


The Role of State, Community, and Institutional Policy in the Prevention of College Alcohol Problems

by Laurie Davidson, M.A., and Christene DeJong

 The most widespread health and safety problem on college and university campuses in the United States today is high-risk alcohol use and related consequences. The heavy, episodic use of alcohol that 44 percent of college students engage in¹ results in a myriad of consequences for both drinkers and nondrinkers, ranging from disturbed study and vandalism to assault and even death.²

Alcohol use may have a significant impact on student retention as well. Campus administrators perceive that approximately 27 percent of all dropouts are related to alcohol and other drugs.³

Recent reports also confirm that alcohol use has significant adverse effects on cities and towns surrounding colleges and universities.⁴ Community members living within a mile of campus report chronic problems such as noise, vandalism, public drunkenness, vomiting, and public urination—all of which degrade the quality of neighborhood life.⁴

Many college administrators and community members realize that there is no single cause of students' heavy alcohol use and therefore no single remedy for the problem. A comprehensive approach is required, one that addresses multiple levels of influence. Individual factors and group processes influence drinking behavior, and strategies to address these two levels are part of a comprehensive approach.⁵ But drinking behavior also is influenced by institutional factors, community factors, and public policies at the state and federal level.⁵ Strategies, programs, and activities addressing these last three levels constitute an *environmental management* approach to alcohol problem prevention.⁶ Whether implemented at the institutional, community, state, or federal level, policy change is a particularly powerful environmental strategy, with the potential to reduce high-risk alcohol use and its consequences.

Yet despite the preponderance of evidence supporting environmental approaches,^{1,5,6,7} campus alcohol problem prevention efforts continue to be

weighted heavily in favor of individual educational strategies that research shows are limited in effectiveness *when used alone*.⁸ "On most campuses, prevention efforts have concentrated on intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes, and a subset of institutional factors. Less attention has been paid to factors in the local community that affect student alcohol use; calls by campus officials for changes in state or federal policy remain rare."⁵

Statewide initiatives to prevent college alcohol and other drug problems have provided a support structure that campuses can use to address institutional and community factors. In 45 states, campus administrators, state government officials, and state and local community prevention advocates have collaborated to form campus and community coalitions working to change the campus and community environment.^{9,10,11} These local efforts may include attempts to change city or town ordinances related to the sale or service of alcohol.¹² Statewide initiatives also are an ideal vehicle for campus administrators to speak out in support of state policy change.⁵

This publication aims to encourage campus administrators in a state to work together to introduce policies that make the environment less supportive of high-risk alcohol use. Beginning with a general definition of policy, it goes on to review specific alcohol policy options cited in recent reviews of the scientific literature. It also suggests concrete actions that campus administrators can take to encourage key stakeholders, including policymakers, to review existing policy and serve as catalysts for change.

What Is Policy?

People often think policy is synonymous with the passage of local, state, or federal legislation. In addition to formal legislation, however, "policy" also refers to organizational practices, regulations, enforcement, program operations, and allocation of resources.¹³

Who makes policy decisions? Citizens vote on local ordinances or state referenda, legislators pass laws and allocate funding, and appointed government officials implement decisions about programs and resources. Administrators of private organizations make decisions with far-reaching policy implications as well.

To illustrate the wide array of decisions that specifically affect alcohol policy, table 1 (see overleaf) provides some examples of policymakers and the areas of policy they can influence at the state, county, community, or organizational level.

Using Policy to Change the Campus and Community Environment

Perhaps the most compelling reason in favor of a policy strategy is that it is more efficient to reach a smaller number of policymakers, who in turn can introduce changes that would affect all students, than it is to intervene one student at a time.¹⁴ Recent scholarly reviews suggest that many state laws and local ordinances are effective or promising in addressing campus alcohol use. For example, several policies have succeeded in reducing college students' access to alcohol by controlling the cost, sale, and distribution of alcohol.^{15,16} As the price of alcohol increases, for example, consumption decreases.^{15,17}

Based on Toomey and Wagenaar's review of policy research,¹⁵ a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) task force recommended that college presidents, campus officials, and student and community leaders explore several policy strategies. Similarly, in its report to the U.S. Congress outlining a strategy to reduce underage drinking, the National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine (IOM) urged communities and states to strengthen enforcement of existing laws and to promote compliance. Table 2 (see overleaf) summarizes the recommendations of these two reports.



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A state may have strong laws related to alcohol sales and service but lack the resources or structures to apply them. Allocating state funds for enforcement of these laws also is a policy decision.

What Campus Administrators Can Do

The decision about how policy change can support local prevention efforts must be determined through careful analysis of the state, community, and institutional alcohol problems and current policies. A campus task force reporting to the president can undertake an assessment of current problems and a comprehensive review of existing policy and can help to develop effective institutional policies to reduce alcohol-related problems on campus.⁶ (See the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center publications for a process for reviewing and changing campus policy.^{18,19})

As part of an overall effort to create environmental change, campus officials should support the formation or ongoing work of a campus and community coalition that addresses alcohol problems in the town or city surrounding the campus.

For example, if an assessment of local conditions shows that the number of bars and taverns in close proximity to campus is very high, a coalition could

curtail access to alcohol by working to change local zoning ordinances to reduce the density of alcohol outlets.²⁰ If data show that it is relatively easy for underage students to purchase alcohol, a coalition might work to establish a communitywide training and enforcement program for responsible hospitality.²¹ Table 2 contains other examples of local policies for administrators to consider to reduce alcohol availability.

Campus administrators also should consider working with other campuses for policy change at the state level. Statewide college AOD prevention initiatives, now under way in 45 states, are an ideal vehicle for campuses to take such collaborative steps.⁹ Several states have convened community forums for college presidents and interested community members as a first step toward launching a statewide initiative to reduce alcohol-related problems on campus. Key policymakers should be invited to offer visible support for such efforts, which have been shown to be effective in mobilizing campus and community coalitions to bring about environmental change.

A statewide initiative also brings campus officials together to assess the strength of local and state support for preventing high-risk alcohol use by college students and underage alcohol use generally.

Possible questions, based on the policy examples listed in table 2, include but are not limited to the following:

- Are funding and staffing sufficient to enforce existing laws? Without sufficient and consistent enforcement many laws are ineffective in reducing high-risk drinking.¹⁵
- Is there funding to staff and organize statewide college prevention initiatives that support the development of campus and community collaborations? Can funding be made available, from either state or federal sources, to provide training to increase campus and community coalitions' ability to implement prevention that works?
- Do licensing and administrative procedures effectively deter alcohol sales to minors and those who might become intoxicated? Are the fines too small, and other consequences too minor, to provide a strong enough incentive to obey the law? Are license suspensions too short-term?
- How are limits placed on the density of alcohol outlets within a town or city? Do towns and cities have sufficient control over outlet density and hours and days of sale?

Once a critical policy issue is identified, a campus administrator or statewide initiative leader could develop a briefing paper for policymakers or organize a community forum on the issue. For example, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln (UNL), hosted a community forum in 1999 that brought together retailers, government officials, police, and community leaders to discuss the problems and issues related to false identification. Of particular concern was the fact that existing analog technology made it easy for individuals seeking replacement licenses to submit false identification, as there were no digital files against which to check documents and verify name, address, and age. As a result, minors were acquiring false licenses and identification cards from the state Department of Motor Vehicles and using them to obtain alcohol. The license, made with a laminate pouch and typewriter, could be easily manipulated and altered by minors. In the year following the community forum, a proposal for a digital driver's license system was submitted at a policy symposium for communities throughout Nebraska hosted by NU Directions, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—funded coalition at UNL. After the symposium, the coalition launched an advocacy initiative with a press conference, legislative testimony by members of a broad statewide coalition that included NU Directions, and the distribution of infor-

Table 1 Policymaker influences on alcohol policy

Policymaker	Area of influence on policy
ABC regulatory and enforcement officials	Enforcement of bar/liquor store regulations
State directors of public health, substance abuse, mental health, transportation, and education	Overall prevention planning; distribution of state and federal funds for problems such as underage drinking, substance abuse, and impaired driving; allocation of funding specific to college alcohol and other drug problem prevention
State legislature	Legislation to control access to alcohol; allocation of funds for liquor law enforcement, prevention, and treatment programs
Philanthropic foundation	Funding priorities for prevention, early intervention, and treatment
County or community treatment agencies and recovery organizations	Allocation of services to population



mation packets to state senators in collaboration with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Thanks to these efforts, a bill mandating a digital driver's license passed the Nebraska legislature and was signed into law in 2001.²²

The Pennsylvania statewide college prevention initiative, a partnership among the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board (PLCB), the Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Universities, and The Network: Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues, identified the need to increase campus administrators' influence on their communities' liquor-licensing decisions. As a result, the PLCB adopted a policy of informing campus officials about liquor license hearings in communities bordering campuses. Although local citizens had always had the opportunity to voice their opinions at these license hearings, the PLCB's advance notification to campus administrators strengthened their ability to oppose the granting of licenses. In the spring of 2000, for example, the PLCB notified Scranton University that a liquor license was being transferred within the Scranton municipality. At the local hearing, Scranton University's vice president of student affairs testified that establishing another outlet near campus was not in the best interest of either the university or the surrounding community. As a result of the university's testimony, the PLCB denied the transfer. Following this course of events, the PLCB asked all of Pennsylvania's 144 campuses to designate representatives to be notified of any license action in their respective counties.

Finally, presidents and trustees should speak out in support of the policy measures described in table 2. These measures could help institutions of higher education do a better job of ensuring campus safety and maintaining an academic environment conducive to their students' intellectual and social development. Faculty can do the same, either as advocates or as researchers who can provide expert testimony in support of proposed laws and regulations.⁶

Conclusion

Campus administrators have much to gain—improvements in student health and safety and increased rates of retention and program completion—by spearheading or joining existing efforts to change local and state laws and regulations related to underage drinking, substance abuse and impaired driving, and liquor licensing. Recent definitive reports can offer administrators guidance about which alcohol policies to consider when assessing local and statewide needs and problems.

Table 2. Selected policies to reduce high-risk and underage drinking—NIAAA college drinking report¹ and IOM report on underage drinking¹⁶

Policy Strategy	Levels of Implementation		
	State	Community	Institutional
Increase effectiveness and enforcement of minimum drinking age laws (IOM+NIAAA): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand compliance checks in retail outlets. Deter adults from purchasing for minors. Implement zero tolerance laws. Enact graduated driver licensing laws. Prevent use of false IDs. 	X X X X X	X X X	X X
Implement and publicize other laws designed to reduce alcohol-impaired driving (NIAAA).	X	X	X
Restrict alcohol retail outlet density (NIAAA).		X	
Increase prices and excise taxes on alcoholic beverages (IOM+NIAAA).	X	X	
Implement training for those who sell and serve alcohol in social and community settings (IOM+NIAAA).	X	X	X
Regulate happy hours and sales (NIAAA).	X	X	
Strengthen dram shop liability statutes (IOM).	X		
Regulate Internet alcohol sales (IOM).	X		
Implement sobriety checkpoints (IOM).	X	X	
Support campus and community mobilization to reduce underage drinking (IOM+NIAAA).	X	X	X
Fund the development and evaluation of programs (IOM+NIAAA).	X	X	X

Campus administrators and state policymakers must continue to work together to reshape the college environment and reduce high-risk alcohol and other drug use. The Resources section of this publication provides information to help you get started collecting information about state policies and local ordinances. The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center staff can help you identify other sources of information and support, including assistance identi-

fying campus, state, and local policy and enforcement issues specific to your state and locale.

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Resources

The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention

www.higheredcenter.org

The Higher Education Center can provide assistance with state, community, and institutional policy issues to campus officials and to the leaders of statewide college prevention initiatives.

Alcohol Epidemiology Program (AEP)

www.epi.umn.edu/alcohol/

Alcohol Policy Information System (APIS)

<http://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov>

Alcohol Policies Project

www.cspinet.org/booze

College Alcohol Policies

www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/policies/

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America

www.cadca.org

The Community Tool Box (CTB)

<http://ctb.ku.edu>

Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Training Center

www.udetc.org/default.htm

The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues

www.thenetwork.ws/



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