

Aztec Nights

San Diego State University

<http://go.sdsu.edu/aztecnight/Default.aspx>

The first few weeks of the school year are a risky time for incoming freshmen. A series of student injuries and other alcohol-fueled events in 2007 at San Diego State University led a campus task force to recommend several strategies to reduce alcohol misuse and related problems. The recommendations included: 1) requiring freshman to complete the e CHECKUP TO GO; 2) distributing discussion guides to parents of incoming students; 3) changing alcohol policies and sanctions; 4) prohibiting alcohol at fraternity parties during the first several weeks of the semester; and 5) Aztec Nights, a series of alcohol-free late-night events.

[Aztec Nights](#) officially kicked off during the 2008 fall semester. This was an expansion of a residential education program that had already become popular within the resident halls. Due to its success, funding grew substantially and the number of events was expanded and included commuter students. Three campus divisions were approached to contribute funds—Student Affairs, Associated Students, and Business & Financial Affairs. A budget of about \$350,000 was established and is now an institutionalized line item.

The planning committee is comprised of the division sponsors who finance and organize the events. The current goal is to plan 13-17 events during the first 5 weekends (Thursday—Saturday nights) of each semester, beginning at 10:00 p.m. and running until 1:00-2:00 a.m. Aztec Nights events are promoted during new student orientation and by Resident Assistants (RAs). The biggest events (Carnival and Red and Black Dance) typically attract between 6,000-8,000 students. Students are required to show their student ID card to get in, and some events allow SDSU students to bring a guest. Aztec Nights events have traditionally included:

- Carnival—Includes rides, food, and a DJ.
- Red and Black Dance—A traditional event that includes learning the SDSU fight song and getting a towel.
- Go-Kart Track—An alcohol message is imbedded in this event by giving students Breathalyzer tests before they can drive a go-kart.
- Sledding—During the winter semester, snow is brought in for students to go sledding.
- Screen on the Green—A large movie screen is set up and movies are shown on the Green.
- Midnight Study Break—Breakfast is provided, along with prizes and study tips.

One of the reasons Aztec Nights is such a huge success with students is because the events are never promoted as being “alcohol-free.” According to Jim Lange, Ph.D., SDSU Director of Health Promotion, “Aztec Nights events don’t include any health messaging or tables with information about healthy behaviors. These are supposed to be fun events.” Students aren’t screened to weed out those who may have been drinking, but of course those who are disruptive are not permitted. Taking a break from drinking and eating helps to slow down intoxication. It’s those most at risk for drinking that are the ones most in need of an alternative. Sometimes these are the social leaders who lend the events more credibility.

Higher Education Center

for Alcohol and Drug Misuse Prevention and Recovery

The totality of the strategies implemented to reduce high-risk alcohol use resulted in reducing drinking rates and related problems among SDSU students. Successes include:

- Alcohol overdose medical transports were cut in half.
- There were fewer student alcohol violations in the campus judicial system.
- Freshmen were more likely to say they hadn't consumed any alcohol in past 12 months.
- Attendance at Aztec Nights events has increased over the years and has become a positive student tradition.

Providing late-night activities on the weekends as part of a comprehensive approach can help to reduce student alcohol and drug misuse. Campuses who want to implement a similar series of events will increase their likelihood of success by sticking to the following lessons learned at SDSU:

- Avoid spending a large sum of money on one big event—the key to success is quantity as well as quality.
- Involve various campus departments to share in the responsibilities of financially supporting and planning the events.
- Focus on the first five weeks of each semester when students are at a higher risk for engaging in high-risk behaviors.
- Don't promote the events as "alcohol-free." Instead, work to create a 'social vibe' around the events that makes students want to attend.
- Include students in the planning and organizing process.
- Allow students who have been drinking to attend the events, as long as they aren't disruptive.
- Ensure that the late-night events don't conflict with other popular campus events (i.e., football games, outside concerts, etc.).

For more information:

Aztec Nights: <http://go.sdsu.edu/aztecnights/Default.aspx>
e CHECKUP TO GO: <http://www.echeckuptogo.com/usa/>