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Expressing concern about binge drinking can influence student choices

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Jeff Hayes, a professor of counseling psychology in Penn State's College of Education, helped conduct a study and co-wrote a journal article on alcohol consumption of college-aged students. The study focused on how students who had people in their lives who expressed concern about alcohol consumption were more likely to be concerned about their own alcohol consumption.

The consequences of binge drinking on college campuses can be dire, both for the student and others, according to Hayes. He pointed to a statistic that more than half of college students who sought counseling reported drinking alcohol at a level considered to be "hazardous" by the World Health Organization.

Hayes said that one of the goals of this study was to educate professionals who work with students, which he hopes will result in better student engagement and more effective outreach programs. The other goal of this study was to raise awareness of friends and family of students who abuse alcohol.

"We found that students who were not distressed about their binge drinking did not have other people who expressed concern to them about their alcohol consumption," said Hayes. "On the other hand, when a friend or family member expressed concerns to a student about her or his excessive drinking, it can help the student reflect on their alcohol consumption and begin to take steps to reduce it."

Hayes said that this study grew out of both professional and personal interests.

"My concerns about binge drinking stem from multiple perspectives," said Hayes. "As a licensed psychologist, I often hear about the effects of binge drinking on students' academic performance, on their relationships and on their mental and physical well-being. As a parent of three teenagers, including one in college, I am aware of and concerned about the ingrained culture of binge drinking among adolescents. Finally, as a researcher, I am disappointed by the preponderance of data indicating that existing efforts to curb binge drinking among college students are modestly successful, at best."

The data for the study were gathered through the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, which is a network of nearly 200 university counseling centers across the United States, and which is organized and run centrally by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Penn State, including faculty members and students in Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling and Special Education in the College of Education. The research team at Penn State analyzes data sent from college counseling centers throughout the U.S. and provides useful information back to practitioners in the form of webinars, annual reports, conference presentations and articles.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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