



Chapter Six

Alcohol-Free Programming—A “Cool” Way to Attract and Entertain Students

By Raphaella Prange

“**H**eavy drinking and the disruptive behaviors that accompany it have been a part of campus life in American colleges since colonial days. College responses to this problem have varied, ranging from a complete ban of all alcohol on college property, to a complete denial that the problem exists” (*Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 52, No.4, p.159). Creating awareness and disseminating information are among the most popular approaches to alcohol misuse for colleges and universities. Promoting increased understanding about alcohol and its effects, offering alternative activities and discussing personal choices are the foundation of awareness and information programs.

About 44% of US college students binge drink—consuming five or more drinks in a row for males and four or more drinks for females on one or more occasions during a two-week period. Half of these students do so frequently (i.e., three or more times within two weeks) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997; Douglas et al., 1997; Wechsler et al., 1994). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

(NIAAA) Task Force recommends schools implement alcohol-free, expanded late-night student activities (*College Parent Magazine*, Issue 1). Alcohol-free programming (AFP) can be a refreshing component to a university’s comprehensive alcohol education program or may be used as a stand-alone concept. AFP, when implemented correctly, is viewed by the student as a purely social outlet. Experienced programmers are able to interweave an educational component into AFP without detection and, therefore, are able to gain better student buy-in than with other alcohol education strategies. Students who take advantage of alternative late night campus-sponsored movie or comedy nights say they enjoy the recreational resources offered in place of drinking-related events (*College Parent Magazine*, Issue 1).

Many universities have jumped on the AFP bandwagon as a reactive measure after a tragedy involving alcohol has occurred or after assessment of the social environment of the campus indicates that alcohol use is more prevalent or more risky than desired. After the death of a student in a tragic alcohol-related

incident, MIT has more than tripled its funding for community-wide events that provide alternatives to events with alcohol. The University of Pittsburg has also increased funding for alcohol-free events, creating a funding source for student organizations that choose to program alcohol-free. In 1997, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill replaced an informal pre-semester drinking party with Fall Fest, a street festival that offered food, sports, music and prizes—all without alcohol. Alcohol-related urgent care visits, the number of other alcohol-related events, and reported attendance and volume of business at off-campus bars all decreased compared to 1996 (Higher Education Center, 1998b).

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Peer norms, activities and patterns of social connection and activity correlate positively with binge drinking (Bachman et al., 1984; Perkins and Wechsler, 1996), while levels of social bonding and trust within the campus community protect against heavy episodic drinking (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). To create an environment conducive to social bonding, many colleges have used AFP to keep students busy during the late night and early morning hours, when they are most likely to hit the bars. Students at some institutions, including the main campuses of Ohio State University and Pennsylvania State University, work with administrators to offer movie nights and free concerts as social alternatives to keg parties. But programmers are careful not to advertise the events as “alcohol-free.” Advertising as such would eliminate the “cool factor” of attending such events.

So why is it necessary to be intentional about alcohol-free programming? Doesn't it already occur in the form of student organization events or speakers on campus? Well, it all boils down to the concept of supply and demand. Alcoholic beverage companies comprise one of the biggest businesses in our society. Among the most important environmental determinants of binge drinking are pricing and promotion of alcoholic beverages (Chaloupka and Wechsler, 1996).

Low prices and easy access promote underage alcohol use (Kuo et al., 2003). Many times, the cheapest thing to do (yes, even cheaper than going to the movies) is happy hour. University newspapers gather many dollars through advertisements of these specials, and student vehicles are papered weekly. Students are bombarded with this information, whether they are 21 years old or not. Universities need to combat these messages with something more appealing.

It is the responsibility of the university to assess the wants of students. In the age of “needs assessments,” we forget that although students may need something, they may not necessarily want it. Universities have missed the importance of the “wants” of students. Why are students fleeing campus every weekend night? Sure, many enjoy the bar scene and will give you countless reasons for their membership in the “party ‘til you pee” club, but many students just don't know what else to do. We need to provide them with the ABC's: attractive, budget-friendly and, most importantly, “cool” events that teach students how to socialize without the crutch of alcohol.

Who Should Lead the Effort?

We've described the university's responsibility, but it is important to note that alcohol-free programming will not and cannot be successful without student input and ownership. At many universities, it is the students who have led the charge for alcohol-free programming. Student activity boards, student governments, fraternity and sorority governing bodies, and small special interest groups are finding ways to encourage their peers to celebrate sober.

If you are at a university that has a health promotions or wellness center, count yourself lucky—you have a built-in support network. Use these departments to brainstorm ideas for AFP and coordinate these events with the rest of your alcohol education program. If you are not so lucky as to have a department devoted to alcohol education, don't worry. Gather the support of prominent student constituency groups—Greek-affiliated students, athletes, student government, residential students and students of color. Building a network of committed individuals will help your AFP achieve initial buy-in.

Even if students are not particularly excited about AFP, there are ways to entice them. Specifically, Greek letter organization can receive funding and recognition from their national organizations for sponsoring AFP. Co-sponsoring with several groups also creates a larger pool of money; and proposing a large-scale event specifically designed to deter students from the bar scene is very attractive to university administrations. Grants are also an excellent funding source. There

is definitely money out there for AFP—you only have to look for it.

If you are starting at square one, develop a coalition or focus group to brainstorm ideas for alcohol-free programming. Once you have gathered interested parties, place eight to 10 individuals on a core committee. These are your programmers. Make sure they know their responsibilities and encourage them to keep in constant contact with their constituency group to ensure those students will be there when the event happens. Don't go overboard with committing yourself to too many activities. One, or at the most, two AFP events per semester should be your starting point. If there are already events taking place on campus that are very popular, capitalize on those events and develop a series of events linked to that concept. For example, if your Springfest is always a well-attended event, look at the components of the event. Are there always people listening to music? Waiting in line for the climbing wall? Can you create smaller and separate events to encourage students to gather more frequently? Are there weekends that are known to be "party weekends?" If so, are there attractive events that you can plan during those times? Pull out the flipchart and record all those events you know to be popular, break them down and figure out how to re-create them as part of an alcohol-free programming effort.

It is important to start by explaining the purpose of alcohol-free programming to everyone in your coalition or focus group. Make sure everyone is on board. Remember, word of mouth is the ultimate publicity tool. Take note, also, that the words "alcohol-free" can sometimes be a death sentence for an event. Come up with a "cool" concept for this type of programming. Take your cue from those that know all about "cool"—your students.

What Are the Logistics?

So you've noticed a need for alcohol-free programming on your campus, you've gathered a group of committed individuals/organizations, you've come up with a solid and "cool" concept. Now what?

It is time to act. As stated previously, many universities have taken to implementing alcohol-free programming during late-night and weekend times. Do not let this trend dictate when you implement your own AFP. Although weekends and late nights may be important times to provide AFP, think about other times that your campus may need alternative programming. How about major athletic events? Is the tradition to

have alcoholic tailgates? How about trying to implement an alcohol-free tailgate with free food, activities and root beer? Make it a clean and safe environment, bring those "cool" students in, and invite popular professors. Have the team make an appearance.

Your community may also be a great resource for AFP. Donations of food, non-alcoholic beverages and prizes make some alcohol-free programming virtually cost free. However, doing AFP on your own can sometimes be costly. To bring students in, you are most likely going to need to provide the two Fs: food and fun, two things that students usually have to pay for and that you'll need to provide for free.

Where you have an alcohol-free program can be as important as the program itself. Scope out neat local eateries, movie theatres and recreational complexes, or find a lively environment on campus. When a well-planned event goes awry, it can often be boiled down to poor publicity and poor location. If the environment in which you are hosting an event is sterile and empty (like most college and university union rooms), then that is what students will feel. Find a location with character and warmth. Think of what the local bar provides: low lighting, compressed space, music and furniture. Try to recreate part or all of that at your event.

As we've said before, having that base of participation is essential. Gain the ownership of folks involved in organizations that come together. When Greek organizations or athletic teams commit to something, high attendance is a guaranteed. Individual student buy-in is great, but it isn't going to get you the numbers off the bat. You'll need to get those student groups hooked on the concept.

Who Are Your Allies?

In this day and age, alcohol use is a major concern for every college and university. Therefore, approaching the administrations of colleges and universities is a great way to begin creating allies. Many institutions have alcohol education offices and wellness centers that may already have many of the resources you are seeking. Your chief student affairs officer may also be a great ally, especially when you look to fund AFP. However, our greatest allies for AFP may be found in an unlikely place—parents.

Why? Because they are the ones who hear students say, "There is nothing to do on campus but go to keg parties." AFP is a great way to debunk this myth. In-

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forming parents through calendars, electronic correspondence and especially during new student orientation is essential in creating a knowledge network as it pertains to AFP. Parents have more influence than we think and allowing them to encourage students to attend alcohol-free programming assists us in our efforts.

You may also explore relationships with your university catering provider, bookstore and other auxiliary departments that have resources you may need. They may not be able to provide you with dollars, but items such as food and school T-shirts can be equally attractive and useful for your programming.

A controversial potential ally is the alcoholic beverage industry. Many alcoholic beverage companies have gotten on board with colleges and universities to support and fund alcohol-free programming and alcohol education. It is a fact that there is money for AFP available from alcoholic beverage companies, but universities must decide whether or not the companies' involvement in AFP negates the purpose of such programming.

What Is the Educational Value of AFP?

There is much potential in AFP for educational value, whether visible or invisible. You can contribute to AFP's educational value by placing flyers around your event, developing brochures or table tents supporting responsible alcohol use, or by implementing assessment at the event. Conducting a survey of student satisfaction related to the event and of drinking behaviors helps identify student wants and needs.

What Are Other Campuses Doing?

Type in the words "alcohol-free college" in your favorite online search engine and you will be amazed at the number of colleges and universities that have posted their ideas for AFP. Events range from movie nights and professional sports outings to dances, concerts and comedians. Open mic nights have become popular, and mocktail hours, where non-alcoholic cocktails are served, are becoming a trend for late-night events in student centers.

Several universities have begun to tap into their local community for AFP, creating brochures describing things to do for students and scoping out student-only discounts. Many other campuses have created funding pools specifically for AFP and others have turned their most popular (and previously alcoholic) events into AFP. At the University of Kansas, for example, students recently scheduled "Friday Night Frenzies" through the school year and the summer. Every Friday, students gathered at alternating dwellings and the host cooked dinner for the party. The "frenzies" ended as early as 10 pm or ran as late as 1 am and frequently involved games, movies, bowling or trips to University of Kansas basketball games. Slippery Rock

Resources

Here are online resources that can be helpful in researching and developing alcohol-free programming for your campus.

www.bacchusgamma.org

The BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network is an international association of college- and university-based peer education programs focusing on alcohol abuse prevention and other related student health and safety issues.

www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov

In response to the increasingly complex issue of alcohol abuse among college students, the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism created the Task Force on College Drinking in 1998. This Web site is full of helpful ideas for programming, as well as research concerning collegiate alcohol use.

www.factsontap.org

Facts on Tap is one of the country's most versatile and innovative prevention strategies. The program, with its materials, training and technical support, is designed to enhance campus-based alcohol prevention efforts.

www.edc.org/hec/

The Higher Education Center's purpose is to help college and community leaders develop, implement and evaluate programs and policies to reduce student problems related to alcohol and other drug use and interpersonal violence.

www.alcoholandotherdrugs.com

This Web site contains information regarding alcohol and drug use, specifically targeted toward college students.

www.researchmatters.harvard.edu/

This is a helpful research-based site with links to important studies regarding alcohol education strategies.

University (PA) has sponsored successful “All-Campus Alcohol-Free Mix-Off” events featuring popular tropical drinks and rock music. Several university departments, as well as the campus food vendor, sponsor the event, which is designed to show students that they can have fun without alcohol.

You can also show your students how to have fun without alcohol. All it takes is careful and thoughtful planning, well-chosen community and campus allies, and, of course—food and fun.

About the Author

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