

When in Rome: Study-abroad students increase alcohol intake

October 11 2010

For most American students, spending a semester or two studying in a foreign country means the opportunity to improve foreign language skills and become immersed in a different culture. For others, studying abroad is more like a prolonged spring break: it can be months with fewer academic responsibilities, plentiful bars and alcohol, and parents far away.

New results from University of Washington researchers point to why some students drink more alcohol while abroad and suggest ways to intervene.

"We hear stories in the media and elsewhere about students going abroad, [drinking](#) too much and getting into trouble. But no one has ever measured this risky drinking behavior and there are no published studies of prevention strategies before they go abroad," said Eric Pedersen, a UW graduate student in psychology.

Like heavy drinking on campus, consequences of drinking while studying abroad can be mild, such as missed classes due to hangovers, or more severe, such as fights, injuries and regrettable sexual experiences. But heavy drinking while in a different country can present additional problems, including disrupted travel plans, promoting [negative stereotypes](#) of American students and even legal issues with a foreign government.

In the current issue of *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, Pedersen and

co-authors report that students doubled how much they drank while they were away, upping their consumption from about four [alcoholic drinks](#) per week while at home to about eight drinks per week while they were abroad.

"We can't really say if this is risky drinking or not," Pedersen said. "This could be a drink a night – a glass of wine at dinner – over the course of a week." Or, these students could be binge drinking, imbibing four drinks on Friday nights, for example, and another four drinks on Saturday nights.

Most of the 177 survey participants were abroad for three to five months. About two weeks before the students left, they completed a pre-departure survey asking how many alcoholic drinks they consumed each week, how much they planned to drink while they were away and what their perceptions were of the drinking habits of others studying abroad. A month after they returned to campus, they completed surveys about how much they drank while abroad and how much they were currently drinking.

When students returned to campus, generally they lessened their alcohol consumption to their pre-trip levels. But those who drank the most while away returned home drinking more heavily than when they left.

"That speaks to how there may be lasting changes in drinking behavior," Pedersen said.

Pedersen's data also support the idea that students younger than 21, the legal drinking age in the U.S., take advantage of more lax drinking laws abroad. The underage students in his study nearly tripled their drinking, whereas students over 21 doubled their intake of alcohol.

Drinking behavior also differed according to where in the world the

students studied. Those who went to Europe, Australia or New Zealand drank more heavily while they were abroad than those who went to Asia, Latin America, the Middle East or Africa.

"Students have misperceptions about drinking in different countries," Pedersen said. For instance, students may think "Germans drink all the time and that's what I'm going to do too," he said. Correcting those misperceptions before the students go abroad could decrease their alcohol consumption while traveling.

Similarly, students have misperceptions about how much other American students drink. They overestimate, and then may adjust their own drinking behavior to try to match what they think everyone else is doing, Pedersen said.

Pedersen and his co-authors recommend that prevention programs target students who are heavy drinkers and intend to drink heavily while abroad. Talking with these students before they travel could correct their misperceptions of their peers' drinking habits and those of residents in different countries, resulting in less alcohol intake.

"The study abroad experience presents both unique opportunities and unique risks for students," said Mary Larimer, director of the Center for the Study of Health and Risk Behaviors and associate director of the UW's Addictive Behaviors Research Center. Larimer is a co-author on the study and Pedersen's doctoral adviser. "Working with these students pre-departure is a terrific opportunity to help reduce their risks for drinking consequences while abroad, and may also help prevent difficulties when they return home," she said.

Pedersen is now looking into how study-abroad students pace their drinking during the week. "Our data generally shows that students drink moderately while abroad, but a subset of [students](#) drink more heavily and

may begin to experience consequences abroad," he said.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: When in Rome: Study-abroad students increase alcohol intake (2010, October 11)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-10-rome-study-abroad-students-alcohol-intake.html>

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