

Feature Article: Social Norms and Prayer

"The norm seems to be that if a person engages in prayer at all, they are likely to do it with regularity. The majority of people must find some benefit in the behavior to do it so frequently. More research is needed to find out how beneficial this behavior is to health and academic success, why it is misperceived, and what inhibitions exist to talking about the benefits of prayer."

Is prayer a "normative" health behavior? Do misperceptions exist about prayer? While there is very little data about norms and prayer behavior, mentions of spirituality as a component of wellness are popular. Prayer is associated with potentially beneficial neuro-immunological changes, cardiovascular changes and muscle-relaxation changes in literature reviews (McCullough, 1995; Thorensen, 1999) and has been associated with lower levels of stress and an increased sense of well-being. However, while most health promotion offices promote a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of health, the specifics of prayer behavior are rarely addressed and even less commonly promoted.

Spirituality: The "Missing Consideration"

One author called spirituality the "missing consideration" (Love, 1999). After conducting a review of student affairs literature spanning 15 years, Love (1999) found only one short essay addressing spirituality and student development. The book *Finding God at Harvard* (Monroe, 1997) contains a series of essays from students related to spirituality and campus life. The students point out that, despite the fact that prayer and spirituality were a key component of their lives, prayer and spirituality were taboo topics for discussion in classrooms at Harvard. This is of course even more ironic when one remembers that Harvard was initially founded as a seminary.

Social norms research consistently shows that a gap exists between perceptions of health norms and real health behavior. People tend to overestimate unhealthy behavior and underestimate healthy behavior, and hide or "closet" behavior that is incorrectly thought to not be

normative. It is possible that this perception gap and closeting behavior may exist for prayer as well. Since health promotion stresses the need to assess current health-related behaviors in a population in order to increase and maximize health, more needs to be known about how many people pray regularly, what type of health benefits they obtain from it, and how misperceptions may influence prayer behavior.

The Study

This article reports on a convenience study that was conducted to assess real and perceived prayer norms among students of various ages. Samples consisted of four different student groups that were being provided a health-related lecture by the researcher. Response rates were not calculated for the groups but the vast majority of participants in each session returned surveys. The four groups were high school juniors attending a church related retreat, four-year college student leaders in orientation training, community college students and faculty attending a national conference, and first-year medical students attending a stress management seminar. In the community college student group about one in twenty participants were faculty. While faculty were not supposed to take the survey, there is no way to be sure that they did not.

Prior to being given a health-related lecture, participants were asked to take a short optional and anonymous survey. The survey contained eight to ten questions related to perceptions and behaviors and the survey took only a few minutes to complete. Two questions at the end of the survey related to prayer. These questions were: "How often do you think the typical student prays?" and "How often do you pray?" Possible responses included: Never, Yearly, Monthly, Weekly, and Daily. Prayer was not defined.

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Editor's Note: "The Gathering Place" brings together news, announcements, and important developments in the field of social norms.

Grants and Awards

The Canadian Centre for Social Norms Research was recently funded through a one million dollar grant from the Brewers of Canada. The Centre will be a division of The Student Life Education Company, which is the Canadian counterpart of Bacchus/Gamma. The funding will be used to test the efficacy of social norms media campaigns at six post-secondary sites in Canada over the next four years. Following this, the Centre will make its resources available more widely to Canadian colleges and universities. For more information contact Fran Wdowczyk at edlife@on.aibn.com or go to: www.studentlifeeducation.com.

CSAP Award Given to University at Albany. After a rigorous scientific review of more than 200 substance abuse prevention programs, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced that The Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program of the University at Albany was one of 25 programs to be awarded a *2001 Exemplary Substance Abuse Prevention Program Award*. The Middle Earth program incorporates social norms messages into an interactive peer theater performance and is the second such award given by CSAP for a social norms intervention (the first went to the University of Arizona). The awards are selected and announced annually by CSAP in collaboration with the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors and the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. The Middle

Editor's notes

This issue of *The Report on Social Norms* provides a good snapshot of the field, reminding us of how far the social norms approach has traveled in the span of a decade. One article reports on a successful media campaign targeting high-risk drinking among college students. The feature article on prayer challenges us to consider new applications and directions. And a synopsis of the long-awaited first book on social norms edited by H. Wesley Perkins provides an overview of theory, new applications, and successful interventions, considerably strengthening the evaluation literature. A new Canadian social norms center, a second CSAP award, and a new publication on media relations round out the list.

Those of us who attended the recent National Meeting on Alcohol and Other Drug and Violence Prevention in Higher Education November 21-24 in Seattle came away inspired and impressed with the diversity of the programs on social norms. At this meeting and at two other recent conferences – the American Public Health Association Conference and the National Conference on Tobacco and Health – a total of twenty-five sessions were presented on social norms, including successful outcome data for social norms interventions for smoking, with athletes, in one-one interventions, and with small groups. A future *Report* will provide an overview of these presentations and summarize their findings.

Please accept my very best wishes to all of you for the coming year. May we continue to be productive and healthy, and model in our own lives the values and behaviors we have successfully promoted for others.

Sincerely,

Alan D. Berkowitz, Ph.D.

Editor

The Report on Social Norms

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Earth program was the subject of a recent *Report on Social Norms Working Paper*. Further information can be obtained from M. Dolores Cimini at 518-442-5800 or dcimini@uamail.albany.edu.

Resources and Materials

"**The Main Frame: Strategies for Generating Social Norms News**" is the name of a new document created to help social norms practitioners develop press releases, respond to and foster media

coverage. It recognizes the need to create a new frame for public health issues that is based on sound science, accuracy in reporting, and positive messages. It contains talking points, sample press releases, guidelines for working with the media, and relevant research. "The Main Frame" will be available soon on the websites of the National Social Norms Resource Center (www.socialnorm.org) and the Higher Education Center (www.edc.org/hec).

Social Norms and Prayer

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Table 1: Student perception of prayer frequency and actual prayer frequency

Group	Perception estimates of how often others pray					Self-report of how often individual prays				
	Never	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily	Never	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
High school juniors on a religious retreat (n=206)	6%	24%	32%	34%	4%	5%	4%	12%	38%	40%
4-year college student leaders (n=119)	3%	7%	28%	46%	16%	12%	8%	15%	18%	46%
2-year college students & faculty (n=189)	4%	19%	40%	31%	6%	9%	6%	12%	21%	51%
First-year medical students (n=136)	5%	-%	29%	57%	9%	18%	-%	15%	19%	4%

The Results

The results, as reported in Table 1, show that every single group underestimated how common prayer behavior is in the life of students. As can be seen, 40% to 51% of respondents prayed daily, and the majority (ranging from 64% to 78%) prayed either daily or weekly. Thus, prayer (whatever it is to the individual) appears to be normative in this sample.

Misperceptions about prayer existed and were greatest for daily prayer. Students estimated that 4% to 16% of students prayed daily, while in reality 40% to 51% prayed daily. The most commonly chosen perceptions were that people prayed monthly or weekly. Sporadic or monthly prayer appears to be less common and regular prayer is more common among these groups.

Two groups also underestimated “never” praying. Never praying as a behavior occurred within each group. This was even true of the high school group on a religious retreat. It should be pointed out that the religious retreat was not optional for the students. While many wanted to attend the retreat, some did not and were forced to attend by their parents. It was interesting to note that the medical student group had the

largest percent of “never” prayers (18%). Medical students in general tend to be analytical and fact-oriented. Spirituality does not lend itself to that type of study. It would be interesting to compare a group of first-year medical students to fourth-year students and see if prayer behavior had increased or decreased after their exposure to the life and death challenges of clinical practice.

Discussion

From this data, it appears that regular prayer is a normative behavior in our culture. Like other health behaviors in the United States, prayer is misperceived and underestimated. Why do misperceptions about prayer occur? Perhaps both the group and individual nature of prayer can help to explain the misperception process. While group prayer is visible in such organizations as churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, for many people this type of prayer occurs weekly or less. Group prayer behavior occurs with a community that is often distinct from one’s work and school peer group. People may assume that they are the only one going to church or synagogue. In reality, their work and school associates may be attending church, temple or synagogue but not talk about their attendance

because it is not thought to be of interest to others. In addition, the majority of daily or regular prayer probably occurs at the individual and not the group level. Individual prayer frequently occurs in the privacy of one’s home. If done in public, individual prayer can be literally “invisible” to others.

In the United States, prayer behavior is rarely mentioned on the nightly news or in print media. If spirituality is mentioned at all, it is usually associated with religious groups and social conflicts. Public conversations about prayer are infrequent. While many people will openly discuss their party behavior and even intimate details of their sex life, it is much less common to hear individuals openly discuss their prayer life.

If prayer is associated with health, as the review studies seem to indicate (McCullough, 1995; Thorenson, 1999), then correcting misperceptions about prayer may be one way to increase prayer and, therefore, the health of a population. Prayer centers people, decreases stress and helps people focus on the values and priorities in their lives. Perhaps norm-setting campaigns related to prayer could actually “grow” its frequency and distribution. The challenge,

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from the field

“AFTER Hours” at Mississippi State

Editors Note: Each newsletter of The Report on Social Norms will feature model programs or interventions that have been successfully implemented in a community setting.

This project implemented a multi-faceted social norms program to reduce high-risk drinking among first-year students at Mississippi State University (MSU). It consisted of four main components: 1) alcohol peer education; 2) an interactive website; 3) alcohol-free social activities and; 4) a social norms media campaign. These four program elements were designed to be mutually reinforcing so that each intervention served to strengthen the other. This project represents the first time MSU has provided a comprehensive, theory-based program to reduce high-risk drinking among its students. At MSU, the lack of alcohol-free entertainment and the accessibility to drinking establishments for those under the legal drinking age place first-year students at an increased risk for heavy alcohol consumption. Funding for the project was provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

Program Components

The four program components are described below.

Peer Education: A workshop was offered at the beginning of the academic year for exemplary Resident Assistants (RAs) devoted to alcohol education programming focusing primarily on social norms and perceptions regarding high-risk drinking. For each freshmen residence hall one RA position was re-classified as an “alcohol peer educator” with specific alcohol education responsibilities.

Keys to success: Only those RAs with significant experience and strong recommendations from peers and professionals were invited to become alcohol peer educators. By involving exemplary RAs in alcohol education, we maximized

their retention and ensured that the most responsible individuals would assist with the program. The careful consideration and selection of alcohol peer educators has paid off in that they have taken a sense of ownership of the program and have been a tremendous source of support in all aspects of program implementation.

Website: A website to provide information and change misperceptions of high-risk drinking was developed and made available via the MSU server during the Fall semester. In order to attract and retain students it was continuously updated, with gift certificates as incentives. The site contains interactive programs including streaming videos of students with social norms messages and decision-making scenarios. In addition, it serves as a clearinghouse for alcohol information and provides personalized feedback based on student responses to interactive programs.

Keys to success: Students reported that placement of the website on the campus server enhanced the credibility of the social norms information and demonstrated support from the university. Thus, it was important to create a domain name that was specific to both our program and the school. To encourage site visits, the web address was set as the homepage and mouse pads with the web address and a social norms message were used in computer labs in the residence halls and across campus.

AFTER (Alcohol-Free Thursday Evening Recreation) Hours: The AFTER Hours events provided MSU students with alcohol-free social activities during typical drinking times, primarily

Thursday evenings. Themes for events were developed during focus groups with students and project personnel. Events were promoted through flyers in high-traffic areas on campus, a calendar maintained on the website, and campus newspaper and radio advertisements.

Keys to success: Student satisfaction surveys were administered and focus groups were conducted with those students in attendance following each event. This form of process evaluation enabled program staff to monitor and continuously update events to meet the needs of MSU students. The social norms messages delivered during the events were specific to each event theme, which students felt created a more fun atmosphere.

Social Norms Marketing Campaign: The social norms marketing campaign consisted of messages displayed in residence halls, high-traffic areas on campus, and media advertisements. Three primary alcohol social norms messages were used based on data from the Core Survey administered to MSU freshmen in Spring 2001. The following messages were used to address abstinence, frequency, and quantity of alcohol use, respectively:

- Over half of MSU freshmen are alcohol free.
- 2/3 of MSU freshmen drink less than once a week.
- 72% of MSU freshmen have less than 4 drinks a week.

Keys to success: Messages were tested throughout the program for comprehension and believability. Social norms messages were tested in focus groups prior to and immediately following their introduction.

Interaction of Key Program Components

As this was a multi-faceted approach, it was vital for all key intervention components to interact with each other to more effectively meet pro-

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gram objectives. Listed below are some examples of how various program components supported one another:

- A calendar of events was maintained on the website, as well as pictures from previous events. Thus, the website helped to increase attendance at upcoming events.
- Conversely, the promotional items that included social norms messages also displayed the website address to increase the number of site visitors.
- In addition to peer alcohol education programming duties, RAs assisted in survey collection, event staffing, and website development.
- Pages from the website were used to enhance peer-led alcohol education programming.
- Much of the social norms marketing campaign included the domain name of the website in addition to social norms messages.

Keys to success: Based on past success of other social norms programs, this intervention tested the effects of implementing multiple social norms strategies simultaneously to enhance outcomes. Each aspect of this program is an intervention in and of itself, so it was imperative for program staff to understand their role with respect to their specific program piece and how it fit in with the comprehensive nature of the program. Key program personnel stressed the importance of collaboration while at the same time developing a sense of ownership among program staff. Allowing staff to discuss individual successes and failures at regular meetings helps create a collaborative environment and at the same time improve the process of implementation.

Another key to the success of the interactive effects was the support from the university itself. Prior to implementation, key leaders representing various departments within the university such

as student affairs, residence life, student government, campus activities board, etc. were invited and encouraged to participate in our program. The considerable support received from the university was essential to the successful implementation of program activities.

Evaluation and Results

Process Evaluation. For this study, much emphasis was placed on information collected through formative evaluation measures to monitor the progress of implementation. The process evaluation was instrumental in the development and refinement of social norms messages as well as the implementation of project objectives.

Student exposure to social norms messages was measured through estimated attendance at AFTER Hours events, the number of website “hits” and students attending peer education programs in the residence halls. Several focus groups were conducted during website development in order to more effectively reach the students with social norms messages. Various marketing components were pre-tested on groups of freshmen to elicit feedback regarding readability, comprehension, enjoyment, etc. Student response was also collected through surveys randomly distributed at AFTER Hours events and in the residence halls.

First-year Findings. The Core survey was administered in residence halls where over 90% of MSU freshmen live. A total of 412 surveys were returned complete (74.9% response rate). Preliminary findings indicate lower rates of alcohol consumption among first-year students in 2002 when compared to their peers from the previous academic year. There were slight decreases in average drinks per week among both males ($x=7.23$ to $x=6.75$) and females ($x=3.21$ to $x=2.35$). While there were improvements on all alcohol consumption variables among female respondents, our campaign produced only small and sta-

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tistically insignificant decreases among males.

These gender differences in decreased alcohol consumption suggest that social norms campaigns may have differential effects on men and women, at least initially. More investigation is required to determine if the reductions in alcohol use would be greater if messages were tailored by gender. This finding is consistent with other literature on social norms. For example, Berkowitz, in a recent review of the social norms approach (2001), reported that several studies have shown misperceptions of alcohol use to be greater among women than men (Agostinelli & Miller, 1994; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). In addition to these gender differences in misperceived alcohol use norms, research has also shown gender effects with regard to alcohol use outcome following social norms programs. Thus, a recent campaign targeting first-year university students resulted in improved alcohol use for women and non-Greek men, but not for Greek men (Odahowski & Miller, 2000). The authors suggested that these findings might be attributed to the differential influence of general drinking norms (all first-year students) on sub-groups (gender, fraternity status) of the target population. As noted above, results after the first year of the MSU program replicate such findings, indicating a need for the field to evaluate the relative efficacy of more selective, gender-specific social norms messages. Accordingly, current social norms efforts at MSU have been modified to consider the influences of drinking behaviors specific to various segments of the college student population.

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Recent Research

In January, 2003, Jossey Bass Publishers will release the first book on the social norms approach. *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, Clinicians*, edited by H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., contains theoretical overviews, case studies, and innovative applications. For additional information contact: www.JosseyBass.com.

Part I: Introduction

1. *The Emergence and Evolution of the Social Norms Approach to Substance Abuse Prevention*. (H. Wesley Perkins). An introduction to the Social Norms Approach with a historical description of its evolution.

Part II: Case Studies of Campus Experiments to Reduce Alcohol Abuse

2. *The NIU Experiment: A Case Study of the Social Norms Approach* (Michael P. Haines & Gregory Barker). The first applied experiment of social norms in a college student population using print media and co-curricular activities publicizing actual norms to change perceptions and, in turn, create dramatic and continuing declines in heavy drinking.
3. *The Hobart and William Smith Experiment: A Synergistic Social Norms Approach Using Print, Electronic Media and Curriculum Infusion to Reduce Collegiate Problem Drinking* (H. Wesley Perkins & David Craig). The development and results of an experimental social norms intervention with multiple interlinked strategies to achieve a synergistic effect in reducing misperceived drinking norms that produced dramatic reductions in high-risk drink-

ing and negative consequences. Results from multiple evaluations demonstrate both immediate and long-term positive effects.

4. *The University of Arizona's Campus Health Social Norms Media Campaign* (Koreen Johannessen and Peggy Glider). A replication of the NIU print media strategy to reduce misperceptions that refined and further developed the production of media images with a significant reduction in heavy drinking as a result.
5. *Applying the Social Norms Model to Universal and Indicated Alcohol Interventions at Western Washington University* (Patricia Fabiano). A case study of another print media campaign, adding social norms delivery through a large peer educator program and, for students with alcohol problems, delivery through an alcohol screening and intervention program, with a significant reduction in high-risk drinking.
6. *The Rowan University Social Norms Project* (Linda Jeffrey, Pam Negro, DeMond Miller, & John D. Frisone). The replication of a social norms intervention with print media at an East Coast university. As exposure to campaign materials increased each year a corresponding reduction in high-risk drinking resulted.
7. *The Small Group Norms Challenging Model: Social Norms Intervention with Targeted High Risk Groups* (Jeanne Far & John Miller). The development and implementation of a norms challenging workshop offered to small groups. Targeted high-risk groups included fraternity, sorority, and athletic team members.

Part III: Expanding Social Norms Interventions to Other College Student Applications

8. *Perceptions, Norms and Tobacco Use in College Residence Hall*

Freshmen: Evaluation of a Social Norms Marketing Intervention (Linda Hancock and Neil Henry). Results of an experiment to reduce the onset of smoking among new college students using a social norms marketing strategy at one university, compared with data from a control site, demonstrating a significant reduction in onset of smoking among students exposed to messages about accurate student norms.

9. *A Social Norms Approach to Building Campus Support for Policy Change* (William DeJong). Social norms can provide an important first step in the application of other environmental strategies such as strengthening public policies, which are likely to be more effective if there is known to be significant student support. Yet students often underestimate the level of support for regulations that actually exists among peers.

Part IV: Young Adults and Social Norms Work beyond the Campus

10. *Misperceptions of Peer Alcohol Norms in a Statewide Survey of Young Adults* (Jeff Linkenbach and H. Wesley Perkins). This state-wide survey of 18 to 24 year old residents in Montana examines actual and perceived norms for frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption and prevalence of drinking and driving among adolescents and young adults outside of college.

"... the first book on the social norms approach contains theoretical overviews, case studies and innovative applications."

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Results again reveal dramatic discrepancies between actual and perceived norms for both men and women.

11. *The Montana Model: Development and Overview of a Seven Step Process for Implementing Macro-Level Social Norms Campaigns* (Jeff Linkenbach). Strategic steps to create a statewide level of implementation and a review of issues ranging from data gathering, message development, building coalitions and stakeholder interest.

Part V: The Social Norms Approach in Middle and High School Populations

12. *The Imaginary Lives of Peers: Patterns of Substance Use Misperceptions of Norms Among Secondary School Students* (H. Wesley Perkins and David Craig). Documents the pervasive pattern of misperceptions regarding peer tobacco, alcohol and marijuana norms among middle and high school students nationally. Data were collected in a web-based survey conducted in 22 schools in 5 states demonstrating the growth of misperceived norms as students move through grade levels.
13. *Most of Us Are Tobacco Free: An Eight-Month Social Norms Campaign Reducing Youth Initiation of Smoking in Montana* (Jeff Linkenbach and H. Wesley Perkins). A social norms experiment conducted among 12 to 17 year olds living in seven Montana counties with results compared to youth in the rest of the state. The intervention was associated with a dramatically lower rate of first-time use of tobacco by the end of the experimental time period compared to first-time use rates in the rest of the state.
14. *Using Social Norms To Reduce Alcohol And Tobacco Use in Two*

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Midwestern High Schools (Michael P. Haines, Gregory Barker and Richard Rice). An intervention conducted at two Midwestern high schools using social norms media significantly reduced cigarette smoking and drinking among 10th grade students during a two-year period. This project used media to change the perceptions of parents and teachers as well as students.

Part VI: Further Applications and Challenges for the Social Norms Model in Promoting Health and Well-Being

15. *Parents' Perceptions of Parenting Norms: Using the Social Norms Approach to Reinforce Effective Parenting* (Jeff Linkenbach, H. Wesley Perkins and William DeJong). A state-wide study of parents of teenage children that examines parenting behaviors and parents' perceptions of other parents. Parents typically misperceive the norms of other parents believing them to be less involved and more permissive in parenting than is actually the case.
16. *Application of Social Norms Theory to Other Health and Social Justice Issues* (Alan Berkowitz). Misperceptions can be observed with respect to hate speech, sexual aggression among men, and eating disorders among women, extending the horizon for social norms. Current work in these areas is reviewed.
17. *The Promise and Challenge of Future Work on the Social Norms Model* (H. Wesley Perkins). The promise of social norms is reviewed based on the range of available research, with suggestions for research needed to address remaining questions. Common questions and criticisms are addressed.

From the Field

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For a social norms calendar and information, head to www.socialnormslink.com.

Social Norms and Prayer

of course, would be to avoid entanglements in promoting one religion over another, but rather to promote “prayer” as a behavior not associated with a specific denomination that can increase health and well-being.

Limitations of the Research

This research has several limitations. It is difficult to generalize the findings because the sample was not randomly selected. There may have been something different about the students who elected to attend these lectures as compared to the general population of students. In addition, the data collected was very minimal. No data on age, gender or other health-related factors were collected. In addition, the community college sample may have included a few faculty members.

This was simply an exploratory study. The study results are, however, consistent with the well-documented pattern of underestimating health behaviors and “closeting” behaviors that are incorrectly thought to not be normative. It is also interesting to note that the pattern of prayer frequency and misperceptions about that frequency were fairly similar across all four groups.

In conclusion, the four samples in this study reveal that approximately 60-80% of students pray daily or weekly, 10-20% never pray and 10-20% pray monthly. The norm seems to be that if a person engages in prayer at all, they are likely to do it with regularity. The

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majority of people must find some benefit in the behavior to do it so frequently. More research is needed to find out how beneficial this behavior is to health and academic success, why it is misperceived, and what inhibitions exist to talking about the benefits of prayer. Beyond this, research is needed to see if “growing” the health behavior of prayer would improve the health of a population.

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Corrections

We apologize for the following errors in Volume 2, Issue 2 (December 2002) of *The Report on Social Norms* that were in the Recent Research column.

Two entries were missing the names of authors: "Relationship of the Estimation of Binge-Drinking among College Students and Personal Participation in Binge Drinking: Implications for Health Education and Promotion" was authored by R.M. Page, A. Scanlan, and L. Gilbert. The thesis: "A Social Norming, Comprehensive Marketing Campaign's Impact on First Year College Student's Self-reported Alcohol Drinking Behavior" was authored by Leann Habrock Obrecht.

Finally, the last entry, "Perceptions of Other's Masculinity Beliefs: Conforming to a False Norm?" had a few words missing from the last sentence, which should read as follows (missing words in italics): "Interestingly, perceptions of women's beliefs had no predictive value *in explaining men's masculinity beliefs.*"

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