Breath Testing and Survey Data Show Freshman Drinking Decline in 2003

New survey data and results from voluntary testing of student blood alcohol levels show a modest decrease in the frequency and amount of freshman drinking at California State University, Chico.

First-year students at CSU, Chico were the target audience for a two-year, $276,590 U.S. Department of Education grant for alcohol abuse prevention. The grant funded random, anonymous breath testing of students over 48 weekend nights-24 in each year of the project-coupled with an alcohol-abuse information campaign.

Student participants were told their blood alcohol level and the impairment to be expected. They were provided materials on laws and penalties in Chico, campus services related to alcohol and social norming information intended to correct students' overperceptions of their peers' drinking.

The percent of freshmen with blood alcohol levels over 0.00 decreased 11 percentage points, from 74 to 63, comparing those tested in 2002 to participants in 2003. The percent of freshmen with blood alcohol levels of 0.10 or higher decreased nine percentage points, from 32 to 23. The legal determination of intoxication in California is 0.08 for drivers 21 years of age or older.

The percentage of participating freshmen who had had a drink the day of testing dropped from 80 to 72 percent from 2002 to 2003. The percentage who had five or more drinks that day dropped 21 percentage points, from 65 to 44.

The 2,532 freshmen participating in the "Wanna Know" program were interviewed and breath-tested as they returned to their residences. Interviews were conducted by trained students. Breath tests were given by emergency room registered nurses.

Results from the 2003 CORE Institute Drug and Alcohol Survey-administered annually to CSU, Chico students since 1989—also pointed to a decline in freshman drinking from the prior year.

The percentage of freshmen surveyed who drank at some time over the past year decreased from 92 in 2002 to 86 in 2003. There were reductions as well in six other responses to the CORE survey, including the number of drinks per week by freshmen, the percentage of freshmen who had five or more drinks at least once over the past two weeks, and the percentage of freshmen who had five or more drinks three or more times over the past two weeks.

Two hundred sixty CSU, Chico freshmen, along with 956 other CSU, Chico students, completed the CORE survey in spring 2003, compared to 166 freshmen and 1,084 other students in 2002. Students are surveyed in randomly selected classes. The CORE survey is used on about 130 two-year and four-year college campuses nationwide.

The 2003 CORE survey results did not find significant changes in drinking habits among all CSU, Chico students, however. When asked if they had consumed alcohol over the past 30 days, 84 percent of students surveyed said yes, up two percentage points from 2002, though down one percentage point from 2000.
Similarly, 92 percent of students said they had consumed alcohol at some time in the past year, up two percentage points from 2002, but down one percentage point from 2000. The reported median number of drinks consumed per week was five, returning to the 2000 level after being down to four last year. (These questions were omitted from the 2001 CORE survey.)

Shauna Quinn, director of CSU, Chico’s Campus Alcohol and Drug Education Center (CADEC), said campus student drinking levels have been relatively stable over the past 10 years. “Like other campuses, we face a major challenge in curtailing student alcohol abuse,” Quinn said. “It’s not a short-term problem, or easy fix.”

At the same time, Quinn is optimistic about the 2003 data showing a reduction in freshman drinking. “There is general agreement that freshmen are a key at-risk group when it comes to alcohol abuse because they have just left home and may not have made strong peer or group connections,” she said. “If we have made substantial progress with these students’ habits of dealing with alcohol, it bodes very well for our future.”

Walt Schafer, professor of sociology and director of the federal grant project, said there are several reasons that might point to the change in freshman drinking. The campus social norming campaign, called “Did You Know,” focused on the residence halls, occupied overwhelmingly by freshmen. Facts about student drinking levels-disputing students’ overperceptions of drinking, as determined by survey data-were publicized on dining-hall table cards and posters in students’ rooms and hallway bulletin boards.

In addition, new resident advisors hired to work in the residence halls had more experience and training to enforce campus rules, which preclude student drinking. In 2001, CADEC and several other campus offices co-sponsored the Survivor Workshop Series oriented toward teaching freshmen the necessary skills to cope with being away from home for the first time. Finally, Schafer said, the Wanna Know program sent social norming information home with 2,532 freshmen from 2002 to 2003.

The survey and testing findings suggest comprehensive measures taken by the campus may be starting to lower drinking patterns among first-year students, Schafer said. “We believe the one-to-one late-night contacts with freshmen as we gave them feedback about their blood alcohol levels may have had a positive effect,” he said. “So, too, might the information we discussed with them about the fact that Chico State students drink less than commonly believed.

“However,” Schafer continued, “student drinking patterns result from many factors—for example, the student’s background with alcohol, his or her peers’ drinking habits, student organizations’ policies and activities, campus rules and enforcement, widespread overperception of other students’ drinking, opportunities for alcohol-free activities, a campus’s traditions and reputation, easy access to alcohol in the community, community enforcement of drinking laws, and more. This is why it is vital that this campus continues to address student drinking in a comprehensive way. We believe the environmental management strategy we have taken makes the most sense.”

While CSU, Chico’s Department of Education grant has ended, the social norming campaign will continue. To help ongoing alcohol-abuse prevention programs, the university has received a state Office of Business, Transportation, and Housing Agency, Office of Traffic Safety grant of $55,873. CSU, Chico is one of eight CSU campuses to receive an alcohol-abuse prevention grant from this state agency.