

Attacking the drinking culture on college campuses from different directions

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A multi-tiered effort designed to stem binge drinking at a large university and to change the drinking culture among its students produced notable results during the 2.5 years of an Indiana University study.

Freshmen living on campus showed significant drops in the average number of drinks consumed in a week; in the percentage who drank at least once a week in the last year; and in the proportion of students who engaged in [binge drinking](#) in the previous week.

Heavy drinking by [college](#) students and the associated consequences -- poor health and academic performance, riskier and more irresponsible behavior -- are problems on university campuses and in college towns nationwide. The program assessed by the IU study attacked the problem at three levels -- at the individual level through a mandated online class, at the peer level, through special training for resident assistants, and at an environmental level with educational campaigns that combined community and university resources.

"An ecologically guided, multi-tiered approach appears to be critical for success," said Dong-Chul Seo, associate professor in the Department of Applied Health Science at IU's School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. "The Task Force of the National Advisory Council on [Alcohol Abuse](#) and Alcoholism concluded in 2002 that to significantly reduce drinking on college campuses, the culture must be changed and that all the three tiers (individual, peer, and environment) must be

intervened. This has been widely advocated by college administrators and researchers. But, there is still a paucity of data on the effectiveness of such interventions."

The study, which took place from 2006-2009, involved a quasi-experimental format that compared freshmen who lived on campus with non-freshmen who lived off-campus. The non-freshmen were only exposed to the environmental interventions, which involved posters and other information that promoted several different anti-binge drinking and [responsible drinking](#) and driving campaigns.

Here are some of the findings:

- The average number of drinks consumed in a week declined by 15.9 percent for the freshmen but only 7.5 percent for the comparison group
- The percentage of students who drank at least once a week declined by 17.5 percent for the freshmen compared to 6.7 percent for the comparison group
- The percentage of students binge drinking declined by 12.2 percent among freshmen and by 1 percent for the comparison group.

Seo said these results are very encouraging but the study found some areas of concern. The freshmen in the study, for example, showed no significant changes in their perceptions that drinking helps them connect with peers, serves as a mechanism for male bonding or female bonding, or allows people to have more fun. The comparison group, he said, showed an unfavorable change in perceptions that drinking alcohol makes it easier to deal with stress and facilitates a connection with peers.

"This might be interpreted that the perceived benefits of drinking might not affect drinking behavior as much as one could expect. That is, drinking may not necessarily happen because one sees the direct benefit of drinking, given the substantial improvements in drinking behavior as well as in drinking norms and consequences observed in this study," said Seo, adding that these changes were unexpected and need further research.

Provided by Indiana University

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