

The Report on Social Norms

Volume 2 Issue 8
Working Paper #11
June 2003

Perspectives on Social Norms: Student, Practitioner, and Researcher

Editor's Note

This Working Paper includes three perspectives on the social norms approach, one from a student (Greg Joiner), a second from a practitioner (Koreen Johannessen), and a third from a researcher (Brad Smith). They were initially published by the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) on their website (www.ICAP.org), which hosts a regular feature with “invited opinions” on current issues in the alcohol field. For the interested reader, a statement of ICAP’s mission is provided below. *The Report on Social Norms* is extremely grateful to ICAP for allowing it to reprint these pieces here. To complement these three perspectives we have added an overview of the specific social norms campaign that is described in the student paper, and a response (by this Editor) to concerns brought up in the research paper. (Note: The ICAP papers have been edited slightly to improve readability.)

The ICAP invited opinion by student Greg Joiner is possibly the first published report of a student’s experience with a social norms campaign. It reminds us that we must not neglect the experiences and perspectives of our students as we try to document the effectiveness of our interventions. Although the social norms approach is, by definition, accountable to students (who are involved in the design and evaluation of campaigns and their messages) we have rarely taken the time to solicit their perspectives in writing and in case study narratives. With the development of rigorous qualitative research and narrative methodologies this is now possible and should become standard practice in the field.

The first of the two pieces added to supplement the ICAP Invited Opinions is by Jennifer Baurele, the director of the University of Virginia’s social norms intervention. In it she provides an overview of the campaign that Greg has described from his perspective as a student. In the second, I have written a response to Brad Smith’s “cautious” evaluation of the research on social norms to provide a different perspective and conclusion about the research. I have used the word “cautious” to describe Brad’s invited opinion because he had been careful to look at the social norms literature from his perspective as a researcher committed to scientific proof and rigorous experimental design. As such, he is conscious of ways in which social norms research may be lacking. While I agree with Brad that the cumulative research literature on social norms does not yet meet the “scientific gold standard” that he articulates, I offer an alternative perspective incorporating practitioner’s needs, suggesting a both/and conclusion that augments Brad’s call for more research with the need for continued careful implementation of the model.

If you have any thoughts about these invited opinions or perspectives that you would like to share or have considered for a future issue, please send them to me.

Sincerely,

Alan D. Berkowitz, Ph.D.
Editor, *The Report on Social Norms*
Phone: 607 387-3789
E-mail: alan@fltg.net

“The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is a not-for-profit organization funded by 101 major international producers of beverage alcohol. The mission of ICAP is to reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide and to promote understanding of the role of alcohol in society. ICAP is actively involved in building partnerships and encouraging dialogue between government, the beverage alcohol industry, research, the public health community and others involved in alcohol policy.”

A Social Norms Campaign Seen Through a Student's Eyes

The first day in college is a milestone in many people's lives. Mine was no different. With so many anxieties and fears facing me on my first day, safe drinking habits were lost in the shuffle. The buzz on the hall was of all the crazy fraternity parties planned for that night and of how drunk "everyone" was going to get. Should I go? I retreated from the chaos of the hall to the bathroom. Then I saw it on the back of a bathroom stall door, "2 out of 3 UVA students have 0-4 drinks per week." Maybe not everyone is going to get "trashed" tonight.

The quote I read was from an issue of the humorously titled *Stall Seat Journal*, a monthly poster series that spreads the social norms message to first-years at the University of Virginia (UVA). That was my and many people's first exposure to social norms marketing. It is something that I have learned to believe because I have seen it work. My name is Gregory Joiner and I am a third-year intern in the social norms office at UVA. I would like to discuss briefly my views of social norms marketing as well as how I think it has been an effective alcohol-education tool at UVA.

For many years, UVA had held the reputation of a "party school"—a reputation that it has tried hard to overcome with its high academic standards. However, despite the University's growth and success, some of its students still party very hard. As a former Resident Assistant and 3-year University Housing resident, I've seen that excessive drinking is definitely a serious problem facing UVA students. College is a unique experience and provides many once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Unfortunately, there are students who choose not to envelope themselves in academia but rather in gratuitous partying in which alcohol plays a central role. One former resident explained to me, "When else in my life can I get wasted every single night?" Various degrees of this attitude seem to prevail

throughout UVA and on college campuses everywhere. Alcohol abuse is definitely a problem and education about drinking is definitely necessary.

There are many approaches that are currently employed on college campuses across the country to deal with this problem. Two of the most prevalent are abstinence education and, most recently, social norms. I have always felt that any alcohol-abuse education program that solely teaches abstinence or attempts to create a dry campus is wholly inappropriate for two reasons. Firstly, given the high degree of alcohol availability and the lack of supervision and responsibility that comes with college life, underage consumption of alcohol is inevitable. If you only teach abstinence, when drinking does occur, you've equipped the student with no means of dealing with the consequences that can come from overconsumption. However, secondly, and more importantly, if you do not allow students to make informed decisions on their own, you run the risk of alienating them from your message entirely.

That is where the beauty of social norms comes into play. The social norms message is not preachy or demeaning. It treats its audience like mature adults faced with a decision: How much, if at all, should I drink?

Rather than use the extreme scare tactics often employed by many education programs, social norms simply gives students the facts about their peers' drinking habits. I feel that this makes it a far superior message to traditional alcohol abuse education. It encourages students to think and to decide for themselves what they want to do. People like to be empowered, not lectured.

Proponents of social norms marketing can make the same theoretical argument that I made above and can even produce statistics to validate the success of social norms. It is a tried and tested method that has found success at college campuses all over the country. However,

"As the year went on, something remarkable began to happen. On the weekend when guys would stop by one another's rooms to see what each other was doing, more and more guys were staying in and opting not to drink. Frequently, you would hear the abstainer explain to his friend, "Dude, not everyone goes out and drinks every night." Many times, the friend would pause, think for a bit, and then stay in too. That was the norming message, and it was actually sinking in. The same guys who were partying almost every night earlier in the year were now staying home."

I am a systems engineer and like any good engineer, I like to see tangible proof of something before I put faith in it. I was fortunate to have served in two positions that gave me such tangible proof of the success of UVA's social norms marketing campaign. First, I served as a Resident Assistant in first-year housing, and second, I was a distributor for the aforementioned *Stall Seat Journal*. These two positions allowed me to get extensive first-hand interaction with the students on the topics of both drinking and the social norms campaign itself. I would like to share three brief success stories that I feel help describe the success of UVA's social norms marketing campaign and of the overall effectiveness of social norms.

As the distributor for the *Stall Seat Journal*, I had the unique experience of having to visit all of the first-year dorms' bathrooms. It is common to see the walls of stalls "decorated" with vari-

continued on page five

The University of Virginia's Social Norms Marketing Campaign

This article provides an overview of the University of Virginia's (UVA) social norms marketing campaign that was described by Greg Joiner from his perspective as a student. Initiated in 1999 (prior to Greg's arrival on campus) the Office of Health Promotion has been conducting a social norms marketing program to reduce high-risk drinking among first-year students.

Each spring the Health Promotion Survey is administered to a random sample of undergraduate students to measure alcohol-related knowledge, perception, attitudes and behaviors. During the spring of 2003, the anonymous surveys were distributed via e-mail to 4,580 students. 2,345 were completed and collected, representing a 51% response rate. The high response rate may be due to the up front two-dollar bill, a token of appreciation, as well as the multiple forms of contacts to the participants. The results of this survey indicate that, like other students across the country, students at UVA overestimate the extent to which their peers drink.

Data from this survey is used to update a series of posters called the *Stall Seat Journal*. The eight posters in the series are rotated monthly in the bathroom stalls of the first-year residence halls. The posters provide students with accurate information about the drinking behaviors of other first-year students. This year a theme with local significance, the logo "Hoo

Knew," was introduced on the posters as a way of linking the first-year campaign with a wider campuswide campaign in 2002-2003 using the same logo.

The results of this survey are encouraging. A large majority, 98.7%, of first-year students in the sample, reported seeing the *Stall Seat Journal* bathroom poster at least once, with 96.7% seeing it twice or more. The second most common source of alcohol information for first-year students was the RA, with 30.8% of first-year students reporting having had a conversation about their drinking at least once with their RA. It is notable to mention that 16.6 % of first-years surveyed mentioned seeing a Peer Health Education Program at least once.

The negative consequences that UVA students experience from alcohol continue to trend in a positive direction. Thus, all 17 of the negative consequences declined in year 2003 from year 2002 for first-years. This is particularly important to note as decreasing the negative alcohol-related consequences experienced by UVA students is a major objective of the social norms marketing project. Misperceptions about drinking declined from 1999 to 2002 and are at the same level in 2003, with a gap of a median of three drinks per week difference between perception of consumption and actual student consumption of alcohol.

An emerging idea that our program has incorporated is the concept of "con-

nectors" and "influencers." This subject is discussed in Malcom Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. A researcher at Kansas State University, Dr. Fred Newton, put this theory to work with a survey instrument that he developed. The instrument contains a number of questions regarding influential people on campus as well as people who tend to know a variety of people across the university. Dr. Newton gave permission for the instrument to be used at UVA this past fall in order to determine who our campus influencers are. A group of names were gathered from these surveys and the students were contacted and invited to participate in a series of focus groups held throughout the 2002-2003 school year. The idea is that by determining the connectors at UVA and their issues of importance, it may be possible to tailor UVA's social norms marketing campaigns to affect a further decrease in alcohol consumption.

The continued success of the Social Norms Marketing program at UVA is in large part due to the close collaboration with our students. The collaborations take myriad forms, including focus groups, intercept interviews and internships. The students' input into how to reach the various populations and which messages are salient has been invaluable. Greg Joiner's experience provides one of many examples of how students are involved in our campaign and how they are affected by it.

The complete report of the survey methodology and results is available on the Health Promotion Web Page at <http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/hp/>. Click on "Social Norms Marketing" for more information.

Jennifer Baurele is the Social Norms Marketing Coordinator in the Office of Health Promotion at UVA. She can be reached at 434-924-1512 or at jab9qp@cms.mail.virginia.edu.

"The negative consequences that UVA students experience from alcohol continue to trend in a positive direction. Thus, all 17 of the negative consequences declined in year 2003 from year 2002 for first years... Misperceptions about drinking declined from 1999 to 2002..."

A Practitioner's Perspective

Is the typical United States college student a heavy drinker? The answer is no. Several national surveys document that heavy consumption is not typical of the majority of students. According to the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study, the NIAAA Monitoring the Future Survey, the Core Alcohol and Other Drug Survey and the National College Health Assessment, most college students are not heavy drinkers—in fact the majority drink moderately or not at all.

There is, however, more to the story. Although the majority are not problem drinkers, a minority of students tend to drink most of the alcohol consumed by students in any given week. Most are drinking some and some are drinking way too much.

At the University of Arizona (UA), only 22 percent of our students account for close to 70 percent of all the alcohol consumed in a week by undergraduates (Campus Health Annual Health and Wellness Survey 2002). Heavy drinkers are more likely to experience serious consequences more often than their moderate to light drinking counterparts—these include driving under the influence, alcohol poisoning, passing out and failing grades. Students who drink heavily frequently report higher rates of trouble with police and school authorities. Heavy drinking students tend to attract both student and public attention. Public safety and public health officials, parents, and civic leaders are now challenging university administrators and public officials across the country to “do something about student drinking.”

Is student drinking a health and safety problem in the United States? Yes. Is it a problem for most students? No. Enter social norms.

According to social norms theory, public exposure to images and information that focus on college heavy drinking has led to “misperceived norms—perceptions that usually exaggerate what is typical for other students....” These perceptions “lead(s) to increased drinking behavior as students attempt to conform to what they believe ‘everyone else’ is doing. Therefore, effectively informing

students of actual drinking norms should reduce student drinking” (Perkins and Craig, 2002). In other words, if misperceptions about college drinking can cause college students to drink more, then correcting misperceptions should encourage them to drink less.

In the early 1990s, Northern Illinois University (NIU) became one of the first to use social marketing techniques to broadcast the true drinking norms of NIU students and correct misperceptions. Michael Haines and his colleagues surveyed students using an in-class survey. Information about the true norms for alcohol use, infrequency of negative consequences as well as basic alcohol information was provided to students in ads sponsored by Health Enhancement. The information appeared in ads in the school newspaper, on health posters, and other NIU-specific health education materials. Posted norms and other alcohol information was reinforced by student workers who provided a small monetary incentive to students who could correctly answer questions about the norms when approached in small groups in public areas of campus.

Students were exposed to normative messages challenging their beliefs about peer alcohol use and other health related topics, and messages were seen multiple times in a single year. In 1995, UA Campus Health conducted a similar campaign beginning with a random mail survey and utilizing ads in the campus paper, posters in residence halls, norms information at orientation presentations and in health/wellness newsletters. The results at both schools were dramatic. At NIU, heavy and high risk drinking decreased significantly—down 44% over a ten-year period. At UA, heavy and high risk drinking decreased 29% decrease over a three-year period.

Social norms projects at Western Washington University, the University of Virginia, the University of Missouri at Columbia, and the State University of New York at New Paltz followed and have also shown significant and encouraging results. In 1996 the first computer based social norms marketing campaign was established at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, resulting in a 44% reduc-

tion in self-reported high-risk drinking over a four-year period.

A number of other college campaigns are showing evidence of positive change, delivering the norms through small group interaction.

Although results are encouraging social norms is not without its critics. The Dec. 9 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* listed Social Norms Marketing as “one of the 80 ideas that shook the world (or at least jostled it a little) in 2001.” It went on to ask the question—“What’s the best way to stop college students from drinking? Invoke their inner lemmings.” This less than complimentary statement may be at the heart of the issue for many critics of social norms. The *Times Magazine* article describes social norms as the “science of persuading people to go along with the crowd”—a concept that feels almost anti-American. [Ed: Volume 1. No. 2 (Winter 2002) of *The Report* includes responses from four experts to this article.]

I don’t believe that social norms marketing forgets about the individual. Social norms marketing is simply a strategy that “turns up the volume” on accurate information about the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of one’s peers. By doing so social norms campaigns inform students who don’t drink that they are not alone, inform students who drink moderately that most of their peers also drink moderately, and it provides those who drink heavily and often with a benchmark and sometimes a wake up call for reassessing their own behavior.

Critics have voiced other concerns about the social norms approach. Some are suspicious because the alcohol industry supports social norms and others because the strategy does not urge students to abstain. The social norms approach appears to be alcohol friendly and few can argue that making a case for student moderation would be less compelling to potential funders than one that highlights the tragic consequences of student alcohol abuse.

As it turns out, however, very few programs have received support from the alcohol industry. Almost all of the col-

continued on page five

Practitioner's Perspective

continued from page four

lege and high school social norms projects to date have been funded by federal demonstration and research grants, state offices of alcohol services, and alcohol control, state highway traffic safety offices, private funders including concerned alumni and parents, and college health and wellness local budgets. Alcohol industry funding may become more common as other funding sources become scarce.

Not all projects have been able to demonstrate success. There is still much that needs to be learned before this promising strategy can be adopted as the gold standard. But no other substance abuse prevention approach has shown such positive, tangible results or generated as much excitement and enthusiasm in such a short period of time.

Social norms provides frequent dosing of healthy, positive and normative information that includes all students and is accessible to all students. Without this information it will be difficult for a college student to make an informed decision, free of judgment, bias, or threats of harm. Social norms is a public health strategy that shows great promise.

Koreen Johannessen, M.S.W. is the Senior Advisor for Prevention for the Campus Health Service at UA. She is a national consultant, 2002 recipient of the Network Outstanding Service Award, and on the advisory board of The Report. She can be reached at: koreen@dakotacom.net.

References

- Perkins, H.W. & Craig, D.W. (2002). *A multifaceted social norms approach to high-risk drinking: Lessons from Hobart and William Smith Colleges*. Newton, MA: The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention.
- Glider, P. (2002). *Report on the 2002 Annual Health & Wellness Survey*, Campus Health Service, The University of Arizona. Unpublished report
- Frauenfelder, M. (Dec. 9, 2001). Social-norms marketing. *New York Times Magazine*, December 9, 2001.

Social Norms through a Student's Eyes *continued from page two*

ous items such as humorous notes and magazine clippings. One such stall had every square-inch covered with pictures with one notable exception. *The Stall Seat Journal* remained perfectly exposed right where I had posted it the previous month. When I asked the student who was responsible for the elaborate ornamentation about it, he informed me that he could never cover up the journal because, "...everyone reads it."

Often the job of distributing the *Stall Seat Journals* would take several days. A few months into the school year, I was surprised to find that a stall in a bathroom I had not yet visited already had the new issue. Puzzled, I asked around how it had gotten there. Finally, a student confessed, "Well, we really wanted the new issue and we noticed that the guys downstairs already had it, so we took one copy for our bathroom." Surprisingly, this almost "cutish" following was not an isolated occurrence. One fraternity president asks for the monthly issue to place in their bathroom. Two friends of mine who are RAs at other schools both ask me to save them an issue for use in their own halls. The campaign is popular, well-received, and has a surprising following.

While the above two stories speak of the popularity of the marketing campaign, this final story speaks of the success of the social norms message itself. When my residents found out that I worked for the social norms office, they would often rib me by quoting various norming messages to me or the other guys living in our suite. However, as the year went on, something remarkable began to happen. On the weekend when guys would stop by one another's rooms to see what each other was doing, more and more guys were staying in and opting not to drink. Frequently, you would hear the abstainer explain to his friend, "Dude, not everyone goes out and drinks every night." Many times, the friend would pause, think for a bit, and then stay in too. That was the norming mes-

sage, and it was actually sinking in. The same guys who were partying almost every night earlier in the year were now staying home. One resident later explained to me, "We all went out because we thought that everyone else was doing it. We were afraid that if we did not do it [go out drinking] we would be missing out on so much. Now I realize just how much I was actually missing out on spending Thursday through Sunday drunk."

Social norms works and is the ultimate alcohol education method for a college campus. Its straightforwardness and honesty are refreshing to most students who spend their days being told exactly what to think. Additionally, college students' concentrated living arrangements and generally consistent schedules make them ripe to hear the norming message. This allows for a social norms marketing campaign to reach a very large audience very quickly at a rather inexpensive cost. Every day it amazes me just how many people know of our campaign and have adopted its message. The campaign's successes have led me to dedicate an increasing amount of time to spreading the social norms message. I have become passionate about it because it works. From my unique experience as a student, resident advisor, and social norms intern, I would recommend the social norms approach to any college or university looking for an innovative and effective approach to substance abuse education.

Greg Joiner, '03 University of Virginia

Greg is a 21-year-old senior at UVA majoring in systems engineering. This year, he was the Undergraduate Social Norms Intern. Greg is completing his undergraduate degree in three years. Greg can be contacted at: gvj4v@alumni.virginia.edu

A Cautious Research Perspective

Interventions based on Social Norming Theory (SNT) have become a popular approach to attempt to reduce problematic drinking among college students. SNT interventions typically involve messages about attitudes or behavior relevant to drinking. Examples include “77% of students at USC have 4 or fewer drinks per occasion” or “94% of students insist on having a sober driver.” These messages are typically conveyed in campus-wide campaigns using a variety of media (e.g., posters, newspaper ads, or screen savers). Another popular SNT method is group presentations by peers or opinion leaders.

According to a survey published in 2000, about 20% of institutions of higher education in the United States have adopted an intervention based on SNT. Considering that about 10 years ago only a handful of schools were using this approach, interventions based on SNT have enjoyed remarkable growth. This growth probably represents the most rapid dissemination of any intervention in the history of higher education and substance use prevention. Unfortunately, the efficacy of SNT interventions has not been established. Consequently, widespread dissemination of SNT-based interventions may be premature. As I will argue below, SNT interventions should be treated as experimental and there are some alternatives to SNT that should be offered to college students with the highest risk for alcohol-related problems.

Applications of SNT that target college student drinking are based on the premise that perceptions of peer drinking norms have a causal influence on an individual student’s own drinking. According to this theory, the higher the perceived level of drinking, the greater the risk for heavy drinking and alcohol related problems. This theoretical position plus the common finding that students often grossly overestimate the extent to which their peers drink is the reason why so many social norms campaigns focus on correcting misperceptions of peer drinking norms.

Two major sources of evidence are commonly cited in support of the SNT treatment theory. One source is correlations between perceived drinking by peers and actual or self-reported drinking behavior. The other commonly cited source of evidence is field studies of social norming interventions that have shown that efforts to change perceptions of drinking norms have been associated with reductions in drinking and alcohol-related problems. Both of these sources enjoy some empirical support. However, as argued below, the available empirical support regarding the efficacy of SNT interventions is inconclusive.

Several studies have found a strong correlation between students’ perceptions of drinking by peers and students’ self-reported drinking. Indeed, among US college students it appears that one’s perception of drinking by peers is a better predictor of one’s self-reported drinking than the actual level of drinking by peers. However, these correlational findings do not prove causation. At least two other conditions must be met to conclude that changing perceptions of norms is an effective way to prevent or reduce high-risk drinking among college students. First, studies must show that interventions that produce changes in perceptions also produce changes in personal drinking. Second, the studies must rule out plausible alternative explanations to the effects of SNT intervention. I am not aware of any studies published in respected scientific journals that meet both of these conditions.

Proponents of social norming interventions often cite the results of several field studies in which an intervention was implemented on a single campus and subsequent surveys found reductions in norms and self-reported drinking. It is tempting to attribute these results to the social norming intervention, but there are many rival explanations that need to be addressed. For example, the social norming intervention might be confounded with sweeping changes in campus policy, such as increased enforcement and new parental notification policies.

Another methodological confound is that simply measuring student’s drinking behavior seems to result in reductions in self-reported drinking. Why this measurement effect occurs is currently unknown, but the practical implication is very clear. Without a comparison group it is impossible to tell if reductions in drinking from baseline to follow-up are due to the intervention or simply due to effects of repeated measurement. Unfortunately, in the field studies of SNT interventions there were no comparison groups, so it is unclear if the reported changes are due to SNT interventions, a measurement confound, or some other uncontrolled methodological factor.

Good experimental control with random assignment to treatment and control groups can lead to greater certainty about the cause of change in an experiment. Over the past few years there have been several published studies using randomized designs to test the efficacy of social norming interventions designed to reduce problematic drinking among college students. The findings of these studies have varied widely, but none have demonstrated conclusively that social norming interventions changed both perceived social norms and actual drinking. Indeed, a common finding in several of the more recent studies is that the social norming interventions were associated with changes in perceived norms but there was little or no change in self-reported drinking.

Critics of these randomized studies have commented, and I think quite correctly, that the interventions in these studies were either a) far too weak, or b) too poorly implemented to be considered a reasonable social norming intervention. Thus, one can argue that the randomized studies have not tested valid interventions (technically the randomized studies had poor experimental construct validity). In other words, the randomized studies have not tested the true potential of interventions based on SNT.

It is tempting to propose that if researchers simply used stronger or bet-

continued on page eight

A Different Perspective on Social Norms Research

The research on social norms can be viewed simultaneously through a number of different lenses. One of these—the standard of controlled experimental design—is the benchmark standard of effectiveness in the scientific literature, with results published in peer-reviewed journals. I would agree with Dr. Smith that the efficacy of social norms has not been conclusively proven by these standards. However, waiting for conclusive proof would prevent us from utilizing almost all of the strategies that are currently employed in our field, including social norms. As noted in the report of the panel convened by the National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism (NIAAA), very few interventions (specifically, some for individual abusers) have been scientifically validated in college populations. All of the other practices recommended by NIAAA for collegiate drug prevention (including social norms) have not met the scientific standards enumerated by Dr. Smith. Thus, while I agree with his conclusion that the ultimate standard of proof has not yet been reached for social norms and that more research is needed, I also believe that the field needs to continue disseminating the model in its current form.

An approach that has been recommended by the NIAAA and many other federal agencies is to identify “promising practices” that have strong provisional support from the literature, that are theoretically sound, and that can be implemented and evaluated while the research literature is evolving. Social norms was identified as a promising practice by the NIAAA panel and is

one of its recommended strategies. They state:

“Initial results from programs adopting an intensive social norms approach are promising... Together these findings provide strong support for the potential impact of the social norms approach. Although any case report in this literature could be challenged methodologically, the results of each study are remarkably consistent. (2002, p. 13)”

I personally believe that the current research literature in support of social norms is stronger and more thorough than comparable research for any other secondary or tertiary prevention strategies currently in practice for colleges and universities. In addition, the individual approaches that have been scientifically validated (such as BASICS) all use normative feedback, which is the critical ingredient of the social norms approach. (See references for literature reviews.)

Dr. Smith’s concern that measuring student’s drinking may cause changes in self-reporting is not relevant because the bias that he refers to only occurs when the *same* student takes multiple surveys over time, something not common in social norms efforts.

In summary, while more research on social norms is needed and “conclusive proof” may be lacking, the current state of knowledge strongly supports continued implementation of the approach. Dissemination that is careful and faithful to the model is both recommended and warranted.

“...the current research literature in support of social norms is stronger and more thorough than comparable research for any other secondary or tertiary prevention strategies currently in practice for colleges and universities.”

Alan Berkowitz is a co-founder of the social norms approach and is the Editor of The Report on Social Norms. He can be reached at alan@fltg.net.

References

- Berkowitz, AD. (2003). *The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research and Annotated Bibliography*. Available on the Higher Education Center’s Social Norms Website (www.edc.org/hec) or from www.alanberkowitz.com
- Berkowitz, AD (2002). Responding to the Critics: Answers to Common Questions and Concerns About the Social Norms Approach. *The Report on Social Norms: Working Paper #7*. Little Falls, NJ: PaperClip Communications.
- NIAAA (2002). *How to Reduce High-Risk College Drinking: Use Proven Strategies, Fill Research Gaps*. Final report of the Panel on Prevention and Treatment, Washington, DC.
- Perkins, HW (2003). The Emergence and Evolution of the Social Norms Approach to Substance Abuse Prevention. Chapter 1 in HW Perkins (Ed). *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, Clinicians*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Perkins, HW (2002). Social Norms and the Prevention of Alcohol Misuse in Collegiate Contexts. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Supplement 14:164-172.

“...while more research on social norms is needed and ‘conclusive proof’ may be lacking, the current state of knowledge strongly supports continued implementation of the approach. Dissemination that is careful and faithful to the model is both recommended and warranted.”

A Cautious Research Perspective

continued from page six

ter-implemented social norming interventions they would get the desired reductions in drinking. However, these suggestions are speculative. For instance, the dosage effects of social norms interventions on college student drinking are unknown and may be non-existent. Therefore, it is probably more important at this stage to engage in more rigorous research on social norming intervention as opposed to simply providing more strenuous interventions.

Another consideration is that implementing social norming interventions can be devilishly complex. Part of the appeal of SNT is the elegance of the theory with an apparently simple causal mechanism that should have wide applicability. However, my own experience with SNT has taught me that there must be at least a dozen dimensions along which social norming interventions can be varied. These dimensions include the salience of a message, relevance of a message, congruence of a message with other elements of the campaign, target audience, service delivery model, timing of the message, and quality of the delivery of the message. It could be the case that refinements along these dimensions are more important than the dosage or vigorousness of implementation. Again, however, this is an untested proposition worthy of future study. Such investigations should be sensitive to diversity issues and the challenges of SNT interventions on campuses with relatively heterogeneous versus homogeneous populations.

To summarize, there is no conclusive evidence either for or against the

efficacy of social norming interventions designed to prevent problematic drinking among college students. Considering that current state of the literature, there are two important implications for further studies of SNT interventions.

First, for relatively low risk drinkers (which is the majority of college students on most campuses in the United States) no interventions have been proven to prevent or reduce high-risk drinking. Indeed, some common alternatives to SNT interventions, such as enumerating the risks of drinking (i.e., “scare tactics”), have been shown to be ineffective or even counter productive. Therefore, mistakes of the past should be avoided and new interventions, such as SNT, should be treated as experimental. These new interventions should be carefully evaluated for effects on a campus-by-campus basis and for differential effects on campus subgroups.

Second, there are some empirically validated approaches for dealing with students with elevated risk for heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems. For example, one of the most consistently effective and efficient approaches for helping high-risk students is based on individualized feedback and brief motivational interviewing (BMI). When studying high-risk populations (e.g., college students who frequently engage in heavy episodic drinking), experimental approaches such as SNT should be compared with empirically supported approaches (e.g., BMI) to see if SNT has unique or interactive effects compared to the previously empirically supported treatment (e.g., BMI). Also, because it is

unethical to withhold an effective treatment, it is probably inappropriate for studies with high-risk students to have a no treatment control group. All high-risk students should get an evidence-based treatment.

Conclusions about SNT interventions are premature. The theory is elegant, well supported by decades of high-quality research in social psychology laboratories, and the preliminary applied research is promising. Nevertheless, the effects of this approach are unproven for problems such as college student drinking, social justice, sexual assault, and tobacco use. Further investigation, rather than head-long dissemination, is the appropriate course of action.

Dr. Brad Smith is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Carolina Over the past three years Dr. Smith and colleagues have received two grants from the U.S. Department of Education to support the development and evaluation of social norming interventions designed to reduce problematic drinking among college students. One program is a randomized study of a peer-lead, small-group intervention that targets first-year students. The other is a randomized study of 21st birthday cards. Dr. Smith can be reached at: smithb@gwm.sc.edu.

The Report on Social Norms is published by PaperClip Communications. Four working papers, five newsletters and one index are published each year as part of The Report on Social Norms publication. Copyright 2003. No portion of this newsletter may be reproduced without the express written consent of PaperClip Communications, Inc. • 125 Paterson Ave. • Little Falls, NJ 07424 • 866 . 295 . 0505 • fax 973 . 256 . 8088 • www.Paper-Clip.com.

Editorial Advisory Board:

William DeJong, Ph.D., Higher Education Center • Pat Fabiano, Ph.D., Western Washington University • Jeanne Far, Ph.D., Washington State University • Michael Haines, M.S., National Social Norms Resource Center • Koreen Johannessen, M.S.W., University of Arizona • Jeff Linkenbach, Ed.D., Montana State University • H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., Hobart and William Smith Colleges (NY) • Richard Rice, M.A., National Social Norms Resource Center

Editorial Staff:

Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D., Editor
Joellen Collins-Cardona

Andy McLaughlin, Publisher
Julie Phillips