and long-term consequences of excessive drinking are more widespread and destructive than most people realize, which can often result in serious injuries, assaults and other social, health, emotional and/or academic problems.

At college campuses across the nation ...

- ✓ Although the number of students who abstain from alcohol has increased over the past 10 years, the percentage of “binge drinkers” has also increased over this time period
- ✓ At least 1,400 student deaths a year are linked to alcohol, and 500,000 students are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol
- ✓ 95% of all college campus violence is related to alcohol
- ✓ Approximately 50% of the sexual assaults involving college students are associated with alcohol use
- ✓ Approximately 28% of all college dropouts acknowledge alcohol abuse problems and 25-40% of college students report academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind and receiving lower grades
- ✓ Approximately 2 in 5 students (44%) are classified as binge drinkers
- ✓ 31% of students meet the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse and 6% for a diagnosis of alcohol dependence
- ✓ Students younger than 21 consume almost half (48%) of the alcohol that all undergraduate students report drinking
- ✓ The gender gap between males and females has been narrowing with females consuming alcohol at a higher rate than in the past
- ✓ Students who exhibit heavy episodic or binge drinking tend to have more friends and are more likely to be members of fraternities, sororities or athletic teams

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- ✓ **And ...** Brevard County is in the “Drug Corridor” and has a higher rate of substance use problems with teenagers than any other county in Florida.

Florida Tech’s Counseling & Psychological Services participates in National Alcohol Screening Day each year. In comparing our students (N=860) alcohol use rate to the National rate (N=24,060) from last year’s screening event, our students engage in hazardous or harmful alcohol use at a slightly higher rate (2-3%) than the national average. When compared to other small technical colleges, our students are also utilizing alcohol at a higher rate. Hazardous or harmful alcohol use is a classification based upon the administration of the Alcohol use Disorders identification test (AUDIT) developed by the World Health Organization. A classification of hazardous drinking suggests that an individual is exhibiting alcohol abuse symptoms that are recurrent and have significant adverse consequences such as blackouts, absences from class, failure to keep up with studies due to alcohol use, difficulties managing day-to-day responsibilities.

At Florida Tech ...

- ✓ Last year, there were 44 alcohol-related campus incidents reported
- ✓ Two students were seriously injured in alcohol-related accidents
- ✓ Four students were hospitalized at the local ER due to alcohol poisoning issues

CAPS research on alcohol use regarding Florida Tech students (N=860) reveals ...

- ✓ 37.5% of students under the age of 17 engage in harmful drinking behavior
- ✓ The gender gap on hazardous drinking is narrowing with male students at 30% and female students at 26%
- ✓ The percentage of students engaging in hazardous drinking increases at age 21 (33%) and peaks at age 23 (60%)
- ✓ Graduate students surveyed had a higher rate of hazardous drinking (40%) than undergraduate drinkers (28%)
- ✓ Hispanic students (37%) drink at higher levels, followed by American Indian (33%) and Caucasian (30%) students
- ✓ African American students on campus drink in a hazardous fashion at the lowest rate (14%)
- ✓ Students living off-Campus, without parents, engage in hazardous drinking at a much higher rate (41%) than students living on-campus (27%)

College students drink alcohol for various reasons. Some may feel pressured to drink at social gatherings, because others are drinking or they think it is the “cool” thing to do. Others may use alcohol as “an escape” from academic or social pressures, financial strain and/or relationship or family problems. Further, students may suffer from feelings of shyness, loneliness and low self-esteem, and they may use alcohol to try to compensate.

What is Florida Tech doing to address this issue?

- ✓ Adopting a campus-based parental notification policy, where after the second alcohol violation parents are notified, thus making an attempt to clarify the college’s expectations for its students and engaging the parents in the effort to reduce high-risk alcohol use

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- ✓ Holding an Alcohol Awareness Week, where students are exposed to educational materials designed to reduce binge drinking by providing more accurate information about actual levels of alcohol use on campus
 - ✓ Providing anonymous online alcohol screening, where students are able to identify if they have a problem and may need to seek further help
 - ✓ Presenting seminars, where students can learn facts about alcohol use and abuse
 - ✓ Addressing the topic of alcohol/illicit drug use in the University Experience Class
 - ✓ CAPS continues to research alcohol and drug related issues to address high-risk groups and better target prevention efforts

What can faculty/staff do to address this issue?

- ✓ Introduce alcohol-related facts and issues into their regular academic courses
- ✓ Create a social, academic and residential environment that supports health-promoting norms, such as offering options that do not include alcohol
- ✓ Restrict marketing and promotion of alcoholic beverages on campus
- ✓ Talk with students privately if they begin missing classes, falling behind, sleeping in class, exhibiting behavioral problems, or doing poorly on exams/papers
- ✓ Express your concern in a nonjudgmental manner, while identifying the observed negative behaviors of alcohol use and the potential consequences
- ✓ Identify and refer them to available resources, while at the same time empowering them to make positive changes
- ✓ Have a follow-up contact with the student, to help ensure there is follow through on the actions agreed upon

While alcohol abuse is a serious problem that can affect students academically, personally and professionally, it is a treatable problem. The first goal is prevention, where efforts are made to increase student awareness of alcohol-related facts and problems, change false attitudes and beliefs and foster each student's determination to avoid high-risk drinking so they will be better informed and make healthier decisions about drinking.

However, prevention is not a sure method of combating this problem, as there will be students who will need more individualized attention. Faculty and staff can help assist these students toward a more positive path to college life by making referrals to the appropriate campus support services. For example, CAPS may be helpful for students, where they may be taught several ways to reduce their risk of heavy drinking, including managing stress, documenting alcohol consumption and exploring the impact of alcohol use on reaching personal and academic goals, or participating in motivational enhancement interventions provided by a CAPS staff member.

In the next issue, "Suicide and College Students"

Beyond the Classroom is a joint effort of
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