

Commentary

Environmental Management and the Prevention of Other Drug Abuse

by William DeJong

The essence of environmental management is to structure the campus and community environment in ways that will decrease both the demand for and the supply of alcohol and other drugs. Recent years have seen increasing numbers of campus administrators join with community leaders to develop and implement environmental approaches to reduce alcohol problems among students. Based on that foundation, campus officials should now apply the same commitment and energy to reducing other drug abuse.

Campus administrators who have applied the environmental management approach have focused primarily on reducing alcohol-related problems. Key strategies include limiting alcohol availability, restricting alcohol marketing and promotion, and developing and enforcing new policies that restrict the times, places, and circumstances under which alcohol can be purchased and consumed. At the same time, administrators have sought to reduce the attractiveness of illegal and dangerous alcohol use by offering and promoting a variety of social, recreational, extracurricular, and public service options and by creating a campus environment that supports health-promoting norms.

While alcohol is the leading substance use problem on college campuses, the abuse of other drugs—including marijuana, cocaine, ephedra, Ecstasy, methamphetamine, OxyContin, Ritalin, and steroids—is also of great concern and deserves focused attention from administrators who are responsible for creating safe and healthy campuses.

Campus officials have an obligation to keep students informed about the dangers of illicit drug use, especially as new research becomes available, and they should also work to refer addicted students to drug treatment and recovery programs. By themselves,

however, these individually focused interventions will not make a significant dent in the scope of the problem.

To make real progress against illicit drugs, campus administrators need to develop and implement the types of environmental approaches they have already embraced to combat alcohol-related problems. Many of the tactics being used nationwide to change the alcohol environment will also serve to reduce the attractiveness and availability of illicit drugs; however, there are additional tactics specific to illicit drug use that should be considered as well.

The environmental management approach involves five strategies, with each one focused on a problematic aspect of typical college environments. Each strategy involves multiple program and policy options for administrators to explore as part of a comprehensive strategic plan for preventing illicit drug use.

1. Offer and promote social, recreational, extracurricular, and public service options that do not include alcohol and other drugs.

Students at residential colleges may have comparatively few responsibilities and a great deal of unstructured free time, and there are too few social and recreational options. To help ensure that substance use does not become the easiest and most readily available option, campus administrators are investing additional resources to: create and promote substance-free events and activities; provide greater financial support to student clubs and organizations that are substance-free; open or expand a student center, gym, or other substance-free setting; and develop student service learning or volunteer activities.

With problems related to Ecstasy and other club drugs in mind, administrators can design alternative

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events that simulate the club and rave atmospheres that appeal to some students, with high-energy music, dancing, and extended hours. Such events must be widely advertised as substance-free. As with any event, adequate supervision and security measures must be in place to ensure that alcohol and other drugs are not used.

2. Create a social, academic, and residential environment that supports health-promoting norms.

Beginning with student recruitment materials and continuing with routine communications from the president and other administrators, campus officials must clearly state their expectations that students will not engage in illegal alcohol and other drug use or misuse prescription drugs. Communications from faculty and staff must reinforce, not undermine, those declarations.

There are additional options for conveying the institution's expectations that its students will be focused on their academic objectives and not engage in illegal alcohol and other drug use: modifying the academic schedule to increase the number of early morning and Friday classes; increasing academic standards so that students will need to spend additional time studying outside of class; increasing faculty-student contact; and improving faculty mentoring of students.

Students generally overestimate the percentage of their peers who use marijuana or other drugs, which in turn can lead to perceived normative pressure to engage in substance use. One promising strategy is to conduct a social norms campaign that communicates accurate information about how few students actually use other drugs, thus reducing that normative pressure.

Regarding the residential environment, many colleges and universities now offer substance-free residence halls where all substance use (even alcohol and tobacco use by people of legal age) is expressly prohibited. Another option is to employ older, salaried resident assistants who can both declare and enforce the institution's housing rules with greater authority than can junior or senior undergraduates.

3. Limit the availability of other drugs both on and off campus.

An existing campus and community coalition, which includes active participation by law enforcement agencies, can work to identify where students are getting and using illicit drugs and then take action by arresting and prosecuting dealers, working to close clubs that allow drug use on the premises, and taking actions against local landlords whose premises are used to sell drugs. In addition, local ordinances can be amended to prohibit sales of drug paraphernalia.

Campus health officials can tighten controls on prescribed drugs by reviewing prior medical records before writing prescriptions for new students and restricting prescriptions to a month's supply or less. Students using campus-based computers also can be blocked from accessing online pharmacies.

4. Restrict marketing and promotion of clubs and raves.

Campus officials can act to prohibit on-campus advertising of rave clubs and related events where club drug use may be encouraged or tolerated. Student party announcements that refer or allude to illicit drug use can similarly be prohibited.

5. Develop and enforce campus policies and local, state, and federal laws.

Administrators should revise campus alcohol and other drug policies as necessary to cite specific drugs of abuse and then seek to communicate those policies clearly and frequently to the campus community, including possible consequences for violations.

When it comes to enforcing these laws, the campus should never be viewed as an enclave that protects students from the consequences of their illegal behavior. Hence, administrators should authorize campus police, residence hall staff, and other appropriate staff to work in partnership with local law enforcement to uphold campus policies and local,

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state, and federal laws related to the distribution or possession of illicit substances.

Other tactics to be considered include: (1) developing and enforcing new policies to curb off-campus parties, including tougher ordinances to restrict open house assemblies and noise; (2) developing a system for local law enforcement agencies to report off-campus offenses to campus officials; and (3) collaborating with local drug courts or other community-based diversion programs.

Environmental management is based on a simple but powerful idea: the most cost-effective way to reduce substance use problems among college students is to change the campus and community environment in which students make decisions about alcohol and other drug use. This prevention approach has paid off in reducing alcohol-related problems on campus. It will work to reduce other drug abuse as well.

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