

The Report on Social Norms

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Special Issue: The State of Social Norms

Editor's Note:

This special issue of The Report on Social Norms features contributions from national experts on the theme "The State of Social Norms." Its issue coincides with the Seventh National Conference on the Social Norms Model to be held July 21-23 in Chicago. In the seven years since the first social norms conference the field has evolved and advanced considerably. These expert contributions provide a snapshot of where we are and the challenges ahead.

Each contributor was asked to answer one or more of the following questions: how would you assess the state of the field, what is the current state of knowledge, how successful or unsuccessful has social norms been, how is it being used (in what settings and for what topics), what are the emerging challenges or issues that need to be addressed, and what are the next steps to be taken?

The responses are varied and rich, including a summary of challenges (Johannessen), an overview of the conference (Rice), the need for science to inform practice (Linkenbach & colleagues), critical issues raised by the research (Kilmer & Larimer), the influence of program design and evaluation on assessments of effectiveness (Perkins), and a response to Henry Wechsler's criticisms of social norms (DeJong). An emerging theme is the need for science-based prevention – through well-articulated theory, knowledge of existing research, and careful program design and evaluation.

The interested reader can review my own answers to these questions in the April 2004 issue of the Report (Volume 3 #7) in an article titled "Emerging Challenges and Issues for the Social Norms Approach" where the challenges addressed include: program readiness, message salience, credibility of message, evaluation comprehensiveness and integrity, and responding to critics.

This issue concludes the third year of publication of The Report on Social Norms. We look forward to learning about and writing about future challenges and successes in the years ahead.

Best wishes,
Alan Berkowitz, PhD
Editor

Going from College... to High School... and Beyond

By Rich Rice, National Social Norms Resource Center



Assisting in the programming for the annual National Social Norms Conference provides an opportunity to assess the state of the field. Each year the proposals that the National Social Norms Center receives become increasingly varied, as more and more individuals come to understand the social norms model and work to adapt it to the particular issues that they wish to address. Given that, I would like to describe, in fairly general terms, three kinds of sessions to be offered at this year's conference. This snapshot can tell us something about where social norms currently is and some of the directions that it appears to be taking.

Going from College... Ten to fifteen years ago the number of colleges and universities that were using the social norms approach was exceedingly small. As knowledge of this promising practice grew throughout the 1990s more and more schools began to use it in some way. Much of this was driven by the seemingly intractable nature of two principal concerns of administrators and health professionals: heavy episodic alcohol consumption and tobacco use. If *something* seemed to be working (the thinking

seemed to be) it was certainly worth a try.

But social norms is not simply a new way of doing the same old thing. It presents a number of paradigm shifts, chief among them being a shift in content away from a focus on *problems* and *deficits* to a consistent promotion of the attitudinal and behavioral *solutions* and *assets* inherent in the majority of a population. How to measure the latter, effectively promote them in order to positively impact a group's perceptions, and then accurately evaluate one's efforts requires a complex set of skills that are often quite different from those that many health professionals went to school to acquire. A solid foundation in the basic tasks and strategies of social norms is thus as important today as ever. The National Conference has always presented strong offerings in all of the key areas—data collection and analysis, media development and testing, and both process and outcome evaluation—and it will again this year, with a wide array of sessions offered by acknowledged experts and seasoned practitioners.

... to High School ... Where social norms was 10 to 15 years ago vis-à-vis universities and colleges is exactly where it is today vis-à-vis high schools: poised to

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Questions and Challenges Ahead

By Koreen Johannessen, University of Arizona

As a practitioner, trainer and evaluator of social norms, I have identified several emerging issues and challenges for the future of social norms theory, research and practical application. These issues are informed by ten years of successful application of the social norms approach at the University of Arizona (UA) and by extensive involvement in a number of other social norms efforts.

There are too few social scientists committed to conducting good social norms research. This issue affects all other aspects of the state of the field. Without a strong theoretical base and good research study design it is difficult to increase our knowledge or demonstrate the efficacy of social norms as a valid prevention strategy.

How much message is enough? We have not identified the dosage level of social norms marketing messages necessary to influence the misperceptions (i.e. how many times should we publish, or announce the norm?).

Is misperception correction always necessary? We need to know if correcting misperception is always necessary for a change in behavior and if so at what level.

How to accurately measure changes in perception? We lack adequate measures to document change. For example, should we standardize misperception questions to enhance our ability to compare “apples to apples” across programs?

Does social norms work better for some groups than others? We need to identify which groups may benefit most. For example, UA’s sorority specific social norms program has shown significant reductions for sorority women in high risk drinking, and increases in protective behaviors during a period of time when the general social norms campaign showed very little change for all women.

Can social norms be used for other public health or behavioral issues? Examples exist of using social norms to

address other issues (for example, smoking prevention, decreasing cheating on your taxes). More research is needed to uncover the other potential uses of social norms.

The importance of control groups. It is difficult to identify a true control group for social norms marketing since all students on campus or all students in the target population receive the intervention. In addition, schools may be reluctant to serve as controls due to fears of being negatively compared to schools in the experimental group.

Need for standardized measures of success. There is little agreement that harm reduction is an appropriate goal in substance abuse prevention. In addition, we have not identified a set of evaluation indicators that could be used from setting to setting that would indicate that harm reduction has occurred. Although change in public conversation is an important intermediary outcome we have not identified the indicators that would tell us when a change in the public conversation has been achieved.

Credibility is critical. Social norms marketing sponsorship and credibility of source information have a significant influence. The target population’s perception of the sponsoring agency can enhance or detract from believability of an intervention. Agency motivation—“do they have my best interests at heart or are they trying to protect their own interests”—is another important influence.

Distinguishing central mission vs. supporting goal. Many institutions are in the business of education (not public health) and enhanced health and safety may not be a priority (nice to have but not central to the mission). Large institutions are more like small cities with multiple competing agendas. Organizing key stakeholders to unite behind a public health issue such as heavy drinking is formidable and often does not happen until a crisis threatens the institution and the organization’s attorney voices concern.

Public relations concerns.

Combining social norms which “turns up the volume on the norms” and environmental management strategies which often begin with “turning up the volume on the problem” can make the public relations folks at any institution very uncomfortable. Social norms practitioners need to learn how to address their concerns.

Need for adequate staffing and training. Those who are charged with conducting a social norms intervention often do not have adequate training in social norms theory or practice. Staff members are often new hires with little political clout or public health experience and therefore poorly positioned to get the job done. Programs are notoriously under-funded for the kind of impact that is expected.

Lack of longitudinal studies. Fundable projects typically have a short shelf life. This makes it impossible to follow the progress of individuals or cohorts over time.

Ability to collect social norms data. Collecting sensitive data for both norms message development and evaluation—including data on some illegal activities—can be impeded by institutional internal review board’s (IRB’s) and governing bodies can sometimes have a negative influence on data collection efforts (especially when survey questions and techniques are subject to new IRB standards and new committee members each year). Techniques such as web-based surveying may not be acceptable. Policies about how this data can be used and who manages the data often need to be resolved before a strategy can be implemented.

Confusion over the social norms approach. Political attacks on social norms theory, practice and efficacy (conducted in large part through the media) have impeded progress and made it difficult for institutions to support what appears to be “a controversial” strategy. Ordinarily scientific knowledge is shared through scholarly

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Back to the Future: Three Commitments for Advancing Social Norms Science

by Jeff Linkenbach, Gary Lande, and Jerome Evans, Montana State University

In the movie classic “Back to the Future,” actor Michael J. Fox and his rag-tag team of applied scientists led by Marty McFly find themselves desperately racing their retrofitted DeLorean back in time so that they might positively alter future events. One outcome was certain—somehow the world would forever be different as a result of their efforts. Those of use involved with social norms are currently embarking on a similar journey as we reflect upon our past and chart our future. Three key commitment areas will aid us in the collective pursuit of advancing our field: Rediscovering the Roots of Social Norms, Balancing the Roles of Scientist and Practitioner, and Embracing the Future of Social Norms Science.

Rediscovering the Roots of Social Norms. A great body of research preceded social norms and paved the way for its development. However, many researchers and practitioners in the field of social norms are insufficiently informed about the sociological and social-psychological theories and research that form the foundation for our work. This tremendous resource is being taken for granted. We must ground our work in social psychology, paying scrupulous attention to the history of quantitative and qualitative study of social behavior. By re-examining our research roots, we can determine the relevance of this work to the field today. To do so we make the following commitment:

Commitment #1: *We pledge a renewed interest in the history of social psychology and other fields which pre-date social norms. We will make a thorough study of the literature that is the foundation for social norms, and make its lessons available to those doing academic work or putting the theories into practice in the field.*

In our work at the MOST Of Us Project we try and implement this commitment by creating a culture of learning that recognizes the pioneering work of “social norms” leaders who came before current notions of social norms theory.

For example, psychiatrist Alfred Adler’s concepts of social interest (the notion that all behavior has roots in perception of social context) have been helpful.

Balancing the Roles of Scientist and Practitioner. We are concerned about the deepening division between academic social norms researchers and the prevention professionals who apply the theory in the field. There is a danger that researchers are ignoring the applications of social norms theory, and that practitioners are carrying out interventions without attention to the best practices being pioneered by their academic counterparts. Social norms researchers and practitioners should inspire and strengthen one another’s work. To achieve this end, it is vital that we renew our pledge to act as *scientist practitioners*. We must advance social norms theory without forgetting its potential as an application, and apply the theory using the strictest scientific standards.

Commitment #2: *We will inventory our skills in experimental design, test construction, and the statistics required for analyzing social norms campaign data. We will disclose our methodology and assessment techniques, and discuss them with our colleagues involved in the academics and application of social norms theory.*

Each of us can accept this commitment by working to develop our “weaker sides” when it comes to becoming scientists / practitioners. Thus, if we are most comfortable as practitioners can we dare to ask questions and seek answers using the tools of researchers? As researchers, we can recognize the critical value of knowledge that is generated when we get out into the field.

Embracing the Future of Social Norms Science. Social norms is a young and growing field, and new research is being added to the literature all of the time. The question is—how well are we translating this *current* research into our campaign planning? It is essential that we stay curious about and informed of new methodological and technological developments that could increase the efficacy or scientific rigor of social norms interventions.

We must keep up with the publications and research of our colleagues in the field, be open to innovation and development, and make sure every one of our interventions reflects the current best practices and procedures for campaign planning, survey design, operations and assessment.

Commitment #3: *Our work must be informed by the most recent relevant social science research. We will watch for and report research findings from the application of social norms to real-life problems. Without fear, we will examine our existing strategies and tactics in the light of emerging social science research.*

At Montana State University, we are constantly challenging our current assumptions about social norms because of new technologies like our web survey or an experience at one of our project sites. These current data allow us to then ask the difficult questions about survey design and research methodology. We find that we have more questions than answers and that this keeps us interested in learning.

Summary. The positive impacts of social norms will be measured by our success at meeting these three commitments. We must understand the historical foundations upon which social norms theory was founded and credit those pioneers who paved the way for our work. We must strive to balance the skills required by the scientist-practitioner model, and learn from the symbiotic relationship between research and practice. Finally, we must have the courage to embrace emerging technologies and research at the risk of challenging some of our current views of our work. It is through the rigor of these perspectives that we can be sure that our race back to the future of social norms will result in positive benefits to the communities that we serve.

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The State of Social Norms: Emerging Questions and Future Steps

By Jason R. Kilmer, *The Evergreen State College and Saint Martin's College* and Mary E. Larimer, *University of Washington*

Social norms research has seen tremendous advances over the last few years. In this limited space, we will attempt to highlight some important implications of recent research. These include issues regarding relevance of the normative reference group based on campus size and gender, implementation strategies using web and computer technology, and the impact of normative information on abstainers or very light drinkers. As the quest for effective interventions and prevention efforts continues, it is important for practitioners to be aware of recent research so that interventions being designed can incorporate suggestions based on empirical findings, and so that interventions can help provide answers to important questions about intervention effectiveness.

Relevance of the Normative Message: Campus Size. Many social norms campaigns targeting alcohol use provide information about what “most” students consume when they party. Even normative feedback in individually delivered interventions involves the comparison of the perceived norm to the actual campus norm (i.e., what the “typical” student does). In a recent review by Borsari and Carey (2003) they noted the potential differential impact of such a campaign on smaller versus larger campuses. They suggested that norms campaigns may be more effective on smaller campuses because of a greater potential influence. On larger campuses students may feel that they do not personally know most of the other students and may see these students’ behavior as having less relevance.

Ongoing or future research comparing campaign outcomes across schools would benefit from attempting to evaluate predictors of intervention effectiveness and better understand the impact of campus size. Perhaps this even begins in a lab setting, requesting that students rate the relevance of the behaviors of numerous student groups on campus to understand differences in the relevance of what “most” students do. Thus, the

relative salience of different norms can be evaluated in future studies.

Salience of the Normative Message: Gender Differences. Borsari and Carey (2003) also concluded that norms from groups that are more proximal will be more likely to result in behavior change than norms from less relevant groups. Lewis and Neighbors (in press) provide some important empirical evidence about this issue, but demonstrate that proximal norms are not always indicated. They showed that perceived same-sex norms are more strongly associated with problematic drinking than more general norms, and demonstrated that perceived same-sex norms for women were stronger predictors of actual alcohol consumption than they were for men. The authors concluded that at least for women, gender-specific same sex norms could be a better reference group in normative interventions. They suggested that same-sex specific feedback was not indicated for men. Future studies could advance the field’s understanding of this issue by testing the relative effectiveness of more tailored interventions versus more generic ones.

Web or Computer Delivery of Interventions. Neighbors, Larimer, and Lewis (in press) evaluated a computer-delivered normative feedback intervention with a sample of college students. Their results indicated that, compared to a control group, students who received the intervention changed their perceived norms and reduced their alcohol consumption at follow-up. Subsequent analyses demonstrated that changes in norm perception mediated the reduction in alcohol consumption. As college campuses see an infusion of computer-savvy college students both familiar with and comfortable with web- and computer-based programs, this strategy for intervention delivery can also be studied further. Particularly as campuses seek time- and cost-effective approaches to addressing college student drinking, understanding the strengths, limitations, and variations of a computerized approach will be of great value.

Implications for Abstainers. An earlier article by Borsari and Carey (2001) reviewed the research on peer influences on college drinking and provided information with significant implications for college students who are abstainers. The authors stated that not drinking at a social function leads to receiving several offers to drink, that students who are more socially secure can resist these peer offers of alcohol, and that new students attempting to develop friendships and fit in may be more likely to accept offers of alcohol. These students would be appropriate targets for normative education confirming for them that they are not alone in the decision to abstain. Because skills training approaches have a well-established foundation in the scientific literature (Larimer & Cronce, 2002), perhaps evaluating the effect of skills training (either in drink refusal, setting limits, or social skills training) as a complement to norm education or prevention efforts with this population would be worthwhile. Additionally, since normative approaches can be utilized to impact students’ impressions of the drinking of their peers, perhaps there are educational/prevention opportunities to change student perceptions of others’ abstinence (i.e., they really don’t want to be convinced into having a drink)?

Conclusions and Future Directions. There is still a great deal to understand about the various applications and extensions of social norms interventions. Future research could look at predictors of norm intervention effectiveness, with a specific focus on for whom this approach seems most and least effective and whether there are iatrogenic effects for any segment of the population. This could include everything from evaluating differential impact based on campus size, year in school, sex, ethnicity, living group, student identification with the campus, and individual student goals, values, or characteristics. Carefully designed experimental studies in the lab may help guide message framing and message

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Getting Social Norms Results by Improving Implementation and Assessment

By H. Wesley Perkins, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

I am grateful for this opportunity to take stock of where we are as a field and where we might be headed. Since I can only address a few issues here, I will leave much to other contributing colleagues and concentrate my remarks on the issue of “getting results.”

People working in areas of risk behavior reduction and health promotion all know that obtaining demonstrated positive effects from their intervention work is critical for evidence-based programming. This is especially important in light of occasional reports of social norms interventions not achieving the desired outcome. As more studies are implemented by a wider range of health and education specialists “trying out” the approach, along with more success, there are also more reports of “failures.”

These reports of an apparent lack of effect do not mean that the theory or approach is flawed. We know without question that exaggerated misperceptions of problem behavior abound and that people do behave in accordance with their perceived norms. If one can reduce erroneously negative perceptions of normative attitudes and behavior, a reduction in problem behavior will follow. So it is essential to understand what might lead to a judgment of “failure.” Why do we sometimes observe no change after a social norms initiative? The reported “failures” provide us lessons about two phases of social norms programs: great effort and sophisticated work must occur at both the *implementation* and *assessment stages* of a social norms project. Neglecting implementation or assessment can lead to a disappointing conclusion.

Implementation issues. What types of implementation are more likely to assure success? I can note a few key elements here. 1) Projects should not concentrate exclusively on a single message about one behavior. Simply mass publicizing a single message over and over again may ultimately be received as a jingle or viewed as more of a health message

logo than as actual credible news information about the normative profile of peers. It is much better to give information on a variety of both injunctive (attitudinal) and descriptive (behavioral) norms. 2) The credibility of the data is crucial. Most people will not immediately believe the true norm even when it is presented with the most credible sources because their misperceptions are often quite extreme and entrenched. But if perceived norms are to become more accurate, that change is more likely if the source has some scientific credibility and if it can be locally identified as such. The source of data should be given more attention in media messages (larger print space than a footnote), for example, to make the point about where it comes from and how representative it is. 3) The “dosage” of credible messages must remain high over an extended period of time to begin to change minds. 4) We must use multiple strategies to deliver the message about true norms because people learn through different mechanisms. Receiving accurate messages through multiple venues can produce a synergistic effect to break down old perceptions.

Methodological issues. A project may have had an excellent implementation and still find no positive result, however. It is actually quite easy for a real success to go undiscovered with an unsophisticated evaluation. Indeed, one of the most problematic aspects of social norms evaluations is the limited or poor methodological and quantitative assessment that is frequently conducted by local evaluators. In several instances I have seen that a careful examination of the data leads to a quite different result than the simple comparison of aggregate results for measures at time 1 and time 2. What looks like no effect on the surface

may be hiding a significant impact. As the expression goes, “the devil is in the details.” That is, a poor analysis can erroneously mislead project personnel to conclude that they are not making progress when in fact important strides have been made. Just as any presumed positive effect might disappear when more sophisticated assessments are employed, hasty conclusions of no effect can be overturned with better analyses. Often the positive effects of norms interventions get lost when evaluators do only simple pre/post time comparisons or introduce only rudimentary statistical controls.

Here are some important methodological issues to consider: 1) When evaluating a student population there is always a concern about what is happening over time at surrounding schools. No change may represent a positive effect in the face of worsening conditions in comparable populations. 2) One may need to assess and control for differing student baseline characteristics of normative behavior in the population that “comes in the door” each year for a school population. 3) It is often important to control for several demographic characteristics that may shift within samples over

time. 4) Varying rates of exposure to the program intervention in various subpopulations will play a role. If significant exposure was achieved in only a limited portion of a population, then overall change in the larger population is not likely to achieve statistical significance. Thus measures of exposure and analyses that incorporate these intervening variables must often be considered. 5) Similarly, turnover factors in a student body are a crucial consideration. A new cohort each year represents at least one-quarter turnover in most high school and college populations. If a point-in-time

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Social Norms Marketing Campaigns: Examining the Controversy

By William DeJong, Boston University School of Public Health

Remember when you first learned about the scientific method? The process of scientific investigation seemed so orderly. Researchers articulate a hypothesis. They execute carefully controlled studies, and evidence accumulates either for or against the hypothesis. Above all, the community of researchers works in common cause, guided by the data and dedicated to the truth.

The history of science is a more complicated tale, of course, for all human enterprise, including scientific inquiry, is compromised by human weakness. Even so, our faith in the scientific method remains. We still see it as the best means of advancing human knowledge, and we expect researchers to adhere to its basic principles when conducting their work.

In this context, consider the heated controversy over social norms marketing campaigns, an innovative strategy using campus-based media to correct exaggerated perceptions of student drinking norms and thereby reduce student drinking. Several scientific investigations—including case studies, quasi-experimental research, and true experiments—have demonstrated that changing young people's perceptions of peer drinking norms can lead to reduced alcohol consumption. The strongest evidence comes from randomized trials of brief motivational interviews, in which problem drinkers learn for the first time that they have been drinking far more than their more moderate peers—that is, that their drinking greatly exceeds the campus norm.

The evidence on campus-based media campaigns is more mixed. Case studies and quasi-experimental research have been supportive, but not uniformly. Proponents of social norms campaigns readily admit that more research is needed, but they also note that the balance of evidence to date is very encouraging.

In response, Dr. Henry Wechsler, a Harvard lecturer, has unremittingly attacked this work, mounting nothing less than a full-blown public relations campaign to undermine this promising

innovation. Consider a recent evaluation published by Wechsler and his colleagues in the *Journal of Alcohol Studies*. The method was straightforward, but severely limited. The Harvard team asked a senior administrator at several campuses to answer the following question: “Has your institution used any of the following alcohol education programs or services on your campus?” One item was “social norms campaign.” The investigators found no decreases in student drinking associated with having a campaign.

What are the study's limitations? First, the researchers assumed that a single administrator could reliably report an institution's programs and policies. In fact, campus officials often have varying opinions about what is in place. Second, the term “social norms campaign” was not defined. This is not a universally known term. Additionally, the level of activity necessary to call the effort a “campaign” was not specified. Would a college president's speech to incoming freshmen qualify? Some administrators might think so. Third, the Harvard team made no effort to determine the quality and reach of the campaigns. Clearly, the evaluation would be pointless if the campaigns failed to meet minimal quality standards.

To demonstrate that students had seen the campaigns, the researchers asked whether the students had seen information on “students' drinking rate at your school.” This is too imprecise. Complaints about high consumption rates or negative drinking consequences would be counter to the social norms approach, but students hearing such statements could respond affirmatively to the survey question.

In their journal article, Wechsler and his colleagues admitted that their study is far from definitive, stating that it, “does not provide a final conclusion about the effectiveness of social norms campaigns...”

Unfortunately, Wechsler's comments to the press have been far less temperate. In a press release, he stated, “We looked at social norms marketing programs in

every conceivable way to see if they had any positive effect.” To the Associated Press, Wechsler declared, “The only problem is that it doesn't work. It's a feel good program.” For the online edition of *The New York Times*, he stated, “If social norms were a drug, the FDA would not allow it on the market.”

Wechsler sent a reprint of his journal article to college and university presidents, accompanied by a letter based on the press release. The letter boldly concluded, “Our study should encourage colleges, and the communities where they are located, to look beyond social norms approaches as the answer to the complex problem of heavy alcohol use by college students.” (*Editor's Note: For additional critiques of this study see the September 2003 issue of The Report (Vol 3:1) or go to www.socialnorm.org.*)

In other forums, Wechsler has pointed to the alcohol industry's financial support for social norms campaigns as a reason for rejecting this approach. He ignores the fact that social norms campaigns were developed and tested without industry support, and that only a small number of programs have received any industry dollars. Proponents of social norms campaigns have explained this many times. Nevertheless, Wechsler persistently links the social norms approach to what he calls “Big Alcohol.” (*Editor's Note: For a discussion of funding of social norms programs see the May 2004 Working Paper devoted to this topic.*)

According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wechsler has used about \$1 million from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation over the past several years to hire a public relations firm to promote his work. It's unimaginable that the Foundation intended to help Wechsler launch these types of attacks against other people's work.

What has motivated Wechsler's barrage? Proponents of the social norms approach were among the first to criticize Wechsler's use of the term “binge drinking,” which he defines for men as having five or more drinks in a row

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Kilmer & Larimer

components for social norms interventions, including the extent to which descriptive, injunctive, or combined normative messages are most effective. Better understanding the impact of normative interventions on their own and in combination with other approaches would also be of value.

Another challenge to the evaluation of social norms campaigns is often the lack of an appropriate control group, since change from year to year cannot entirely be attributed to the presence of a norms campaigns without ruling out the impact of other variables.

Staying close to what the data and empirical literature indicate (i.e., pursuing and promoting what has empirical support) is important for advancing the science surrounding the development, understanding, and dissemination of normative interventions. Berkowitz (in press) concludes, “it is important to learn from unsuccessful interventions along with the numerous and growing examples of success.” In doing so, the social norms approach, and prevention

and intervention efforts that utilize a normative component, will continue to grow.

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Rich Rice

expand, and to do so rapidly. Each year, increasing numbers of people attend the National Conference looking specifically for sessions devoted to school-age applications. This year there will be plenty for them to do. A number of programs will provide detailed examinations of effective high school interventions addressing alcohol and tobacco use, as well as several sessions that will focus on the special opportunities and challenges inherent in high school-based social norms projects.

... and Beyond. I began by noting that each year the Center receives increasingly varied proposals. This year is no exception. One conference session this year, building on the research of Jeff Linkenbach and his colleagues, will describe a project that addresses the issue of positive parenting norms in a fairly gritty urban context. This project

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extends the scope of an existing and very innovative social norms intervention designed to address youth sexual initiation. Another session will be devoted to a project that used social norms in an effective statewide DUI-prevention campaign, and yet another will focus on an intervention designed to correct the misperceptions that community members have about college students. These sessions and others not mentioned here all indicate that the social norms approach is rapidly growing beyond its traditional concerns to encompass new populations and subjects, and along with it, new challenges and successes.

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publications—not press releases. These very public challenges and resulting public debates about the efficacy of social norms over environmental management have led to the unfortunate and misinformed belief among some that there is either 1) no scientific data to support the social norms strategy, or 2) social norms is a strategy that has been co-opted by the alcohol industry, or 3) social norms is incompatible with other environmental and individually oriented strategies.

To examine the research I recommend the following three sources: a current review of the social norms literature by Alan Berkowitz (www.edc.org/hec); *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse* (edited by H. Wesley Perkins); and this publication, *The Report on Social Norms*.

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survey is conducted each year early in the fall term, then at least one quarter of students may not have experienced sufficient exposure at the time 2 assessment. Indeed, they will look much like the time 1 group. Furthermore, many other students go in and out of the population through attrition and re-entry making an aggregate pre/post analysis of all students inherently weak if perhaps as many as one-third are new or reentering the school in any year. 6) There are additional methodological issues involving the choice of dependent variables in the assessment. The use of the right cut points for creating dichotomized measures based on the actual local norms and messages delivered can make a big difference in results.

In the next few years, two trajectories for the social norms model will compete. On the one hand, we are likely to see an increasing number of simplistic implementations and superficial assessments as prevention initiatives simply “add on” minimal social norms interventions or only dabble with evaluation. On the other hand, programs that invest time and resources in developing sophisticated implementations and use better evaluation techniques, and thereby demonstrate greater success, will help the field immeasurably just as they are helping themselves.

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within the previous two weeks, and for women as having four or more drinks. This definition does not take into account a person’s weight or the duration of the drinking episode, nor does it conform to people’s everyday understanding of the term, which signifies extreme, out-of-control drinking.

For 10 years, news stories reporting on Wechsler’s survey work have proclaimed that nearly half of college students are “binge drinkers.” According to Wechsler’s detractors, his liberal definition of “binge drinking” contributes to an exaggerated view of student drinking norms, which might serve to perpetuate the problem as impressionable first-year students arrive on campus.

Consider now that Wechsler’s reputation—and his claim on national press attention—is based on this work. No wonder he’s upset by the criticism.

How will this controversy be resolved? Ultimately, the answer is better science.

It is worth noting that after reviewing the research evidence on “binge drinking,” the NIAAA National Advisory Council recently approved the following statement: “A ‘binge’ is a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 gram percent or above. For the typical adult, this pattern corresponds to consuming 5 or more drinks (male), or 4 or more drinks (female), in about 2 hours” (emphasis added). In short, the NIAAA, paying attention to the science, rejected Wechsler’s definition of “binge drinking” and developed a more restrictive

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definition. Rationality prevailed.

As for social norms campaigns, several rigorous studies funded by NIAAA are underway, and investigators will soon be reporting those findings. Prevention experts should maintain their faith in the scientific process, resolving to learn when this approach works and when it does not. In the end, it will be scientific investigation—not the loudest voice—that carries the day.

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Social norms theory and research has a long way to go—but there is good science behind this strategy—and good reason to make the journey.

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