

## College Students' Perceptions of a Safe Spring Break Event: An Event Specific Prevention Program

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### Abstract

The most recent National College Health Assessment (2007) revealed that college students are engaging in risky health behaviors that are putting them at risk for death, disease, and injury. Studies suggest that certain college student risk behaviors, such as consuming alcohol, increases around certain times of the year and at certain events. Event specific prevention (ESP) programs have been introduced to many college campuses in order to address these risky behaviors. ESP is a strategy designed to reduce risk behaviors around certain events or during times of the year when risk behaviors increase. The purpose of this study was to determine college students' perceptions of the effectiveness of a Safe Spring Break ESP program. A cross sectional survey, conducted with 223 students from a large Southeastern university, revealed that 89.9% learned something new at the event and 84.5% reported the information would be helpful while on spring break. Also, many students felt the event was effective or extremely effective at increasing their knowledge regarding specific health behaviors surrounding spring break. This study encourages universities to invest in implementing ESP programs. Recommendations for student wellness, student counseling, and student services regarding ESP programs are included.

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### Introduction

The leading causes of death for college aged students are unintentional injuries, homicide, suicide, cancer, and heart disease (Kung, Hoyert, Xu, & Murphy, 2007). The most recent National College Health Assessment (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2007) revealed college students are engaging in risky health behaviors that are putting them at risk for these causes of death at alarming rates. In the past 12 months among sexually active students, males reported having 2.3 sexual partners and females reported 1.8 sexual partners. Additionally, 19.7% of females had been sexually abused or assaulted and 18.9% had been in an abusive relationship. One in ten felt hopeless, depressed to the point it was difficult to function, or considered suicide in the past 12 months. Twenty three percent of males and eleven

percent of females reported drinking five or more drinks at one sitting three or more times in the past two weeks. The last time the students socialized, males consumed 1.8 drinks per hour and females consumed 1.3 drinks per hour. One percent had used marijuana and five percent had smoked cigarettes everyday for the past 30 days. Using BMI to classify weight, 27% of females and 39% of males were classified as being overweight or obese. Students also reported that stress (34%), sleep difficulties (25%), depression/anxiety disorders (15%), and alcohol use (7%) impeded their academic performance (ACHA, 2007). These statistics reveal that college students are in fact engaging in risk behaviors that can only lead to negative consequences.

Generally, not only does engaging in risky health behaviors at the college level put students

at risk for morbidity and mortality, studies suggest that certain college student risk behaviors (e.g., drinking) increase around certain times of the year and at certain events, compounding the risk. Many studies reveal that alcohol consumption increases at the beginning and end of the semester but typically decreases around exam week and that during events such as spring break, homecomings, tailgates, birthdays, spring weekend, local and national holidays and other community or sporting events, alcohol consumption dramatically increases among the student population (Lee, Maggs, & Rankin, 2006; Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Bergstrom, & Lewis, 2006; Neighbors, Spieker, Oster-Aaland, Lewis, & Bergstrom, 2005; Greenbaum, Del Boca, Darkes, Wang, & Goldman, 2005; Del Boca, Darkes, Greenbaum, & Goldman, 2004; Nelson & Wechsler, 2003). During these times, college student morbidity and mortality also increases (Hembroff, Atkin, Martell, McCue & Greenamyre, 2007).

In order to reduce morbidity and mortality among college students, and to address the risky behaviors that college students commonly report, event specific prevention [ESP] programs have been introduced to many college campuses (Lewis, Neighbors, Lee, & Oster-Aaland, 2008; Hembroff, Atkin, Martell, McCue & Greenamyre, 2007; Neighbors et al., 2005; Smith, Bogle, Talbott, Gant, & Castillo, 2006). Event specific prevention is a strategy designed to reduce alcohol consumption during times of the year where heavy drinking is common such as 21st birthdays, spring break, and football tailgates (Neighbors et al., 2007). Programs are implemented before the event occurs and aim to minimize the alcohol consumption associated with that specific event. ESP programs can be conducted with a one-time educational program or intervention, or they can be conducted over a short time period and include multiple educational programs or interventions. Event specific prevention is different from other alcohol intervention strategies in that, these programs are designed to reduce alcohol consumption during a specific event or point in time.

Although there has been limited research conducted on the success of ESP programs, those programs that have reported success have focused on alcohol consumption, particularly at the times of year when drinking increases (Hembroff et al., 2007; Neighbors et al. 2007; Bormann & Stone, 2001; Johannessen, Gilder, Collins, Hueston, & DeJong, 2001). Michigan State University [MSU] sends out Be Responsible about Drinking [B.R.A.D.] cards on 21st birthdays reminding the students of the harmful consequences of alcohol. This ESP program, a one-time approach, has shown that students who receive, read, and understand the message in the B.R.A.D. card reduce their alcohol consumption (Hembroff et al., 2007). However, Lewis et al. (2008) did not find that their 21st birthday card program, a multi-program approach, reduced drinking or its' consequences around this holiday but that it did reduce misperceived norms (e.g., the perceived number of drinks a peer would drink at his/her 21st birthday). Some campuses have restricted or banned alcohol use before, after, and during sporting events (Bormann & Stone, 2001) and found that negative consequences of alcohol use (e.g., arrests, assaults, student referrals to the judicial system) declined. Other campuses have increased policing, prohibited alcohol displays, or restricted how and where alcohol was served during spring festivals and homecomings (Johannessen et al., 2001).

Event Specific Prevention programs targeted toward decreasing negative behaviors have had positive results on excessive alcohol consumption and its negative consequences (Neighbors et al., 2007). However, there is limited research documenting the use of ESP programs around other behaviors such as drug use, tattooing, or safe sex behaviors that occur around certain times of the year or events, such as spring break.

After searching multiple databases in the areas of health, health education, psychology, and alcohol (i.e., MEDLINE, ProQuest, PubMed, Health Source, CINAHL, PsychINFO, Alcohol and Alcohol Problems), specific journals (i.e.,

Journal of Addictive Behavior, Journal of American College Health), and by key terms (spring break, ESP, college students' perceptions) there were no studies found documenting the use of ESP programs regarding the effectiveness of spring break ESP programs specifically. One way to determine if a program is successfully being aimed at the correct population and/or behavior is to ask the participants of the program if they perceive the program as relevant to them and their behavior. College students are the participants in the ESP programs that are occurring on their campuses. Therefore they emerge as the best population to ask whether the programs are successful. Although Lewis et al. (2008) did find that 98% of students receiving 21st birthday cards reminding them of the harm of extreme drinking felt that the university should continue sending the cards to the students, there is no research currently found relating to college students' perceptions of the successfulness of an ESP program. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine college students' perceptions of the effectiveness of a Safe Spring Break ESP program.

### **Methods**

This study was conducted in accordance with and was approved by the Institutional Review Board at this Southeastern University.

#### **Participants**

Many students from a large Southeastern university attended the Safe Spring Break Event and 223 students completed usable surveys. Participants were recruited to complete the survey after visiting the Safe Spring Break booths that were set up outside of a popular student socializing area in the middle of campus. After students had voluntarily visited the booths covering a number of educational topics for staying safe on spring break, the students went on their way to class, to eat lunch, or to resume their day. As students walked away from the booths, student researchers approached them with the Safe Spring Break Survey on a clip board with a pen and asked them if they would like to participate in a survey based on what they had just observed at the booths. It is not known

exactly how many students actually attended the booths, as no head count was taken, nor is it known how many students were approached and refused to participate in the survey. Many students said they did not have time to fill out the survey because they had to get to class or they just said "no, thanks," but 223 did choose to stop and participate.

#### **Instrument development**

A one-page, 14-item instrument, Safe Spring Break Survey, was developed to determine college students' perceived effectiveness of the Safe Spring Break Event they had attended. The instrument questions were created using a qualitative methodology utilizing open-ended discussions conducted with seven students in an Applied Principles of Health Education and Promotion course and a literature review. The students discussed where they were going for spring break, if they felt they would engage in behaviors such as getting a tattoo or drinking, if they felt like a safe spring break event would increase their knowledge about being safe, and what they felt the survey should ask the students who would be attending the event. Based on the literature review and the student discussion, it was decided to create a survey that could be completed in less than ten minutes because it was believed that students who attended the event did not want to spend more time afterward filling out a survey. It was also decided that the survey should ask about the students' knowledge because the group felt as if students would not be honest about their future behavior during spring break, and that the survey should ask demographic type questions to use to determine if there were differences between groups who answered the survey.

The final instrument consisted of dichotomous, Likert-scale, and demographic questions. The instrument included one general question ("I learned something new today? Yes or No) about knowledge and seven questions relating to whether the program was effective (1 = extremely ineffective and 5 = extremely effective) in increasing their knowledge around the Safe Spring Break Event topics (sun safety, drinking and driving, club drug use, traveler's diarrhea, avoiding unwanted sexual advances,

safe sex, and tattoos and body piercings). Two questions asked students if they were leaving the university or their hometown for spring break and if so, where they were going. Two questions were demographic (school classification and gender). And lastly, two asked if the information would be helpful to them while on spring break and if they were required to attend. The instrument also instructed students that their participation was voluntary, that they could stop at anytime for any reason, that they could skip questions, and that there was no penalty for participating or not participating.

Internal consistency reliability coefficient was conducted on the 223 surveys that were collected to help establish reliability of the instrument. The instrument was found to have a Cronbach's Alpha estimate of reliability of .914, suggesting good internal consistency reliability.

### **Procedures**

Students in an Applied Principles of Health Education and Promotion course conducted a portion of a Safe Spring Break event on a Southeastern University campus. The event was held the week before spring break in front of a popular student eatery and social spot. Students covered the topics of safe sex, traveler's diarrhea, club drugs, drinking and driving, and sun safety. Students utilized banners, posters, incentives (e.g., candy, lip balm, sun screen), and games to attract students to their booth/table. Additionally, this was a passport event for all students enrolled in a general required health class (n = ~1,700 students). [Each student enrolled in the general health course must attend a certain number of "approved" events throughout the semester. Each student has a "passport" or stamp card that he/she must get stamped at the event, thus it is called a passport event.] The students who implemented the event used the skills they had learned in their previous coursework to plan, implement, and evaluate the program. Most of the students were seniors and this was their last course before their internship semester.

As students visited the booths they were handed pamphlets, asked to participate in games (i.e.,

sex bingo), given free materials (i.e., condoms) and generally browsed information on tri-fold boards containing health education information. After students visited the Safe Spring Break Event, participated in the games, won free prizes, and received information on behaviors that could put them at risk for illness, injury, or death while on spring break, they were asked to fill out a five minute survey as they left the booths to resume their day. The student researchers held clipboards with pens and a survey and asked them if they would like to fill out a survey regarding what they had just learned. Some students said they did not have time to fill out the survey but 223 students stopped and participated in the survey when the student researchers approached them. After the student filled out the survey, the student researchers brought their completed survey to the principal investigator who compiled them into a file folder and kept them with her during the event. When the event was over, all surveys were housed in the principal investigator's office.

### **Data analysis**

All survey results were entered into The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 15.0). Frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores as well as crosstabs were computed to describe the results of the study.

## **Results**

### **Demographic results**

Of the 223 students who completed surveys, 65.9% (n = 147) were females, 68.2% (n = 152) were freshman, and 59.1% (n = 130) were required to attend the event (Table 1). Although a majority of the participants were females, this represents the demographics of the university (61.6% enrolled in 2007 were women) (Office of Institutional Planning, Research, and Effectiveness, 2008). Sixty five percent (n = 145) of students said they were leaving the university or their hometowns for spring break, indicating that they would be traveling. Of those who said they were traveling for spring break, 41.3% (n = 92) said they were going to the beach, 52.5% (n = 117) were going home, and

another 3.6% (n = 8) were going out of the country or 1.3% (n = 3) on a cruise.

**Table 1.**  
Demographic characteristics of university students (n = 223)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	76	34.1
Female	147	65.9
Grade Level		
Freshman	152	68.2
Sophomore	36	16.1
Junior	22	9.9
Senior	13	5.8
Required to attend the event		
Yes	130	59.1
No	90	40.9
Leaving the university or home town for spring break		
Yes	145	65.9
No	75	34.1
If said yes:		
Beach	92	41.3
Out of country	8	3.6
Home	117	52.5
Cruise	3	1.3
Other	27	12.1

Data reflects those who responded to these items (missing values were excluded from the descriptive statistics).

**Student perception results**

A number of students reported that they learned something new at the event (89.8%, n = 193) and that the information would be helpful while on spring break (84.5%, n = 180) (Table 2). The survey asked students, “How effective was this program in increasing [their] knowledge about...” seven different health topics. Students felt that the event was effective or extremely effective at increasing their knowledge regarding sun safety (58.3%, n = 130), the consequences of drinking and driving (65.7%, n = 146), the consequences of “club” drug use (63.5%, n = 141), avoiding traveler’s diarrhea (62.5%, n = 138), avoiding unwanted sexual advances (59.2%, n = 131), safe sex practices (59%, n = 131), and safety concerns of tattoos and body piercings (57.7%, n = 128) (Table 3).

**Crosstabulation results**

The crosstabulations revealed that those who indicated that they were leaving the university or their home town for spring break (65%) also felt as if the Safe Spring Break Event increased their knowledge about how to engage in safe sex practices (Kendall’s tau-c = -.137, p = .049) and that the information would be helpful to them while they were on spring break (x<sup>2</sup> = 5.94, p = .025, N = 211, df = 1). There were no other significant differences.

**Discussion**

The Safe Spring Break event at this university was seen as a success because many students participated and consequently received some information encouraging them to be safe on spring break. It was also seen as successful because a majority of the students who filled out surveys reported that they learned something new and that the information would be helpful on spring break. Over half of the students who filled out surveys reported that they felt the event was effective at increasing their knowledge around a range of health risk behaviors in which college students typically engage in during spring break. Thus, this study supports the current literature that promotes the use of ESP programs on college campuses to reduce a variety of risk behaviors (Bormann & Stone, 2001; Hembroff et al., 2007; Johannessen et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2008; Neighbors et al. 2007).

**Table 2.** University Students’ Perceptions of the Safe Spring Break Event (n = 223)

Perception	n	%
I learned something new today	193	89.8
This information will help me while I am on spring break	180	84.5

Data reflects those who responded to these items (missing values were excluded from the descriptive statistics).

**Table 3.**  
University Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Safe Spring Break Event (n = 223)

<b>How effective was this program in increasing your knowledge about...</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Sun safety	3.61	1.05
The consequences of drinking and driving	3.84	.994
The consequences of "club" drug use	3.85	1.04
How to avoid traveler's diarrhea	3.71	1.17
How to avoid unwanted sexual advances	3.67	1.10
How to engage in safe sex practices	3.69	1.14
The safety concerns of tattoos and body piercing	3.59	1.25

Means based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = extremely ineffective, 5 = extremely effective)

Event Specific Prevention program studies that target preventing college student risk behaviors around the time of spring break are limited. However, this study can add to the body of literature that encourages universities to invest in implementing these events around the time of spring break. There are many people involved in trying to maintain college student health and building healthier campuses, in general, and specifically around certain times when college student health might decline (i.e., spring break) because of risk behaviors. Administrators, college health educators, student wellness personnel, counseling personnel, faculty, and students all play a role in maintaining good college student health. This study may serve as a template for all involved in trying to improve college student health and reduce the risk behaviors in which they may engage. It may specifically serve as a template for those events in which college students engage in risky behavior around the time of spring break.

Additionally, because students' perceptions of these events have not been thoroughly studied, the results of this study provide relevant information on how students perceive these events and subsequently support the implementation of more spring break ESP programming. It is also interesting to note that those students who were leaving their home town or the university to travel for spring break found the information most helpful. This needs to be paid careful attention to when planning

ESP programs for spring break. Programming planning that is targeted toward those students who are leaving their home towns and the university may have the most success at preventing unnecessary risk behaviors while students are away.

**Limitations**

The first limitation of this study is that it doesn't actually measure student behavior on spring break. This study simply measured students' perception of the effectiveness of the event on increasing their knowledge regarding a variety of risk behaviors that tend to occur or increase around the time of spring break. Additionally, a related limitation is that there was no pre or posttest knowledge assessment. While students reported that the event was effective in increasing their knowledge, there is no evidence that it actually did. Although the purpose of the study was to determine what students perceived, the study would have been much stronger if their perceptions, behaviors, and knowledge could have been associated. This is addressed in the section on recommendations for future research.

Another limitation to this study is that there may have been some confusion on the question that asked students where they were going for spring break. Some students indicated that they were leaving their hometown or the university for spring break (question 3) but they indicated that they were going home when asked where they were going for spring break (question 4). The

researchers assumed that students who indicated this believe that their home is somewhere other than their hometown. For example, if a student was staying in their apartment or on campus for spring break, they might have indicated that they were going home yet answered “yes” that they were leaving their hometown. However, this question is confusing and will be changed for future research.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations regarding ESP programs are suggested:

- 1) Health educators and campus wellness personnel, as well as student services and counseling services, on university campuses might consider implementing spring break event specific prevention programs.
- 2) Health educators and campus wellness personnel, as well as student services and counseling services, might also target specific health information to those who are leaving their home towns or the university and traveling during spring break.
- 3) University administration might consider supporting these types of events on their campuses because they are positive programs that ultimately will help reduce risk behaviors among their students and hopefully reduce the negative incidences that occur during spring break (e.g., drunk driving). Administrative support might include additional funding for print and other materials needed at the Safe Spring Break Event, letters of support for attending the event(s), and public

appearances at the event(s) to show students that this is important.

- 4) It is also recommended that other stakeholders, such as the campus police, the university attorneys, and community members and business owners, become involved in supporting these types of events on campus. These entities could be involved in the aftermath of a mishap among students who are on spring break. Therefore, it is important for students to be aware that these parties are concerned for their well-being and that they yield themselves as places/people that students can come to for advice and support if necessary.

Additionally, future recommendations for research include:

- 1) Surveying students who participated in the ESP program to determine if the event actually changed or curbed risk behavior while on spring break.
- 2) Conducting a pre and posttest knowledge assessment to determine if the event actually increased student knowledge concerning the risk behaviors studied.
- 3) Measuring students’ perceptions of the event upon their return from spring break.

These recommendations will strengthen this study and continue to add to the body of literature that suggests that ESP programs are a worthy investment on university campuses for not only decreasing alcohol consumption, but other behaviors that occur around specific events and time of the year.

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