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PERSPECTIVE

The [underage] drinking life

Battle of the binge

Underage drinking — sometimes responsibly, sometimes recklessly — is a fact of life on college campuses. Here, experts offer strategies for promoting healthy behavior and preventing the tragedies that are every parent's nightmare.

Help students make responsible choices

By JAMIENNE S. STUDLEY
and KEITH KIRSHNER

Reducing high-risk drinking on college campuses nationwide requires comprehensive partnerships throughout each college, as well as with parents and local communities. Some might prefer to shy away from this complex and frustrating matter, but these are the very issues that colleges, families and towns across the country need to take seriously.

Educational institutions have a special responsibility to help students develop the capacity to make good choices and to navigate the demanding transition to independence. At Skidmore, student government, faculty and the administration work together to support students' social and personal growth, establish norms for learning and living together, and help prepare students to live fulfilling lives. Issues surrounding irresponsible drinking present serious problems, but also chances for learning and positive development.

It's not easy to even talk about drinking among people who are under 21. College presidents and parents may wish that it just didn't happen, that we could pretend that because underage drinking is illegal it's also nonexistent. But we cannot hide our heads in the sand and let the chance to influence values and behavior during these formative years slip through our fingers. Instead, we must engage together to reduce the risks to life,

Please see **CHOICES B3** ▶

▶ *Jamienne Studley is president of Skidmore College. She previously was general counsel of the U.S. Department of Education and associate dean of Yale Law School. Keith*

Colleges shift focus to 'social norms'

By MICHAEL P. HAINES

Prohibition didn't work for the nation in the 1920s, and it's a failure on college campuses today. A growing number of universities are beginning to realize the shortcomings of the Prohibition mentality and that, while it is illegal for anyone under 21 to drink, using scare tactics to halt alcohol abuse is not the answer.

Instead, they are adopting a refreshingly novel approach to student drinking — and it's working.

The traditional approach has been to scare students about the hazards of drinking too much or to try stopping alcohol consumption altogether. Now, dozens of universities across the country are introducing campaigns to stress the fact that most students who choose to drink do so responsibly.

Under the old strategy, the deeper issues of college drinking were not addressed. False beliefs about excessive drinking may have actually encouraged some students to consume more alcohol in order to fit in with their perception of peer behavior.

But research has proved that the actual behavior of most American college students is far from the image of the reckless drinking in "Animal House."

Nearly two-thirds of college students average less than one

Please see **NORMS B2** ▶

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NORMS: The scare tactics don't work

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drink a day. And most students
who do drink, drink responsibly,
according to an annual study
developed with a grant from the
U.S. Department of Education
and conducted by the Core Insti-
tute. As director of the National
Social Norms Resource Center
at Northern Illinois University, I
know from experience — and
research has proved — that by
changing perceptions of what is
“normal,” behavior can change.

Other universities are learning
that, too. They are helping to
change students' perceptions of
campus drinking norms, and in
the process, reducing alcohol
abuse. What university adminis-
trators are learning is that when
students consistently overesti-
mate the incidence of heavy alco-
hol consumption by their peers,
they tend to drink more, to fit
that perceived norm. However,
when students are armed with
the truth about the moderate and
responsible drinking habits of the
majority of their peers, they tend
to consume less.

These types of social norms
efforts, introduced at Northern
Illinois University, have resulted
in significant and continuing re-
ductions in heavy drinking and
alcohol-related injuries on cam-
puses.

Before we implemented the
social norms program at NIU 10
years ago, students thought that
moderation was uncommon and
heavy drinking was the prevailing
practice, putting pressure on
them to live up to this false
premise. When healthy behav-
iors were promoted in the 1990s,
heavy drinking by students
dropped by 44 percent and abstin-
ence increased. Such success
stories were seen throughout the
campus community, including
those groups traditionally more
difficult to reach: freshmen,
Greeks and athletes.

And, although the data are
limited to a few colleges, the
positive results have been en-

couraging enough to spur several
hundred institutions to introduce
social norms campaigns on their
campuses.

Last fall, as part of a national
campaign to highlight positive
college trends, ads were placed in
college newspapers at many of
the more than 200 state universi-
ties belonging to the National
Association of State Universities
and Land-Grant Colleges. By
reinforcing the fact that most
students are making responsible
choices such as using designated
drivers and drinking in modera-
tion, the association is helping to
change common misperceptions.

This is a far different approach
from when colleges used scare
tactics and other “traditional”
methods, such as bringing in a
crashed car to illustrate the haz-
ards of abusive drinking. Those
efforts have been shown to have
little or no effect and, in fact, are
often counterproductive. For ex-
ample, after instituting this type
of campaign at NIU in 1989, the
percentage of students at the

university who said they drank
heavily actually rose.

Educating students about how
much drinking their peers really
engage in and about their safer,
true behaviors while socializing
has become a goal at many
schools.

The University of Virginia in
Charlottesville, where there was
a movement in the 1800s to ban
alcohol, tacked up posters in the
dorms. The posters declared that
first-year students drank four or
fewer drinks per week. Kansas
State University tossed footballs
bearing messages that the norm
for most students was four or
fewer drinks. And Hobart and
William Smith College in Gene-
va, Ontario County, runs screen
savers on campus computers that
describe social norms behaviors.

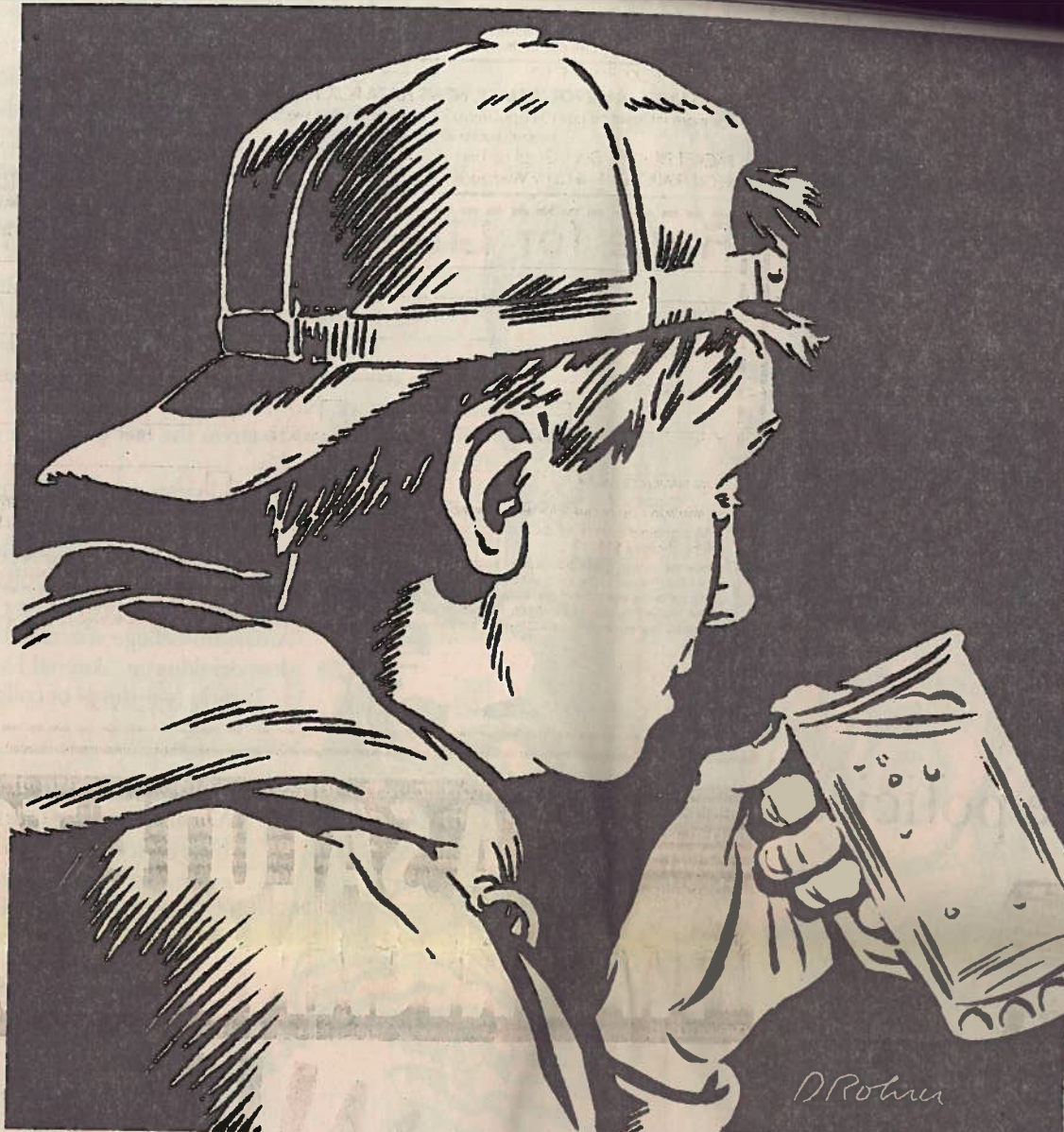
The University of Arizona,
State University College at New
Paltz and the University of Mis-
souri also have adopted this so-
cial-norms approach, and all have
had positive results with their
message.

Preliminary data from UCLA,
Niagara and Santa Clara univer-
sities indicate similar successes.

Students are more responsive
to peer influence than health
terrorism. They want to fit in,
especially when they find out
what “in” is. The results of mar-
shaling that fact have been aston-
ishing. At the University of Ari-
zona in Tucson, heavy drinking
dropped 28 percent in a five-year
period. At Hobart and William
Smith Colleges, it decreased 40
percent over four years.

The same approach now is
being tried at the high school
level in DeKalb County, Ill.
There, the message counters the
perception that everyone in high
school drinks at parties and urges
abstinence.

Social norms is not the one-
stop answer to achieving respon-
sible drinking. But it is a power-
ful tool in helping to change the
landscape of the nation's cam-
puses to make them healthier and
safer learning environments.



TEACH: Parents set the stage for responsible drinking by youths

▼CONTINUED FROM B1
are adults. They can vote, serve
on juries, hold public office, mar-
ry, divorce, adopt children, have
abortions without parental ap-
proval, serve in the military and
in every other way enjoy the
rights of adulthood except one —
to have a drink. It's not surprising
that forcing adults to abide by
children's rules is far less than
successful.

We will never make real prog-
ress against the problem of
youthful alcohol abuse until we
accept the lessons taught by the
long experience of other cultures
— in Spain, Italy, Greece and
Portugal, for instance — where
most people drink, often daily,
but experience very few prob-
lems.

There are three main keys to
the success of such groups:

■ The substance of alcohol is
seen as neutral in and of itself. It
is neither a terrible poison nor a
potion that can magically trans-
form lives. It's how it's used that
is important. Naturally, there is
no effort to stigmatize alcohol by
equating it with illegal drugs.

■ There are two options that
are legally, morally and socially
equally acceptable — abstaining
or drinking in moderation. At the
same time, there is no tolerance
for abusive drinking by anyone of
any age at any time.

■ Education about alcohol
starts early and in the home.
Young people are taught, under
their parents' supervision,
through word and deed, that if
people choose to drink they most
do so in moderation. These suc-
cessful groups would agree that
it's better to learn to drink in the
parents' house than in the frater-
nity house.

But isn't it illegal to serve
alcohol to anyone under age 21?
Not necessarily. Most states per-
mit parents to serve alcohol with-
in their home to their children of
any age. But it isn't essential that
young people consume alcohol in
order to learn about moderation.
We teach middle school students
civics long before they are old

We will never make
real progress against
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until we accept the
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other cultures.

enough to vote, serve on juries or
hold public office.

Parental example is the single
most important factor in the
behavior of young people. And
what we do is much more impor-
tant than what we say. Drink in
moderation and, in spite of
youthful experimentation, your
children will almost certainly
grow up to use alcohol in moder-
ation.

I recently reviewed all research
studies that evaluated the effec-
tiveness of alcohol-education
programs. Abstinence-only pro-
grams were remarkable for their
ineffectiveness. Those that con-
tained at least some attention to
moderation were demonstrably
more effective.

We also need to teach, by
word and example, harm reduc-
tion. This includes such things as
never drinking and driving —
and never riding with a driver
who has — never consuming
more than one alcohol drink per
hour, always consuming food or
“munchies” while drinking, nev-
er becoming intoxicated, and
knowing that the alcohol content
of a beer, a glass of dinner wine
and a shot of whiskey are all
equivalent.

But what about the influence
of peers? Research has demon-
strated that young people, like
older people, tend to select peers
whose beliefs and values are simi-
lar to their own.

As parents, we need realize
that we have more influence over
our young people than their
peers, alcohol advertising, drink-
ing-age laws, schools or anything
else. If we use alcohol in moder-
ation and teach our offspring
harm reduction, they will almost
certainly drink in moderation
and avoid harm.