

## MODEL LITERATURE REVIEW G

### Demographic and Academic Trends in Drinking Patterns and Alcohol-Related Problems<sup>1</sup>

Researchers and college administrators alike have engaged in a continuing effort to better understand the nature of college drinking and best practices for prevention and intervention. Alcohol abuse and alcohol-related problems are considered among the most serious public health threats on American college campuses (e.g., Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). Some national surveys suggest 44% of college students engage in heavy episodic drinking at least occasionally (Wechsler, Molnar, Davenport, & Baer, 1999). Further, the misuse of alcohol by college students is associated with a wide variety of negative effects, such as date rape, violent behavior, poor academic performance, vandalism, injury, high-risk sexual behavior (Eigen, 1991; Wechsler & Isaac, 1991; Presley, Meilman, & Lyster, 1995), and even death.

#### The Effect of Demographic Characteristics on College Drinking

##### Gender

Male gender is often cited as a significant risk factor for heavy drinking in college. College men consistently have been found to drink more than college females (Humara & Sherman, 2004; Perkins, 1992). Measures of national trends among college students show more than twice as many males than females report drinking 10 or more drinks per week (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). Further, men tend to binge drink and to report more alcohol-related problems than females as well (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995). Previous research has shown that men tend to perceive more permissive social and institutional drinking norms relative to women and, consequently, present higher drinking rates than women. In addition to differences in perceptions, misperceptions, and behavior, there are significant differences in alcohol expectancies as well (Read, Wood, Lejuez, Palfai, & Slack, 2004).

##### Ethnicity

Non-White ethnicity has been identified as a risk factor of alcoholism in the general population, but this association does not hold with the college population (Kahler, Read, Wood, & Palfai, 2003). In fact, across

four national surveys of college students, the data consistently show White students reporting the highest prevalence of heavy drinking, followed by Hispanic and Black students, respectively (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). This pattern has been found in several national surveys of high-school-aged youth, such as the YRBS (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000, 2004) and MTF (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2004). Research that equates ethnicity and nationality, however, may not accurately capture the drinking behavior of ethnic groups. For example, research that combines people of Asian origin into a single ethnicity may improperly describe groups that present significantly different drinking patterns, such as the Chinese and Koreans (Luczak, Wall, Shea, Byun, & Carr, 2001).

##### Age

Heavy drinking among college students tends to increase as they approach legal drinking age and levels off after they reach legal drinking age. This pattern tends to result in alcohol abuse and underage drinking by students younger than age 21 (Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002). It is important to note, however, that college students of legal age present alcohol abuse problems as well, albeit less severe relative to underage students.

#### The Effect of Social and Academic Characteristics on College Drinking

##### Academic Class Level

Consistent with the pattern implied by age, college freshmen present the most significant drinking problems on college campuses (Del Boca, Darkes, Greenbaum, & Goldman, 2004). Data on this point, however, are inconsistent. Core Alcohol and Drug Survey (Core Institute, 2005) data, for example, suggested that college freshmen binge-drank less than their upper-class peers in 2004. The survey further indicated that freshmen were the lowest percentage of binge drinkers (45.3%), lower than sophomores (49.1%), juniors (51.6%), and seniors (52.8%), respectively. Reports of average number of drinks by class level followed the same pattern.

<sup>1</sup> Literature review excerpt from Taylor, D. M., Johnson, M. B., Voas, R. B., & Turrissi, R. (2006). Demographic and academic trends in drinking patterns and alcohol-related problems on dry college campuses. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, 50, 35-54. Copyright © 2006 by the American Alcohol & Drug Information Foundation. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Furthermore, during high school, noncollege-bound students engage in heavy drinking more than college-bound students; however, after high school, noncollege-bound students show only a moderate increase in the prevalence of heavy drinking. Conversely, college-bound students drink significantly more after high school years, such that the prevalence of heavy drinking surpasses noncollege-bound students (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002).

#### Greek Status

Fraternity and sorority status has long been known to be a significant risk factor for college drinking (Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004). Greeks tend to drink more and to present more alcohol-related problems. As with college freshmen, many universities have designed alcohol-related prevention programs targeting this unique risk group. Further, research shows that the social and normative factors that lead to excessive drinking among Greeks are quite different from factors affecting the campus at large (Baer, 1994; Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001).

#### Academic Performance

College drinking can severely interfere with academic performance (Higher Education Center, 1997). A national survey of nearly 37,000 students at 66 four-year institutions revealed a strong relationship between alcohol consumption and grades (Presley, Meilman, Cashin, & Lyerla, 1996); whereas students with an A average consumed a little more than three drinks per week, B students had almost five drinks, C students more than six drinks, and D or F students reported nine drinks. Further, a survey of college administrators indicated their belief that alcohol is involved in 38% of cases of lack of academic success and 29% of cases of student attrition (Anderson & Gadaletto, 1997).

#### Drinking Behavior of Students on Dry Campuses

Although alcohol consumption in general represents a significant administration and policy problem on college campuses, underage and binge drinking are particularly troublesome for college administrators. In fact, underage drinking and binge drinking on college campuses have been described as a national public health crisis in research, media coverage, and by many government agencies (Wechsler, Molnar, Davenport, & Baer, 1999). Administrators have responded with an increase in prevention efforts and with the introduction of new prevention technologies (Wechsler et al., 2002). Although decreasing in number, many college campuses are completely dry or only allow alcohol on campus under very limited conditions and on a few modest occasions. To what extent do these measures buffer students from the detrimental effects of college drinking that is commonly found on other campuses? In short, how effective are restricted campus alcohol

policies in reducing alcohol abuse and alcohol-related problems relative to general patterns found on U.S. college campuses?

College students vary significantly in their drinking patterns and associated problems; many demographic, academic, and social characteristics account for the variance. Campus alcohol policies may do little to counter national trends in college drinking. This research will describe the combined results of two surveys presented on two dry campuses in the western United States. Based on five years and nine semesters of survey data (2000–2004)<sup>2</sup> from two western universities, this report describes how various demographic and academic characteristics are associated with college drinking. Comparisons will be made between trends found in these data and research describing national trends.

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<sup>2</sup> Data, however, were not collected in the spring semester of 2001.