

Challenges and Recommendations to Enforcement of Alcohol Policies on College Campuses: An Administrator's Perspective.

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Abstract:

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine challenges and recommendations (identified by college administrators) to enforcing alcohol policies implemented at colleges in the southeastern United States. Methods: Telephone interviews were conducted with 71 individuals at 21 institutions. Results: Common challenges included inconsistent enforcement, mixed messages received by students, and students' attitudes toward alcohol use. The most common recommendations were ensuring a comprehensive approach, collaboration with members of the community, and enhanced alcohol education.

Keywords: college administration | alcohol | alcohol policies | alcohol use | college campuses | college students | health education | alcohol education

Article:

Many landmark reports contain recommendations for strategies to address alcohol consumption by college students, emphasizing strategies that relate to campus alcohol policies and environmental change. 1 – 3 Researchers have conducted studies describing policies currently being implemented at colleges and universities around the country 1 , 4 , 5 ; however, these studies are limited in their scope of policies assessed and geographic region studied, and only 1 study included questions relating to enforcement. 1 To date, studies have yet to be conducted addressing challenges or barriers to enforcing alcohol policies and practical recommendations from college administrators. The purpose of this study was to examine challenges and recommendations to enforcing specific alcohol policies implemented at colleges in the southeastern United States.

Methods

A list of medium to large, public, 4-year institutions was created for each of the 8 states in the southeastern region of the United States. Purposive sampling procedures were used to narrow this list to 3 universities in each of the 8 states to be included in the study, depending upon whose institutional review board (IRB) would allow the research. Once the universities were identified, 4 administrators were identified based on their job title using their respective university's Web site: (1) the Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA), (2) the Director of Housing, (3) the Director of Greek Life, and (4) the Director of Judicial Affairs. All administrators were contacted requesting their participation in the research study. Every attempt was made to follow a strict interview guide. However, appropriate prompts were provided for clarification purposes as necessary.

Interview Guide Measures

The instrument consisted of multiple sections designed to obtain relevant information specific to the administrator being interviewed and pertinent alcohol policies at his or her institution. Demographic information included official job title and length of employment in current position. College administrators were asked the following questions: (1) "Overall, how would you rate the level of enforcement of the alcohol policies on your campus?" The corresponding scale ranged from 1 being "always enforced" to 5 being "rarely enforced." (2) "What are some of the challenges to enforcing alcohol policies on your campus?" This question was tailored to the policies associated with each position. (3) "What recommendations would you make in regard to enforcing alcohol policies on your campus?" Similar to the question relating to challenges of enforcement, this question was tailored to the administrator's position.

Analyses

Data obtained from the interviews were reviewed to identify related themes embedded in the challenges to enforcing alcohol policies on campus, as well as recommendations for effectively enforcing specific alcohol policies. Data collection and analysis were based on a grounded theory approach. Overall, the data were explored through aggregate analysis of all interviews. Responses from each question were transcribed using digital recordings. Transcriptions were subject to open coding, and consensus coding was conducted to validate the coding process. Each mismatch code was discussed between the researcher and a fellow doctoral student with qualitative research experience, and consensus was reached for an overall interrater reliability of 78%.

RESULTS

Sample

A total of 96 administrators were initially contacted, and 71 telephone interviews representing 21 institutions were conducted, yielding a 74% overall response rate. IRB approval was never officially received from 1 institution, the VPSA at 1 institution refused to participate, and no

response was reached from the VPSA at 1 institution. If the VPSA was not available for interview and no replacement could be identified, no other interviews were conducted at that institution. Due to the lack of participation at these 3 institutions, 12 interviews could not be conducted, decreasing the total number of potential interviews to 84. Interviews were conducted with VPSAs (21), Directors of Housing (18), Directors of Greek Life (15), and Directors of Judicial Affairs (17). An affirmative response of participation was never received from 15 administrators: 2 VPSAs, 5 Directors of Housing, 5 Directors of Greek Life, and 6 Directors of Judicial Affairs. Two participants refused to participate in the study: 1 VPSA and 1 Director of Greek Life.

Average enrollment at these institutions was 26,661 full-time degree-seeking students. Ten universities were located in urban settings, with 5 representing rural settings and 6 representing suburban settings. 7 The participants held their current position for an average of 5.9 years ($SD = 5.7$).

The average perceived level of enforcement was 2.5 ($SD = 3.1$) on a scale of 1 (always enforced) to 5 (rarely enforced). The mean varied by the types of administrators, ranging from 1.7 ($SD = 0.8$) among Directors of Judicial Affairs to 3.6 ($SD = 4.6$) among Directors of Greek Life.

Challenges Associated With Enforcement of Campus Alcohol Policies

College administrators identified several challenges associated with enforcement. First, challenges with individual student behavior were identified, including (a) off-campus alcohol use, (b) violating campus alcohol policies, (c) deciding when a friend or fellow student needs medical attention, (d) underage drinking, (e) binge drinking, (f) experience with alcohol prior to entering college, (g) “pregaming,” and (h) “postpartying.” Additionally, student attitudes were thought to be a challenge, specifically the acceptability of alcohol regardless of age and a lack of concern for related consequences and the campus adjudication process.

College administrators noted parental communication with their children about alcohol use and/or acceptance of alcohol consumption by their child as a challenge. For example, college administrators noted that parents glorify their college drinking behaviors and are indifferent when their child is cited for an alcohol violation. Additionally, challenges to enforcing campus alcohol policies also exist with Greek organizations. The fluid membership, Greek houses not being owned by the university, policies within Greek organizations, and the adjudication of sanctions were also reported challenges.

Social acceptability of alcohol was the most commonly referenced community factor among college administrators. This is reinforced through the local media, which displays advertisements for alcohol via television, radio, and promotional media in the community or in bars or clubs. Lack of city resources and inconsistent police enforcement were also referenced as challenges in the community, potentially leading to an additional challenge in curbing alcohol accessibility by underage individuals.

Challenges at the institutional level were also identified. University size and location, specifically proximity to bars and/or clubs, were a reported issue. In several discussions, administrators raised the issue of students receiving mixed messages regarding alcohol use during athletic events and tailgating, in addition to the difficulty in enforcement of laws and policies with the large crowds on campus. Inconsistent enforcement of policies was mentioned several times, including the university official's awareness of violations. However, inconsistent enforcement most often referred to the frontline enforcement by the Resident Assistant (RA) or University Police Department. Examples provided by the administrators included (a) receiving a clear understanding of a dorm situation when there are several students in a room with alcoholic beverages, (b) RA's having difficulty confronting peer alcohol use, and (c) the configuration of the residence halls with the new suite-style residence halls posing additional challenges.

Recommendations for Enforcing Campus Alcohol Policies

College administrators also provided several recommendations to enforcing campus alcohol policies. Education on campus alcohol policies and the enforcement of such policies was the most commonly cited recommendation. The administrators recommended several types of education, including more effective communication of the alcohol policies' details and protocol for adjudication, required online courses for freshman and transfer students, and orientation activities focused on alcohol policies, related risks, and consequences. Ensuring a consistent message was being received by students about alcohol use, policies, and consequences for policy violations was also commonly recommended by college administrators. This includes messages received from the faculty and staff, those related to athletic events, and the inclusion of messages of responsible drinking to students.

The administrators mentioned developing a comprehensive approach to alcohol prevention repeatedly. This approach would include (a) incorporating counseling or treatment services as part of the adjudication process; (b) institutions dedicating resources, including money and staff, to the issue; (c) partnering with on-campus departments or individuals such as Office of Judicial Affairs, the Vice President's Office, the Health Center, and university police; and (d) collaborating with the community to address issues such as limiting access to alcohol and increasing city resources to address these issues. Policy recommendations were also provided, specifically ensuring multilevel sanctioning for adjudication of students violating alcohol policies and presenting a united front for interpretation of policies and protocol for violations.

Related to Greek organizations, recommendations included developing relationships with National Offices of Greek organizations in regard to the submission of policies that college administrators can actually enforce, having a Greek alcohol policy that is consistent with the alcohol policy for the general student population, and having on campus houses when possible. Recommendations at the university level included prohibiting legal-aged individuals to share a room in the residence hall with underage individuals, limiting alcohol advertisement in campus media outlets, and offering more alcohol-free activities.

COMMENT

Implications for College Administrators

Effective enforcement of alcohol policies on college campuses is challenging. To address these challenges, college administrators need to become more familiar with the strategies recommended in reports by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Task Force on College Drinking, the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, and the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug and Violence Prevention. 1 – 3 The recommendations contained within all these reports, and supported by this study, suggest the need for collaboration between faculty and staff, athletics, Greek Life, law enforcement officials, community members, upper level administration, city leaders, Residential Life, students, and parents. Prevention efforts for alcohol use among college students are not a one-size-fits-all approach. University leaders need to determine which policies and strategies are most effective for their specific campus environment. This research can provide college administrators insight to challenges experienced by similar administrators at other universities.

With inconsistent enforcement heavily referenced as a barrier by the participants in this study, administrators need to not only implement policies and strategies that have been shown to be effective, but also to follow through with enforcement of those policies. According to DeJong et al, the lack of enforcement will undermine the integrity of the alcohol policies being implemented on a particular campus. 2 DeJong and colleagues further specified 5 major actions that can be used to strengthen enforcement. These 5 strategies include (a) imposing and enforcing responsible beverage service requirements for hosting an on-campus party where alcohol is served; (b) requiring Greek houses to meet city codes, licensing requirements, and health regulations prior to hosting a party; (c) identifying on-campus locations where underage drinking is occurring; (d) developing a zero-tolerance for fake IDs; and (e) being firm in disciplinary actions where students drive or commit violations while under the influence of alcohol. In addition to these steps, marketing the enforcement protocol and ensuring that students are held accountable for their actions would send a message not only to the students facing consequences, but also those students who witness or hear about the consequences. 8 , 9

University administrators and student leaders should send one clear message to students regarding their stance related to alcohol use, whether it is a responsible drinking message or one of no tolerance. 1 , 3 , 5 Ensuring a clear message can partially be achieved through collaboration with all parties affected by student alcohol use. In addition, the President of the University needs to take a strong stand in encouraging responsible behavior by students, to include allotting resources for prevention activities or verbal commitments against high-risk drinking. 3 , 9 Holding alumni, athletic supporters, faculty/staff, and community groups to the same standard of expectations as students would also send a clear message to students that they are not being held to a double standard about alcohol use.

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