

COLLEGE CORNER

New Approach To Addressing College Drinking [Ⓟ]

(NAPSA)—Experts say the problem with many communications efforts which attempt to frighten people into changing their potentially dangerous ways is that they often don't work on teens and other young people. That's because contracting a life-threatening health condition or becoming seriously injured isn't something most teens envision happening in their young lives.

For example, there have been myriad communications campaigns over the years targeted at preventing illegal underage consumption of alcohol beverages on college campuses. These campaigns have used images and strong language to make the case that consuming alcohol beverages is not only illegal but it could lead to dire consequences. However, after years of urging students to abstain completely, a growing number of colleges are scrapping their old ideas in favor of a new approach that emphasizes responsible consumption.

This new approach is called "social norming," and it educates students about the actual behavior of their peers, focusing on the fact that most college students drink responsibly or don't drink at all. Social norming sets the expectation for positive behavior by reinforcing that most students are doing the right thing—attending classes, respecting others and themselves, and not abusing alcohol.

In practice, social norming educational campaigns involve placing upbeat, often humorous ads about student drinking behavior in campus newspapers or posters in college dorms. The goal of these efforts is to overcome the myth that many students have about the drinking levels or frequency of their peers. The campaigns emphasize important facts—that is, most students drink responsibly, and they drink on average less than one alcoholic beverage per day.

Although the social norming approach is still in its early phases, major players like Anheuser-Busch

have pledged their support. In fact, Anheuser-Busch has contributed \$400,000 to the University of Virginia and six other schools for social norming campaigns. Though many of these programs are just getting off the ground, results have been very promising.

Northern Illinois University (NIU), which is among the leaders in advocating the use of social norms efforts, has achieved a 44 percent reduction in abusive drinking on campus during the 1990s. Other schools which implemented social norming efforts patterned after those at NIU saw similar reductions.

In addition to the wave of success that the social norming approach is bringing about on college campuses, government data shows that underage drinking is continuing to fall. For example, the percentage of college freshmen who say they drink beer frequently or occasionally is at its lowest level since record-keeping began in 1966. Underage drunk driving fatalities have declined 40 percent since 1990 and 64 percent since 1982, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"We're pleased to see not only the overall progress in reducing underage drinking, but we're also pleased to see growing interest in the social norms approach," said Richard F. Keating, vice president and senior government affairs officer for Anheuser-Busch. "Our experience has shown that growing numbers of policy leaders recognize that educational efforts like this are far more effective than imposing more laws and restrictions through legislation.

"Experts say that social norms educational efforts work because they capitalize on every student's desire to fit in by reinforcing responsibility, and making students aspire to that positive behavior as the norm," he added. "The studies show this approach is clearly producing the results everyone wants—less abusive drinking on college campuses."