

# Finding Common Ground for Effective Campus-Based Prevention

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This commentary reviews the controversy over use of the term *binge drinking* to describe college student alcohol consumption, argues for abandoning the term, and explains how doing so will help unify and reinvigorate campus-based prevention work. Binge drinking has been defined for men as 5 or more drinks in a row at least once in the previous 2 weeks and as 4 or more drinks for women. There is no scientific basis for focusing on this measure to the exclusion of other consumption measures; neither is there justification for labeling such consumption *binge drinking*, which reinforces an exaggerated view of student drinking. To build support for environmental management strategies to reduce alcohol-related problems, campus officials should avoid terminology that demonizes students and instead embrace the responsible majority of college students as an essential part of the solution.

The current debate on use of the term *binge drinking* to describe student alcohol consumption is profoundly important to prevention work at America's colleges and universities. It might be tempting to dismiss the controversy as an arcane academic dispute, or even as an energy-draining distraction, but that would be a mistake. At issue is how academic and community leaders view college students, what they communicate to the public about alcohol problems on campus, and the strategies they choose to reduce those problems.

The central argument I wish to make is simple: Campus and community officials need to find common ground that can unify their campus-based prevention work and give it new impetus. Essential to this process is abandoning the divisive term *binge drinking* and instead putting the focus where it belongs: not on alcohol consumption per se but on the negative consequences of drinking, including alcohol dependence.

A call to fight "binge drinking" invites dissension and reinforces student opposition to meaningful reforms for reducing alcohol problems on campus. In contrast, a broader agenda to reduce student deaths, serious injuries, violence, and other negative consequences of drinking can unite campus and community officials, faculty, and students in common cause and help pave the way for those reforms.

No longer using the term *binge drinking* means conceding that its popular use has served to exaggerate campus drinking problems. Could this admission undermine public support for alcohol control policies and other environmental management strategies for reducing alcohol consumption (DeJong et al., 1998)? This seems very unlikely. Alcohol-related problems on campus are too

severe to be swept under the rug. Remove the exaggeration and there is still an enormous social and public health problem that calls for strong preventive measures.

## Controversy Over the Term *Binge Drinking*

Use of the term *binge drinking* to describe student alcohol consumption was popularized by Henry Wechsler and his colleagues when they reported results of the first Harvard survey of college student drinking in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). The researchers defined binge drinking for men as having five or more drinks in a row at least once in the previous 2 weeks and for women as having four or more drinks. By this definition, nearly half (44%) of college students can be classified as binge drinkers (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000).

Some alcohol treatment specialists and researchers objected immediately to this expansive definition, noting that four or five drinks in a row does not conform to the popular notion of a binge, or to the standard clinical definition, which typically refers to an acute but extended episode of abusive drinking (Weingardt et al., 1998). To avoid confusion, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the lead federal agency for alcohol treatment and prevention research, has never endorsed this broader definition of *binge*. Likewise, the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, the lead journal in the field, does not accept research articles that use this meaning of *binge*, preferring instead the term "heavy, episodic drinking" (Schuckit, 1998).

A fundamental objection is that the *binge drinking* definition does not take into account several factors known to mediate alcohol's effects. In particular, it does not specify a time period over which the alcohol is consumed, neither does it factor in the drinker's body weight or drinking history. At best, binge drinking is a crude measure for defining "problem drinking." As reported by Perkins, DeJong, and Linkenbach (2001), very large percentages of so-called "binge drinkers" fail to reach blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) associated with mental and physical impairment, as estimated from survey self-reports. Similar findings were reported by Lange and Voas (2001) when comparing drinking self-reports against BAC measurements from field breath tests.

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Campus-based prevention experts have noted that students will challenge the *binge drinking* definition on this basis, which soon derails any meaningful dialogue about alcohol problems on campus. Put simply, students understand that, for many people, having four or five drinks over several hours does not substantially increase their risk of alcohol-related problems. Wechsler and Kuo (2000) drew attention to the fact that it is the heaviest drinkers who most often raise these objections, suggesting that their viewpoint can be ignored because of their denial. We cannot overlook, however, that heavy drinkers are not the only students who raise the challenge. Lederman and her colleagues (Lederman, Stewart, Laitman, Powell, & Goodhart, 2000) made a more cogent point: There is no useful purpose in insisting on terminology that causes the very students who are most in need of help to turn away. Effective communication means connecting with the target audience, and if using different language to describe alcohol problems on campus is required to do that, then so be it.

Another objection is that the binge drinking measure dichotomizes the concept of alcohol-related risk—binge (unsafe) versus nonbinge (safe)—when in fact there is a continuous relationship between alcohol consumption and risk (Edwards et al., 1994). The danger here is that people may assume that drinking amounts below those specified in the binge definition guarantees their safety. For example, The Century Council (2000), an alcohol industry sponsored prevention organization, widely distributes a brochure to parents of college students that defines “low-risk drinking” as “drinking no more than one drink per hour, maximum 3 for women, 4 for men.” It is axiomatic that some drinkers at this level will reach BACs associated with mental and physical impairment.

Can the binge drinking definition be adjusted to address these objections? Lange and Voas (2001) suggested that, using a .08% BAC as an objective criterion for binge drinking, a more appropriate cutoff point would be seven drinks for men and six drinks for women. As a practical matter, the public would find the declaration of a new binge drinking definition to be extremely confusing. More important, there is a risk that some young people would start to define “low-risk” drinking against this higher standard. Adjusting the binge drinking cutoff downward is not the answer, either, as that would make the definition even more overencompassing and engender even greater opposition.

One more failing of the binge drinking measure should be noted: Namely, as a dichotomous measure, it might serve to obscure real progress being made by campus-based prevention efforts. For example, male students who decreased their consumption from 10 drinks to 5 drinks in a row would still be classified as binge drinkers. A program or policy that led to such a sharp reduction should be touted as a success yet, assessed against this crude measure, it would be branded a failure. A more sensitive measure of alcohol consumption is clearly needed, specifically a continuous measure, such as quantity of alcohol consumed per week (Borsari, Neal, Collins, & Carey, 2001).

### The Political Battle Over “Binge Drinking”

The most vocal critics of the expansive binge drinking definition have been proponents of what is called “social norms marketing.” This prevention strategy is grounded in the well-established observation that college students generally have an exaggerated view

of how much alcohol other students are drinking (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Students come to have these misperceptions for several reasons, including news media reports on college drinking, entertainment television and films, beer and other alcohol advertising, and the perceptual salience of heavy drinking on campus (Perkins, 1997).

These misperceptions can have major repercussions. If college students believe that most students drink heavily, then rates of high-risk drinking will be sustained or may even rise in response. The entry of first-year students into college is a particular time of vulnerability. Incoming students are seeking information on how to act in their new role, away from parental control. If they come to believe that the way to fit in is through risky alcohol use, then many of them will be led down that path (DeJong & Linkenbach, 1999).

In response, social norms marketing campaigns try to correct misperceptions of current drinking norms on the basis of the idea that if students no longer have an exaggerated view of how much alcohol their peers are consuming, then fewer of them will be led to engage in high-risk drinking. The effort to get this message out—by means of publicity events, student newspapers, posters, e-mail messages, and other campus-based media—is called *social norms marketing*. Preliminary studies at several colleges and universities have suggested that this prevention strategy can result in sizable drops in self-reported alcohol consumption (DeJong & Linkenbach, 1999; Haines & Spear, 1996).

Proponents of the social norms approach express real concern about news accounts of the Harvard surveys. In their view, with the lay public equating *binge* with *bender*, newspaper headlines proclaiming that “nearly half” of college students are “binge drinkers” creates a distorted view of student drinking. Television reports reinforce this impression by showing scenes from out-of-control fraternity parties, implying that almost half of college students are engaged in extreme, dangerous drinking. The male student who has five beers over several hours is nowhere in sight. The worry is that, by increasing perceptions of normative pressure to drink, use of the overencompassing binge drinking definition may, in fact, be making the problem worse.

For this reason, the Inter-Association Task Force (IATF), a consortium of 21 leading organizations in higher education, voted unanimously to challenge use of the term *binge drinking*. As explained by Edward H. Hammond, president of Fort Hays State University and a founding member of the IATF, “Nobody is denying that alcohol abuse is a problem, but overstating it to create knee-jerk reactions and parental hysteria is not useful toward building positive coalitions of students, faculty, staff, and community leaders” (Hammond, 2000). IATF’s policy statement occasioned a front-page story in *The New York Times* that revealed the controversy over the binge drinking definition and the meaning of that controversy in the prevention field (Zernike, 2000).

In response, Wechsler (2000) accused his detractors of inappropriately downplaying the problem, feeding into student denial, and doing the alcohol industry’s bidding. He has also tried to turn the tables on the proponents of social norms marketing by claiming that he can prove that the misperception of drinking norms is an unsubstantiated myth (Wechsler & Kuo, 2000), a claim they hotly dispute (DeJong, 2000). Left unanswered by Wechsler, however, are the basic questions his critics have raised about the binge drinking definition.

### A Misplaced Focus on Alcohol Consumption

I think there is an even more significant problem with the binge drinking definition: It perpetuates a misplaced focus on the quantity of alcohol being consumed rather than on the negative consequences of drinking, which should be the true concern.

“Alcoholism” has traditionally not been defined by how much a person drinks but by the role of alcohol in that person’s life and the negative consequences he or she suffers. Indeed, diagnostic tools used to identify problem drinkers (e.g., the Michigan Alcohol Screening Test) do not ask about quantity of alcohol consumed. By extension, it makes little sense to define campus alcohol problems by how much students are drinking.

Wechsler and Austin (1998) counterargued that the binge drinking measure provides an easy shorthand for identifying problem drinking, noting that men who consume five or more drinks in a row, and women who consume four or more, are more likely to experience alcohol-related problems compared to lighter drinkers. Prevention specialists frequently interpret this statement to mean that 5/4 drinks is the critical point at which people begin to experience a high likelihood of major negative consequences, but that is not the case.

Does this cited evidence justify a cutoff point of 5/4+ drinks? No, because a similar statement could be made no matter what cutoff point (e.g., 7/6+ drinks, 3/2+ drinks) is selected. This is true because, beyond very low consumption levels, risk-function analyses typically show the relationship between alcohol consumption and risk of serious alcohol-related problems to be a monotonically increasing function (Edwards et al., 1994).

### Using Binge Drinking Statistics to Bring Attention to the Problem

Solving any public health problem requires consistent attention from community and political leaders and a strong commitment of resources, neither of which can occur without the drive of public demand. There is no doubt that news accounts of the first Harvard survey in 1994 helped bring attention to campus alcohol problems. College presidents and other academic leaders had already identified alcohol as a major concern, but being able to quantify the problem through a national study somehow made the problem seem more urgent (Presidents Leadership Group, 1997).

The question arises, therefore, whether the call to discontinue using the term *binge drinking* runs the risk of undermining current public support for campus-based prevention (Wagenaar, Harwood, Toomey, Denk, & Zander, 2000). After all, abandoning this term means no longer branding nearly half of all college students as problem drinkers. Could less dramatic statistics lead campus and community officials to say that the problem had been overblown and is now unworthy of attention? Could officials in the alcohol industry seize on this correction of the record to influence local, state, and federal policymakers?

This scenario is implausible. In 1997, 3 years after the first Harvard survey was published, student deaths from alcohol poisoning at both Louisiana State University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology created a national sensation, with a cover story in *Time* and extensive coverage by other major news outlets. Those two tragedies galvanized public concern in a way that no statistical report ever could. Press interest in this problem has

remained high ever since. In this context, overstating the problem through binge drinking statistics is simply unnecessary for convincing campus and community leaders that action is required. The evidence is all around them.

### Abandoning the Term *Binge Drinking*

Reason dictates that the expansive definition of “binge drinking” to describe student alcohol consumption no longer be used.

In the final analysis there is no convincing rationale for applying this definition, or even for focusing on the measure of 5/4+ drinks instead of other consumption measures. Use of a term that has weak scientific merit undermines the credibility of campus-based prevention efforts, makes it more difficult to build a consensus for environmental management strategies, and gives the alcohol industry the ammunition it needs to attack new policy proposals.

Attention must also be paid to the several unintended results of focusing on “binge drinking”: wrongly implying that drinking below “binge” levels is inherently safe; handicapping evaluators with a crude and misleading measure for assessing changes in alcohol problems; reinforcing the false impression that students have to drink heavily to fit in; and alienating many students, faculty, and administrators who resent how the term has been used to demonize college students.

### Finding Common Ground to Motivate Reform

I favor abandoning the term *binge drinking* for yet another reason: Switching attention from alcohol consumption per se to the negative consequences of drinking is an essential first step in forging campus and community coalitions that can fight for new policies and other environmental management strategies to reduce alcohol problems on campus.

Public concern about these problems is best raised by highlighting the secondhand effects of alcohol consumption—that is, the negative consequences that students experience because of other students’ misuse of alcohol. College alcohol surveys have found that a majority of students experience these consequences, which include interrupted study and sleep; having to take care of a drunken student; being insulted or humiliated; having a serious argument or quarrel; having property damaged; unwanted sexual advances; being pushed, hit, or assaulted; and being a victim of sexual assault or date rape (Presley, Meilman, & Cashin, 1996; Wechsler, Lee, et al., 2000).

Simultaneously, researchers should try to correct the misperceptions that college students, faculty, and administrators have about how much students drink. If students believe that most of their peers drink heavily, then rates of high-risk drinking will be sustained or may even rise. If faculty and administrators share this exaggerated view, they may fear student resistance and be inhibited from taking forceful action to reduce the problem. As noted, preliminary studies show that this dynamic can be turned around through a campus-based media campaign that informs the campus community about how much drinking is really going on, as opposed to what is thought to be the case.

What will emerge from a social norms marketing campaign is a strong sense that the majority of students abstain or drink alcohol responsibly most of the time. By extension, there will also be a new recognition that the minority of students who do drink irre-

sponsibly are not only hurting themselves but also are compromising the safety and quality of life for all students. Campus community leaders can use this as a rallying point for building a broad town-gown coalition that supports environmental management strategies for prevention.

Alcohol industry critics have observed that the industry tries to focus public attention on the minority of "problem drinkers" and "alcoholics" who are at higher risk for alcohol problems rather than on the alcohol-related problems caused by all drinkers (DeJong, 1996). A focus on the former directs attention to alcohol screening and treatment programs, whereas a focus on the latter highlights the need for broad policies designed to reduce alcohol consumption. Wishing to thwart such policies, industry officials argue that the irresponsible actions of a small minority of drinkers should not lead to policies that penalize all drinkers.

An immediate question, then, is whether a sharper focus on the minority of students who drink irresponsibly will undermine the case for new policies and other environmental management strategies to reduce alcohol consumption.

In my opinion, there is no reason why this should happen. First, consider that the number of problem drinkers on campus, although not as large as the binge drinking statistics would imply, is still considerable. Indeed, the most extreme drinkers, representing about 1 in 5 college students overall, consume about two thirds of all the alcohol that students report drinking (Wechsler, Molnar, Davenport, & Baer, 1999). These heavy drinkers do not suffer the majority of alcohol-related problems experienced by college students; neither do they cause the majority of secondhand effects; but they do cause a large, disproportionate share of these negative consequences (Saltz, 2001). This is a large group of students—sufficiently large, in fact, to make the need for environmental management strategies very compelling. Dealing with a problem of this magnitude on a student-by-student basis simply cannot work.

Next, consider that support for environmental prevention strategies can be reinforced by feeding back evidence of that support to the campus community. For example, the 1997 Harvard survey (Wechsler, Nelson, & Weitzman, 2000) revealed widespread national support for various measures to reduce high-risk drinking, including strict enforcement of the rules (65% of respondents), prohibiting kegs on campus (60%), "cracking down" on Greeks (60%), and banning on-campus advertisements from local alcohol outlets (52%). If students learn that they are part of a large majority on their campus that wants policy reform and stricter enforcement of the rules, they will be emboldened to speak out and be heard.

It is important to note that alcohol control policies and stricter enforcement, if properly implemented, will affect all student drinkers, not just the most extreme problem drinkers. This is a desirable outcome. Changing the environment to reduce exposure risk for an entire population, not just those at greatest risk, is the very essence of environmentally focused prevention work (Rose, 1992). As noted, even though the most extreme drinkers are at higher risk, they are too small in number to cause the majority of alcohol problems. Therefore, eliminating the majority of alcohol problems means also driving down consumption among students who drink more moderately or drink at extreme levels only on rare occasions (Saltz, 2001).

That said, it would be unwise to "sell" alcohol control policies and other environmental management strategies on this basis. Tell

students truthfully that certain policies must be imposed to deal with irresponsible students whose problem drinking puts the entire community at risk, and they will support those measures. Tell them instead that all student drinkers are part of the problem and that new policies are needed to drive down consumption at all levels, and they will stand opposed.

### Summary

I have outlined here an alternative paradigm for building broad support for environmental management strategies that address alcohol problems on campus, one that is grounded in a more accurate view of the true drinking norms on campus and that views the responsible majority of college students as an essential part of the solution. Students are not the enemy but indispensable allies.

Campus and community officials need to stop using the term *binge drinking* and instead inform students that they are part of a true majority that shares certain positive norms and values. They need to point out that students' standards of conduct are routinely violated by a minority of students whose high-risk alcohol use compromises everyone's safety and quality of life, and they need to notify students that the majority of their peers support environmentally focused policy change and stricter enforcement, just as they themselves do.

If campus and community officials follow the old paradigm, with its focus on an overencompassing definition of binge drinking, they run the risk of breeding division and active opposition. If they follow this new paradigm instead, they will find common ground for support for effective campus-based prevention.

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