

# Spotlight focuses on drug and alcohol misperceptions

BY JENNIFER-JO  
MILTARI  
Staff Writer

The November 7 Spotlight Lecture, held in the Pugh Center Common Room, featured an engaging discussion delivered by Professor of Sociology H. Wesley Perkins of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, located in Geneva, N.Y. The lecture, "The 'Reign of Error' on Campus: Misperceptions About Alcohol and Other Drug Norms," focused on student alcohol consumption, the misperceptions a student might have concerning alcohol use and abuse and how these misperceptions affect their intake of the drug.

According to Perkins, statistics show, and students across the nation agree, that alcohol abuse is the number one problem facing college campuses today. Twenty-five percent of college students have alcohol problems and, more often than not, more money is spent by students on alcohol than books. Perkins feels that the problem has increased over recent years because of misperceptions of societal norms.

When students across the nation were surveyed concerning alcohol use on campus, Perkins found the results surprising. In a Core Alcohol and Drug Survey administered by Perkins and his colleagues,

students were asked to respond to two questions. First, how much alcohol they consume weekly and second, how much alcohol they believe the average student consumes weekly. His survey showed that, on average, only 60 percent of students have one drink a week or more. This appeared to be the "norm" for alcohol use on college campuses. When asked the second question, though, the average response was that students believed that over 88 percent of their fellow students had one drink or more per week. Perkins raised the questions "Why does this answer deviate so dramatically from the norm?" and "Why do students have this misperception of alcohol use on campus?" It is obvious, said Perkins, that students have the notion that their peers are behaving in a different fashion than they actually are. According to Perkins, students often grossly misperceive what their peers do. In an attempt to conform, many students will drink more or behave in an abnormal fashion in order to feel accepted by and similar to their peers.

Perkins suggested that one way to alleviate this problem is to create conversation mechanisms by which to communicate the actual norms. He said that students often tend to "sensationalize" what happens



*Echo photo by Jennifer Atwood*  
**Professor H. Wesley Perkins** when they go to parties or out with friends. This is how misperceptions of norms occur. If there were channels of communication through which the moderation view was passed, said Perkins, misperception of norms would not occur. In today's society we have a tendency to follow imaginary peers, therefore becoming a confirmation to misperceptions of others.

Professor Perkins concluded his talk by quoting a famous sociologist, saying, "If something is perceived as real, it is real in its consequences." He urged that students must realize that "not everybody is going to be there" and "not everybody is going to be doing it." This may, hopefully, enable students' misperceptions of norms to be halted. □

