

Health promotion and alcohol in the campus community

www.heretohelp.bc.ca 2011

A significant challenge to health promotion around alcohol use in a postsecondary context is the cultural status that heavy drinking episodes have acquired as an accepted rite of passage marking transition into more independent young adulthood. Perhaps more broadly encouraging to hazardous consumption is the apparently popular notion that alcohol (and even drunkenness) is a staple if not essential component of fun-filled festive occasions with new and old friends alike.

Health promotion undermines its own mandate if it denies, ignores or simply rejects the profile alcohol enjoys and tries to counter artificial glamorization with arbitrary demonization. Candid recognition of the role that alcohol can play in enhancing mood, facilitating conviviality, and adding to celebration and revelry creates opportunity for critical exploration of how integral and substantial the social benefits actually are. It also allows for discussion and decision on how these benefits can best be retained while attending to the real threats use can pose to personal and collective wellbeing in a campus (and surrounding) community.

Promoting healthy relationships on the part of college and university students with substances such as alcohol includes but requires more than just an engaging way of educating undergraduates on the adverse consequences associated with immoderate intake. It involves more than just intervening with targeted

individuals and special-risk populations to correct exaggerated norms, counter inflated expectations, re-channel misplaced motivations and commend protective behavioural strategies. What more, then, needs to happen in addition to efforts to assist and equip individual students with enhanced skills to face challenges that might jeopardize their health and safety?

Cultivating greater connectedness among students and staff is a critical piece in creating an environment more conducive to reduced prevalence of hazardous and harmful substance use (as well as lowered incidence of other mental health difficulties). This can take the form of initiatives to provide alternative socialization that facilitate entertainment, recreation, friendships and wholesome networks, working against the likelihood that students will be marginalized, isolated and suffer loneliness. Offering optimal residential arrangements, organizing exciting events and activities, supplying suitable spaces for get-togethers and otherwise promoting opportunities for positive informal interaction (with faculty and staff as well as fellow students) is a challenging task, but one that can make a significant contribution to the campus climate while relativizing the place of alcohol.

A supportive environment can be all the more enhanced by strategies that engage people in service involvements whereby they consciously contribute to community building, both on and off

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campus. Participation in peer support programs, faculty-directed projects and local service groups (whether to satisfy curriculum requirements or as a voluntary undertaking) can reinforce purpose, confidence and responsibility while serving as a protective factor against the emergence of mental health problems. Active student presence in campus-community collaboration can give valuable learning experience in addressing municipal conditions that are unfavourable to positive mental health outcomes.

Interventions aimed at parents in order to foster positive relationships and constructive conversations between them and their young adult students can strengthen communication and add to resilience. Practical guidance handbooks and orientation sessions are among the means that may be pursued in such an initiative.

A truly robust health promotion approach will seek to influence and regulate the campus and surrounding environment through various avenues. An assortment of academic means (e.g., admission procedures, entrance events, course requirements and class scheduling, performance standards, departmental policies, curriculum infusion) may be judiciously employed to make conditions more congenial to health-consciousness and responsible behaviour in regard to alcohol. Positive implementation and consistent enforcement of an appropriate conduct policy can nurture a healthier ethos of mutual respect and consideration. Rigorous regulation of alcohol's availability can underscore the need to be vigilant in guarding against scenarios which could easily prove injurious. Similarly, regulation of promotion (advertising and sponsorship) can reinforce the recognition that alcohol is best treated as a commodity to be handled with care, moderation and frank acknowledgment of its potential for harm as well as enjoyment.

Partnerships with stakeholders from the surrounding community in local regulatory initiatives (e.g., around public marketing and management of alcohol, standards for student parties in residential dwellings) raise prospects not only for reduction of unwelcome off-campus incidents involving students, but also for stronger constructive contributions in an enhanced commitment to collective wellbeing.

What has been your campus's experience with these various efforts to limit negative fallout from the use of alcohol? Which strategies have been most successfully employed and why? Which have been neglected or inadequately implemented and how can they be incorporated or improved?

Written by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC



HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.