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Correcting Misperceptions and Reducing Risky Drinking through a Student-Designed Poster Campaign

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Dear Editor

Despite an increase in preventative efforts on college campuses, underage college drinking continues to be a national problem and a source of concern for college health professionals and researchers alike (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002). Excessive consumption can result in serious consequences including diminished academic performance, sickness, fighting, unwanted sexual encounters, and even death (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005). The *social norms approach* to college drinking suggests that students are influenced by their misperceptions of the normative drinking patterns of other students (Berkowitz, 2004; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Social norms theory predicts that overestimations of heavy drinking frequency (perceived norms) will increase heavy drinking, while underestimations of healthy behavior (abstinence or moderate drinking) will discourage individuals from engaging in them. As misperceptions predict drinking behavior and are associated with drinking-related problems (see review by Berkowitz, 2004), correcting normative misperceptions among students may result in decreased problematic drinking.

Campaigns correcting normative misperceptions have become increasingly common on college campuses. Our research team decided to implement a campus-wide, poster media campaign to disseminate accurate, normative information regarding the actual alcohol consumption patterns of students at our university. However, despite being cited as theoretically promising by the NIAAA (2002), our team was wary about this approach due to the lack of empirical support for these “universal prevention” campaigns (Wechsler et al., 2003) and due to reports of failed campaigns that cited unbelievable or inconsistent message sources and lack of long-term exposure of the campaigns to students as a major flaw (e.g., Clapp, Lange, Russell, Shillington, & Voas, 2003; Werch et., 2000). Nevertheless, reviews of poster media campaigns state the success of many programs and encourage schools to adopt programs on their own campuses (Berkowitz, 2004; 2002). Researchers cite several necessary steps to consider when designing a campus poster campaign to reduce drinking. These include accurate assessment of true campus norms, consistency and believability of the message presented, dosage (length of presentation) of the message, and adequate evaluation of the campaign (Fabiano, 1999).

Taking into consideration past campaign failures and suggestions from research reviews of social norms programs (Berkowitz, 2004; Fabiano, 1999), we developed a plan. First, the message on the posters needed to be accurate and current. The university distributed a campus-wide CORE survey to all students in the spring of 2004 to obtain accurate and current drinking data of its students. A representative sample of 1,277 students (nearly one-fourth of the student population) completed the survey. Students assessed were similar in demographics to the overall student population as a whole. Statistics from this source were used to display true campus drinking norms on posters.

Next, the message needed to be consistent, attractive, and presented in a way that made the statistics believable. It was anticipated that a “student-designed” poster campaign, rather than one presented by the administration or student affairs staff, would make the presented information more attractive and easier to accept as accurate. Through a collaborative venture with the Department of Graphic Arts, our team recruited qualified volunteer students in upper-level Graphic Arts classes to design the posters. Students received class credit and were able to create an important addition to their portfolios. In order to have a consistent message on posters, we met with students and pitched their mission of mindfulness and responsible (risk-reduction) drinking and provided campus-specific drinking norms to incorporate into the posters. Beyond these guidelines, poster designs were open to the artists’ conceptualization. Students were encouraged to create sets of two to three posters with the same overall theme, but with varying content. At the end of the semester, we selected the three designs they felt were the clearest, most direct, and contained the strongest message. An example of a set of posters from the 2004–2005 poster campaign can be found in Figure 1.

Third, the posters needed to be adequately promoted and visible across campus. By involving students in the design of the posters, the peer-to-peer message was authentic and all publicity surrounding the release of the posters highlighted that students at the university designed these posters. For example, each poster series had its own “poster release party” on campus; an event that included free lunches, games, DJs, and raffles. Residence Hall Directors and Advisors gave out posters to students in the residence halls and students who hung up posters in their rooms or on their doors were given raffle tickets to win prizes at the end of the semester. Our team worked with the housing and student affairs departments to display posters in common areas on each floor of each resident hall, in addition to all academic departments, dining halls, bookstores, the library, and the campus recreation center. During the 2004–2005 academic year, three sets of posters were distributed at different points through-the year and displayed throughout campus. Posters were different in content (e.g., images, statistics used), but similar in the overall theme of responsible drinking.

Finally, adequate evaluation of poster campaigns help assess their impact on campus. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this campaign, a 20-item survey was developed and administered to a convenience sample of students, randomly recruited in common areas around campus. The sample included 212 undergraduate students of all grade levels (32% freshmen, 30% sophomores, 20% juniors, and 18% seniors); 65% female with 68% living on campus. Approximately 89% of respondents remembered seeing a poster on display

(95% of participants who lived on-campus and 79% of participants living off-campus), demonstrating that the posters were perhaps adequately represented throughout campus and visible to both resident and commuter students.

On average, students who saw a poster believed a typical student at the university consumes about 4.8 drinks per week (the actual statistic is 4.5 drinks per week). The students who reported not having seen a poster believed the average to be higher, at 6.2 drinks per week. This discrepancy and the fact that 43 % of respondents reported that they learned that students drink less than they had originally thought, revealed that the posters may have been successful at educating students about normative drinking. The posters also helped spark awareness about one's own alcohol use, as 11% "somewhat considered" to "greatly considered" a need to cut down on drinking. Ninety-seven percent reported believing the statistics on the posters. Seventy-one percent of respondents felt the posters to be effective in getting information to students about alcohol use on campus.

The student-designed poster campaign combines several important elements to make it unique from other programs. First, the posters contained campus-specific normative information that was collected using a large and representative sample of the university students. By having students design and be actively involved in the poster design and release, it was anticipated that the general student population was more likely to believe the information contained on the posters. Second, the student-designed initiative was mutually beneficial for both our research team and the students: the designers were able to build their resume and portfolios while receiving class credit, and we received valuable graphic products at no cost for design. Third, the widespread release of the posters on campus (through the help of collaborative efforts with the housing and student affairs departments) made the posters highly visible across campus. Universities are encouraged to initiate similar student-designed poster campaigns on their own campuses in an inexpensive, accurate, and consistent effort to reduce drinking levels among students.

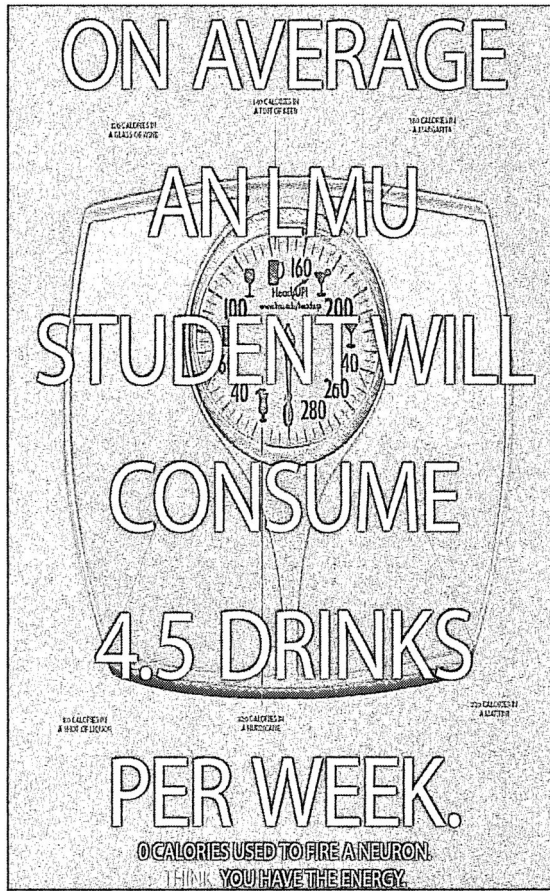
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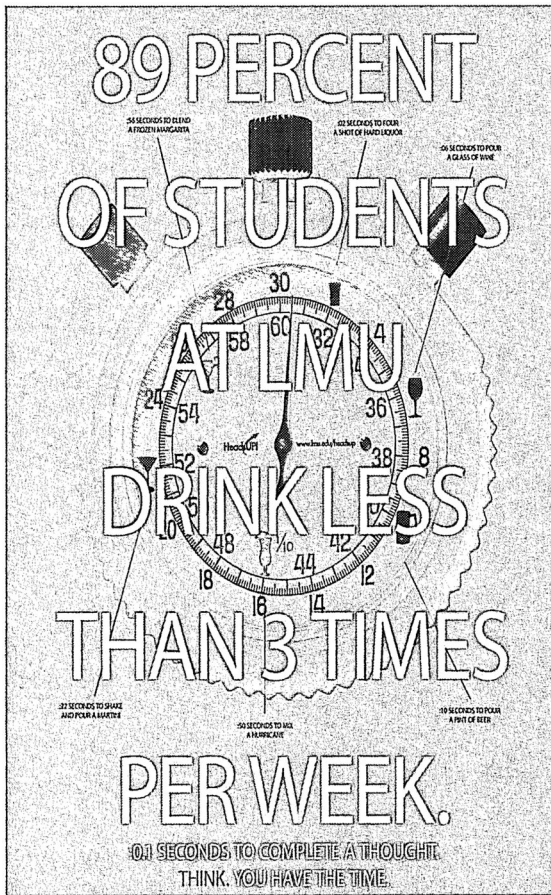






Figure 1.
Posters Used in Social Norms Poster Campaign