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Colleges, Officials Looking To Reduce Campus Drinking

Proclamation takes 'realistic' approach to effecting change

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West Hartford — “Animal House.” “Girls Gone Wild.” Captain Morgan rum ads. MTV’s coverage of spring break.

Such depictions make it hard to imagine college life without drinking, or to believe substance abuse begins the day a student walks on campus.

That is why a group of college and state officials came together Friday to explore a more “realistic” approach to curbing campus drinking by targeting specific groups, including so-called binge drinkers.

“Drinking among young people is so embedded in our culture it’s a rite of passage. With all due respect, saying ‘just say no’ won’t work,” said Peter Rockholz, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. “You can’t tell adolescents we will eliminate alcohol from campus. They would only say ‘get real.’ We need to do something accomplishable.”

Meeting at the University of Hartford’s 1877 Club, nearly two dozen college presidents signed a proclamation supporting a “healthy campus” initiative to promote efforts to reduce binge drinking on campuses. Considering the numerous campaigns already under way, those in attendance were aware that the proclamation could be perceived as quixotic.

Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford, joked at the beginning of the event: “I think the hot air in here is making the room levitate.”

But many seriously welcomed the proclamation, which they said set a “realistic” goal of reducing high-risk consumption. They said it acknowledged that it takes years of consistent and effective effort to produce any significant change in student behavior and that the potential for substance abuse is not spontaneously generated on campuses but “inherited” as students arrive with tendencies and preconceived notions about how they’re supposed to behave.

The initiative represents a collaboration among colleges, the state Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Higher Education and Gov. M. Jodi Rell's Prevention Partnership.

"My concern is the high end of consumption, so this is a more realistic approach," said Thomas Szigethy, director of Alcohol and Other Drug Education and Services at the University of Connecticut. "If a couple of 20-year-olds have two or three beers and walk home, I'm not going to be as concerned as someone doing funnels, stumbling home or getting in a car. If you shave off some of the high risk, you reduce a large portion of those most responsible for potentially damaging behavior."

Aliza Makuch, a program coordinator, said the partnership would make funding and resources available to colleges. She said it might provide, for example, training for residential assistants in how to intervene with students they suspect of substance abuse.

Makuch said the partnership would recognize that each campus has its own "culture" and would help a college determine if a specific group, such as male athletes or fraternity members, was particularly vulnerable to binge drinking. The partnership would then help provide counseling or outreach programs targeting the at-risk group.

Connecticut College President Norman Fainstein, one of those who signed the proclamation Friday, said first-year students, particularly in their first six weeks on campus, are most vulnerable to the pressures of drinking. As a result, he said the college tries to reach those students in their residence halls and to make them aware that those with substance-abuse problems can get treatment without being stigmatized.

Fainstein said Friday's event established a "political culture" that reassured presidents and deans that they were not alone in their efforts. Szigethy said it was reassuring that interest was coming "not only from those working in the trenches, but those at the top."

At UConn, students over 21 are permitted limited amounts of alcohol in their rooms. Students under 21 who are caught with alcohol must attend a group intervention session; second-time offenders must attend a one-on-one session.

Szigethy said many students fail to call 911 or to deal with someone who is sick from alcohol because they fear punishment. UConn tells students that if they make an adult choice to drink they must make an adult choice to deal with the consequences. Part of this is recognizing it is better to help a sick friend get medical help than to risk that person dying or becoming seriously ill.

Szigethy and Makuch said binge drinking is often driven by a disconnect between perception and reality. UConn often asks students how much they drink and how much they believe others are drinking. Students typically believe others are drinking far more than they actually are. He said a step in reducing binge drinking is to get

students to “drink to the level of reality.”

“It starts with a cultural change, a change to the social norm,” Szigethy said. “We need to raise awareness that the norm is not to get plastered and that people are making other choices.”

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