

E x e c u t i v e S u m m a r y :

College Students and "Celebration Drinking"

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

*A collaborative effort between Michigan State University's Olin Health Center,
Department of Communication, and Institute for Public Policy and Social Research.*

In this study, researchers sought to find evidence to prove or disprove the existence of "celebration drinking." Funded by a grant from the U. S. Department of Education (ED), the research team sought to answer the following question: Are there occasions for which there is a normative climate that either encourages or leads larger proportions of students than normal to drink, to drink to excess, and to commit more time to drinking, and thereby possibly increase the risk of alcohol poisoning?

The Michigan State University (MSU) research team was led by Principal Investigators Dennis Martell, Ph.D., Health Educator at Olin Health Center and Charles Atkin, Ph.D., Chairperson of the Department of Communication. Other key members were lead evaluator, Larry A. Hembroff, Ph.D., Senior Survey Methodologist at the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research's Office for Survey Research (OSR) project manager, Jasmine Greenamyre, Health Educator at Olin Health Center and research assistant, Thomas A. Fediuk.

Driven by MSU student focus groups, several suspected occasions of "celebration drinking" were selected as the primary focus of a telephone survey administered by OSR to 1,162 MSU students in May 2002. Provided below are key findings of the study, followed by detailed analysis of the results, and resulting strategies and campaigns being developed and launched at MSU with funding from ED.

Key Findings

- Top reasons MSU students gave for partying are to have fun (65 percent);

to meet up with friends (60 percent); and to celebrate (40 percent).

- Only 5 percent of students said that the reason they party is to get drunk.

- When they are out with friends, 30 percent of students feel uncomfortable if they are not drinking and "everyone else" is and 15 percent feel a need to drink quickly to catch-up to those who may have started drinking before them.

- Those who tend to go out as a part of group and who stay with the same individuals while they are drinking are less likely to drink excessively.

- The majority (62.4 percent) of respondents indicated they have been sufficiently concerned about the health of friends that they have tried to get a friend who had too much to stop drinking.

- Some 28.2 percent of the respondents said that they do sometimes go out partying with friends simply because they feel obligated to go. The fact that three out of ten respondents sometimes went out partying primarily because of "obligation" or peer pressure (however subtle or unintended) suggests that friends have the potential to be powerful forces in reducing risky drinking as well.

- Approximately one out of every five students said they did not know how many drinks posed a serious health risk.

- Some 70 percent of students believe that six drinks or more does not pose a serious health threat; because most celebration occasions are three hours or more, this number of drinks would represent at least two drinks per hour.

Focal Occasions of Inquiry

Welcome Week

Halloween

UM-MSU football Saturday

Other football Saturdays

End of the Semester

St. Patrick's Day

Spring Break

"Typical" Week/Weekend

Celebration Drinking

MSU focus groups led researchers to focus on seven suspected occasions of "celebration drinking" in a telephone survey administered by MSU's Office for Survey Research. Some 1,162 students were interviewed last spring. To establish a baseline of "typical" drinking, respondents were also queried about their drinking the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings immediately prior to the interview. It is important to note that since they cover differing numbers of days or differing mixtures of midweek days and weekend days, a direct comparison between the drinking during one event cannot always be made to the drinking at another event. For example, spring break and welcome week cover a weeklong period of time. It would make little sense to compare the percentage of students who drank at all over each of these seven-day periods to the percentage who drank on a single day, such as Halloween or a typical Friday night. Therefore, in this analysis, compari-

Table 1. Drinking Behavior During Typical Week, Welcome Week, End of Semester, Spring Break

	Typical Week	Welcome Week	End of Semester	Spring Break
1. Percent Who Drank At All				
a. Of all students	46.5%	40.1%	24.1%	48.2%
b. Of those who have drunk at MSU	56.4%	49.1%	29.7%	58.5%
2. Percent Who Got Drunk				
a. Of all students	22.3%	29.1%	13.5%	29.8%
b. Of those who drank (on this occasion)	47.9%	72.0%	55.0%	61.8%
3. Mean Number of Drinks Consumed	6	8.3	6.2	7.8
4. Mean Number of Hours Spent Drinking	3.9	5.1	4.3	5.6

sons have been made among occasions grouped based on the similarity of their time periods.

In table 1, drinking that occurred during a typical week¹ is compared to drinking that occurred during welcome week, spring break, and the end of the fall semester. In table 2, a comparison is made between the drinking that occurred during the Saturday of the UM-MSU football game, the Saturdays of any other football game, and a typical Saturday. In table 3, drinking taking place on St. Patrick's Day and Halloween³ are compared to a

typical Thursday.

Surprisingly, table 1 indicates that a higher number of students drank during a typical week than during welcome week or at the end of fall semester. Slightly fewer students drank during a typical week than during spring break. However, higher percentages reported getting drunk during the three "celebratory" occasions than reported getting drunk during a typical weekend (figure 1). Furthermore, especially for welcome week and spring break, students who drank reported a greater average number of drinks

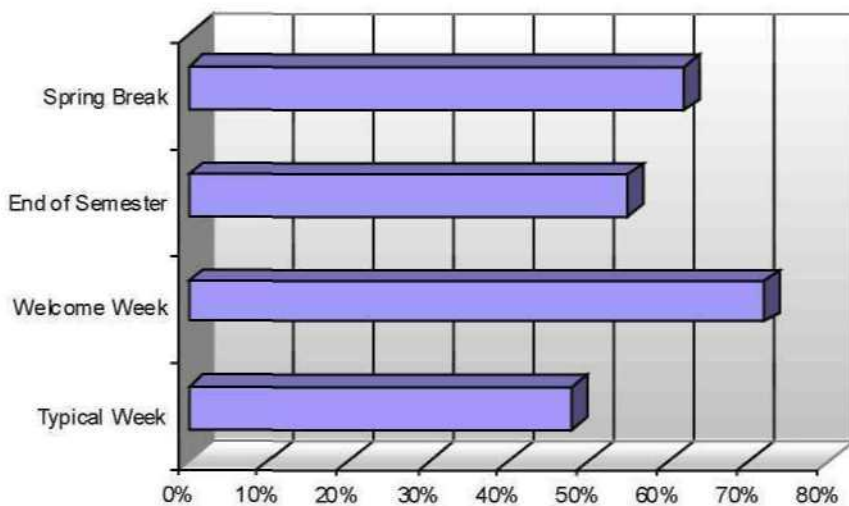
consumed than did students during a typical week.

Table 2 shows that higher percentages of students drank at UM-MSU football and other football Saturdays than they did on a typical Saturday. The table indicates the differences are even greater with respect to the percentages of those who drank who reported getting drunk. Students who drank were roughly 44 percent more likely to report getting drunk the Saturday of the UM-MSU football game than during a typical Saturday and they were roughly 12 percent more likely to report getting drunk on other football Saturdays.

The average number of drinks respondents reported consuming on the Saturday of the UM-MSU football game (7.8 drinks) was also 28 percent greater than the average number reported for other football Saturdays (6.1 drinks) and 44 percent greater than the average number reported for a typical Saturday.

Table 3 shows the relevant results regarding drinking on Halloween and St. Patrick's Day compared to a typical

Figure 1. Percent Who Got Drunk (of those who drank on each occasion) During Typical Week, Welcome Week, End of Semester, Spring Break³



weekday. During 2001, Halloween occurred during the middle of the week while St. Patrick's Day occurred on a Sunday. Since Sundays are not typical drinking days among college students, we have chosen to compare it and Halloween to a typical Thursday. Only 22.8 percent of MSU students who drink reported drinking on the Thursday prior to being interviewed, compared to 32.2 percent on the Friday prior and 28.4 percent on the Saturday prior. Thus, Thursday is likely to be the most appropriate day against which to compare drinking on these other two celebration days, although this is still likely to be a conservative test since drinking on Thursday is likely a much more common day for drinking than are Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Sundays.

The survey found appreciably lower numbers of students consume alcohol on a typical Thursday than they do on Halloween (39.7 percent) and on St. Patrick's Day (32.0 percent). Furthermore, table 3 indicates that roughly 57 percent of those who drank on Halloween or St. Patrick's Day said they got drunk compared to only about 48 percent of those

who drank on the typical Thursday. Results also reveal that students spend an average of 4.1 hours drinking on Halloween and 5.6 hours on St. Patrick's compared to only 3.6 hours on a typical Thursday.

Across the comparisons in all three tables there is a consistent pattern: the percentage of students who drink on celebration days is greater than the percentage who drink on typical days; those who drink, tend to drink more and over a longer period of time; and larger percentages of students get drunk on celebration days. These findings are all consistent with the proposition that there is a particular phenomenon that the researchers have termed "celebration drinking."

There were eight basic occasions about which questions were asked regarding drinking. They are as follows: welcome week, Halloween, the UM-MSU football Saturday, other football Saturdays, the end of the semester, St. Patrick's Day, spring break, and a typical week/weekend. A profile of "Celebration Drinkers" was created through examination of the

characteristics of those students who drank at none, some, or all of these occasions.

It is important to recall that 17.3 percent of the respondents of this study indicated that they had not consumed alcohol since coming to college. If we then count the number of occasions at which respondents drank among the eight targeted in the interview, we find that one-fourth of the students (24.7 percent) reported not drinking during any of the eight occasions. Therefore, some 7.4 percent of respondents, over and above those who claimed to abstain (17.3 percent), did not drink during the occasions in question.

Figure 2 also shows the percentages of respondents who reported drinking and getting drunk during the focal occasions in question. The table indicates that relatively few students drank at a majority of the occasions. Only 40.2 percent said they drank at four or more of the eight events. The table also indicates that nearly half (46 percent) reported not getting drunk at any of them and 28.2 percent

Table 2. Drinking Behavior on Typical Saturday, UM-MSU Football Saturday, Other Football Saturday²

	Typical Saturday	UM-MSU Football	Other Football
1. Percent Who Drank At All			
a. Of all students	23.4%	38.0%	36.5%
b. Of those who have drunk at MSU	28.4%	46.5%	45.0%
2. Percent Who Got Drunk			
a. Of all students	9.1%	21.0%	18.1%
b. Of those who drank (on this occasion)	38.9%	55.6%	49.9%
3. Mean Number of Drinks Consumed	5.4	7.8	6.1
4. Mean Number of Hours Spent Drinking	4.1	5.6	4.7

Table 3. Drinking Behavior on Typical Weekday, Halloween, St. Patrick's Day²

	Typical Thursday	Halloween	St. Patrick's Day
1. Percent Who Drank At All			
a. Of all students	18.8%	32.3%	26.4%
b. Of those who have drunk at MSU	22.8%	39.7%	32.0%
2. Percent Who Got Drunk			
a. Of all students	9.0%	18.3%	15.2%
b. Of those who drank (on this occasion)	47.9%	57.1%	57.6%
3. Mean Number of Drinks Consumed	5.9	6.5	7.7
4. Mean Number of Hours Spent Drinking	3.6	4.1	5.6

reported getting drunk three or more times.

It is clear that there are some students who drink or get drunk at all or nearly all of these occasions, including during a typical weekend. These individuals can hardly be called "CelebrationDrinkers." But if we wish to understand the "celebration drinking" phenomena, then we will have to disaggregate students who drink into categories from which we can draw comparisons. To do this respondents were divided into four groupings: those who drank during a typical weekend and drank at one or more of the celebration occasions (labeled "Anytime Drinkers"); those who did not drink during a typical weekend but did drink during one or more of the other celebration occasions (labeled "CelebrationDrinkers"); those who drank neither during the typical weekend nor during any of the celebration occasions but claimed to have drunk alcohol since coming to MSU (labeled "SeldomDrinkers"); and those who drank during a typical weekend but not during any of the celebration occasions (labeled "Non-Celebration Drinkers"). This categorizing of respondents excludes all those who said they had not drunk alcohol since coming to MSU.

Using this system of categorization, 53.8 percent of those who have drunk alcohol since coming to college are classified as "Anytime Drinkers," 34.7 percent as "CelebrationDrinkers," 8.9 percent as "SeldomDrinkers," and 2.5 percent as "Non-CelebrationDrinkers." Table 5 compares the demographic profiles of these four groupings of drinkers. We find that males were somewhat more likely than females to be "Anytime Drinkers,"

while females were somewhat more likely to be "Seldom Drinkers." But, males and females were similarly likely to be "CelebrationDrinkers." There were also no significant differences across the academic classes of respondents. There was, however, a somewhat lower likelihood of freshmen being "Anytime Drinkers," but the differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 2. Percent Who Drank, Got Drunk at Events Studied

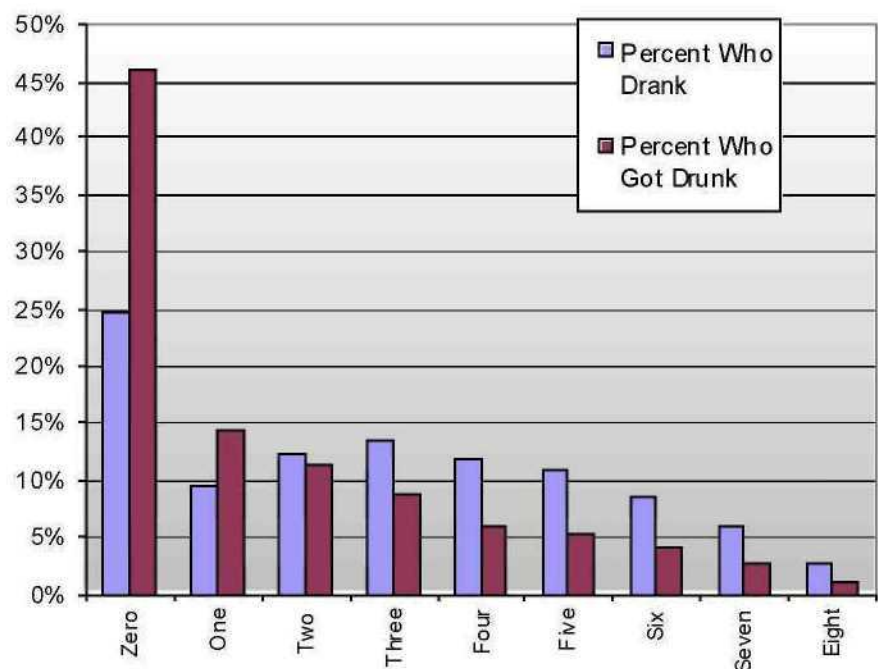


Table 5. Percentage Distribution of Drinking Types, by Demographic Characteristics

		n	Anytime	Celebration	Seldom	Non-Celebration	*****
Gender	Female	514	49.8%	35.0%	12.5%	2.7%	19.03
	Male	431	58.9%	34.1%	4.9%	2.1%	p <.001
Status	Freshman	180	47.2%	39.4%	11.7%	1.7%	8.66 N.S.
	Sophomore	212	54.7%	35.8%	6.6%	2.8%	
	Junior	242	55.0%	33.1%	8.7%	3.3%	
	Senior	313	56.5%	31.9%	9.6%	1.9%	
Race	White	793	56.6%	33.7%	7.9%	1.8%	42.45 p <.001
	African American	61	32.8%	37.7%	26.2%	3.3%	
	Other	91	45.1%	40.7%	6.6%	7.7%	
Drank in H.S.	Yes	666	57.8%	34.1%	6.0%	2.1%	30.6
	No	280	44.6%	36.1%	16.4%	2.9%	p<.001

White respondents were more likely than other student respondents to be "Anytime Drinkers," while African American students were somewhat more likely than others to be "Seldom Drinkers." Slightly greater percentages of African American and other student respondents were categorized as "Celebration Drinkers" than were white student respondents.

Finally, the table indicates that students who had not drunk alcohol in high school were somewhat more likely than those who had to be among the "Seldom Drinkers." On the other hand, those who had drunk alcohol in high school were more likely than their counterparts to be categorized as "Anytime Drinkers," but both groups were similarly likely to be "Celebration Drinkers."

Of the seven celebration occasions other than the typical weekend, "Anytime Drinkers" reported drinking at an average of 3.8 occasions (s.d. = 1.7) compared to an average of 2.6 occasions

(s.d. = 1.5) among "Celebration Drinkers." The average number of such occasions during which "Anytime Drinkers" reported getting drunk was 2.4 (s.d. = 2.0) compared to an average of 1.2 (s.d. = 1.5) among the "Celebration Drinkers." The "Anytime Drinkers" were also more likely to drink more than "Celebration Drinkers" especially during celebration events. During a celebration occasion, "Anytime Drinkers" generally reported consuming 1-2 more drinks than they would during a typical weekend.

In general, "Celebration Drinkers" tended to drink less than "Anytime Drinkers," but the second group tended to drink more during celebration events than they did during a typical weekend. Figure 3 shows the average numbers of drinks respondents in these two groupings reported for each of the eight occasions. The table indicates that "Anytime Drinkers" generally reported consuming 1-2 more drinks during these special occasions than during a typical weekend. The

table also indicates that, without exception, "Anytime Drinkers" reported consuming more drinks during each of the eight occasions than did "Celebration Drinkers."

For each of the various occasions, the interview also included questions regarding where the drinking took place, whether an individual drank only one type of alcohol or more than one kind, whether they stayed with the same group of people throughout the occasion, whether or not they had thought about how much drinking they were going to do before hand, how drunk they got if they got drunk, whether they drank more or less than they had expected they would, and why. The next section provides a general summary and implications for the various occasions.

Summary and Implications

From the extended analysis, it is apparent that there are really two groups

of drinkers with regard to celebration drinking: 1) those who do not drink much except at special occasions and 2) those who drink almost anytime, but drink more and for longer periods of time on celebratory occasions. The analysis also indicates for both groups of drinkers, those who drink only one kind of alcohol and those who stay with the same group of people throughout the time they are drinking are less likely to get drunk.

The results of extended analyses not provided in this brief provide additional evidence that "celebration drinking" does occur. The analyses indicate it is somewhat distinct from other typical drinking behaviors among college students. In its cultural context, celebration drinking is associated with particular events and these are recognized as occasions when even those who may not typically drink will drink and are recognized as occasions to get drunk or drink more than usual.

Although there are differences in degree among various types of students, based on the patterns of their drinking or occasions when they get drunk, there is also considerable concurrence in the reasons students give for going out and partying. The primary reasons for going out, for very large majorities of the students, are to have fun and to get together with friends. The major secondary reasons are to celebrate and to relax. For all groups of students, drinking and getting drunk, in and of themselves are much less commonly mentioned as important reasons for going out. With some exceptions, few indicate intending to get drunk and it is a

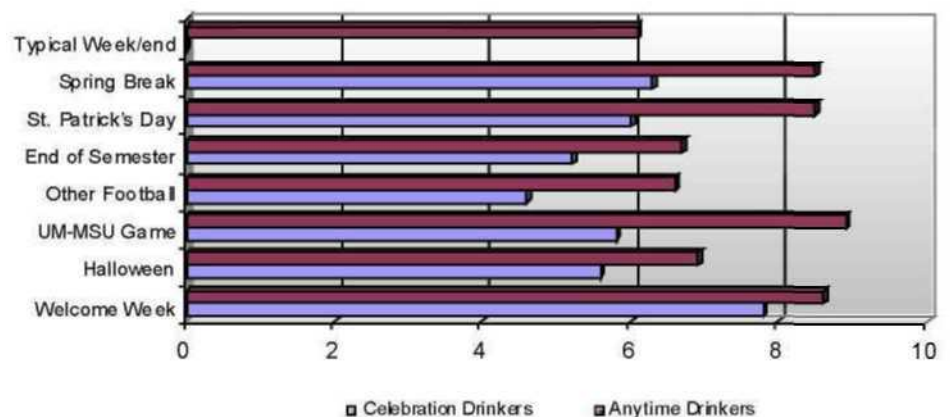
minority of students who claim to have more fun generally when they are drunk.

In spite of this, substantial portions of the student body drink and get drunk both on typical weekends and on special occasions. The analyses indicated that often students go out partying out of a sense of obligation rather than out of real desire to drink or get drunk. The results also indicated that when they are out with friends, many students feel uncomfortable if they are not drinking and "everyone else" is or they feel a need to drink quickly to catch-up to those who may have started drinking before them. How can the university community give such students "permission" to not drink? How can it communicate that it is possible to relax, enjoy each other's company, do "crazy things," and celebrate without having to get drunk - without having to regret the celebration?

The results suggest that many students actually intend to protect themselves from excessive drinking or the problems that can result from this behav-

ior. It is also clear that many students overestimate the amount of alcohol that can be consumed without putting themselves at risk of serious health problems. The research also shows that some actions the students can take are likely to be further protecting of their health. Those actions are as follows: 1) Those who tend to go out as a part of group and who stay with the same individuals while they are drinking are less likely to drink excessively; 2) Those who stay in the same place the entire time they are drinking are less likely to drink too much than are those who jump from party to party; and, 3) Those who drink only one kind of alcohol during their drinking event are less likely to get drunk than those who drink a variety of types of alcohol. The majority of respondents indicated they have been sufficiently concerned about the health of friends that they have tried to get a friend who had drunk too much to stop drinking. This is more possible if people stay together the whole time they are drinking. They will each have a better idea how much each other has consumed. They will

Figure 3. Mean Number of Drinks During Various Occasions, by Type of Drinker



feel less of a need to catch-up if they have been with each other all along.

The results indicated that there is a relatively small segment of the student body that drinks excessively, often, and intentionally. Efforts to dissuade these students from the drinking style they have adopted are probably less likely to be successful until the normative climate around these students changes to a lower risk-level of consumption. These students are disproportionately likely to be white, male, and suburban. On the other hand, those who drink and may engage in celebration drinking, even to the point of excess, appear less often to be drinking excessively by design. These students may be more reachable, more malleable. They might benefit from a better, but realistic understanding of the health risks posed by consuming increasing quantities of alcohol and by some of the choices they can make that are less likely to result in their getting drunk. If the drinking that is a part of the celebratory drinking of these students can be dialed down, the normative climate would in fact be changed, thus

increasing the chances of subsequently reaching the more intentionally excessive drinkers.

The celebratory drinking about which this study was organized focused on only seven occasions. The selection of these was guided by the results of focus groups with MSU students. All of these fall on the same calendar dates for an entire student body. Welcome week, spring break, Halloween, St. Patrick's Day, and many other celebratory events, occur on each student's calendar on the same dates. Other likely celebratory occasions, such as individuals' birthdays or their friends' birthdays, will be much more idiosyncratic for each student or each group of friends. Nevertheless, reshaping the normative culture about safe levels of drinking, about where to drink, with whom, and what to drink is likely to dial down the pressure to drink excessively on birthdays and other idiosyncratic celebration occasions such as weddings as well.

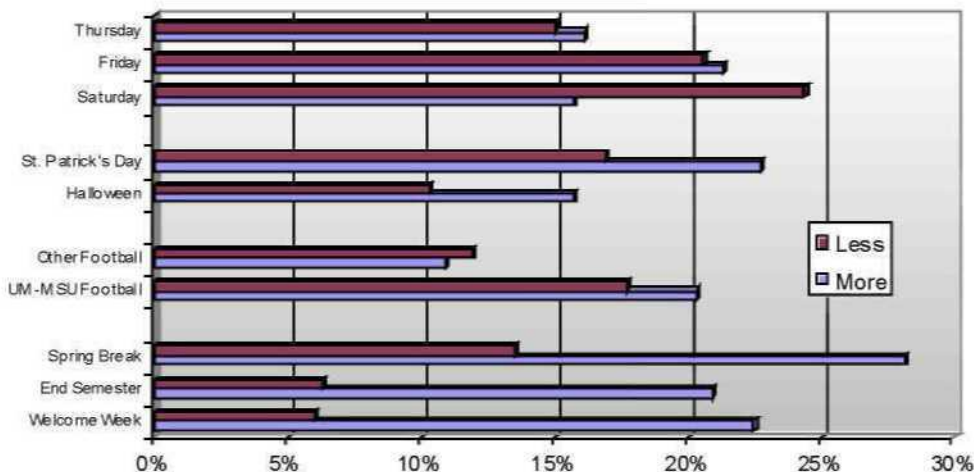
Complicating any attempts to change the normative climate is the sheer number of such celebratory occasions that

are included on the calendar of student culture and the duration that some of these occasions span. It is likely to be a rare adult indeed who could expect several full-length or nearly full-length weeks each year to party virtually the entire time. Yet on an annual basis, students anticipate welcome week, spring break and the end of classes, not to mention other celebration occasions between fall and winter semesters, during the summer, as well as periodic day or weekend-long celebration occasions. Bearing this in mind, are there ways that the university can restructure its calendar or some of its programs that might reduce the duration of these celebratory occasions or the opportunities for excess that they afford?

Next Steps

In addition to funding this research, the U. S. Department of Education (ED) grant provides funding for 1) The development of a peer media campaign using data from the research; 2) Challenging the attitude, beliefs, perceptions and expectations students have regarding "celebration drinking;" and 3) Evaluating the effectiveness of the peer media campaign. Based on the findings of this report, the research team at Michigan State University is moving forward with a peer media campaign. It is informed by the results of this study as well as a prior study on the B.R. A.D. (Be Responsible About Drinking) Foundation programs also conducted by this research team and funded by ED. Preliminary analysis of that study is available at www.ippsr.msu.edu/OSR/CelebrationDrinkingStudy.htm. Key

Figure 4. Percentage Drinking Less or More than Planned



findings are available in appendix A of this report.

Peer Media Campaign

Event Focus

There are four primary messages that are utilized in the fall 2002 media campaign. They are as follows: Welcome Week Poster, Game Day Poster and Advertisement, Party Without Getting Busted Flier, and the Alcohol and Other Drug Bulletin (See appendix B for copies). The Welcome Week Poster was distributed at the Residence and Greek Life Fairs. The Game Day Poster was printed in *The State News* and distributed in Residence halls and across campus. Some 8,350 Party Without Getting Busted Fliers were delivered to "new" off-campus apartments, 4,000 were distributed via the Community Relations Coalition, 1,000 were distributed via Greek Life, and 30 were distributed via the East Lansing Police Department to party stores. Some 400 bulletins were distributed to Residence Life mentors. Approximately 8,680 Residence Life "check-in" bags also contained posters and fliers. More information about the focus on welcome week and football game days is provided below.

Friend Focus

The campaign also focuses on the role that friends have in challenging the attitude, beliefs, perceptions and expectations students have regarding celebration drinking. The desired outcomes are as follows: 1) Increase in knowledge regarding techniques for preventing extreme

drinking and safe procedures for handling an extremely drunk person;

2) Increase in ability to execute persuasive communication to discourage risk-taking by a friend in heavy drinking situations;

3) Increase in verbal and physical interventions to prevent extreme consumption;

4) Decrease in condoning, encouraging, facilitating and pressuring a friend to drink excessively; and, 5) Increase in provision of protective care for a drunken friend.

In the campaign the research team plans to do the following: 1) Invoke role/responsibility of students in both facilitating and preventing excessive drinking and harm resulting; 2) Correct factual and perceptual beliefs and attitudes about alcohol and what one needs to know to actually undertake the role, accept the responsibility; and, 3) Inform students on how to intervene and use the above information to promote safety.

Specific approaches and assumptions that will drive the peer prevention campaign are as follows:

- The peer-targeted campaign is designed to supplement messages aimed

directly at high-risk drinkers, by reshaping the interpersonal environment surrounding drinking occasions.

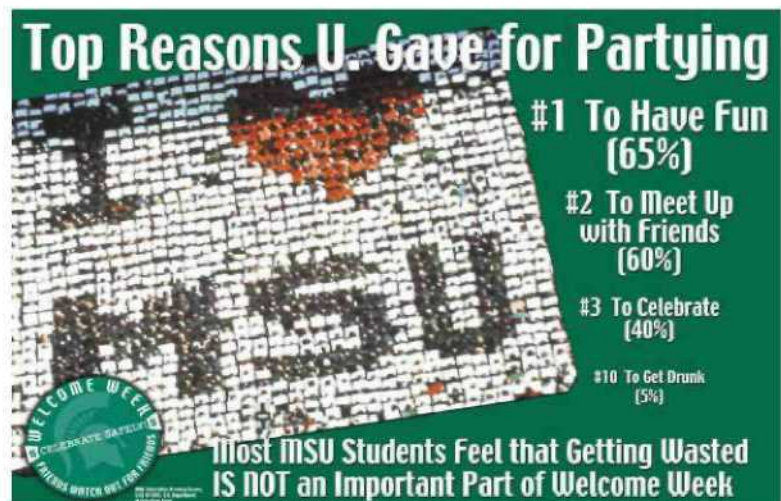
- Peers are in a position to influence heavy-drinking friends via role modeling and persuasive communication.

- The campaign primarily seeks to motivate peers to perform interventions as problematic drinking behavior unfolds or to provide protective care after the friend becomes intoxicated.

- A secondary objective is to motivate intimate friends to take preventative measures by limiting the frequency or length of drinking events of their heavy-drinking mates, and by making plans to limit the quantity or type of alcohol to be consumed.

- Messages also attempt to reduce peer facilitation of extreme consumption via condoning, encouraging or pressuring the high-risk drinkers, as well as by supplying alcohol to the drinker's friends or consuming heavily themselves.

- The basic slogan to be featured throughout the campaign is "Friends watch out for friends."



Welcome Week Poster

- Messages seek to highlight the important role of peers and present reminders to those who are already inclined to take action and to feature positive incentives showing reasons why peers should perform recommended behaviors, such as moral responsibility, altruism and prevalent social norms (while downplaying perceived concerns about social rejection or embarrassment that inhibit peer prevention and intervention).

- Other messages seek to educate peers regarding effective techniques for carrying out prevention, intervention, and protective care (e.g., information about detecting cues that signal the need for intervening or providing care and boosting self-efficacy in their ability to successfully perform these behaviors).

- The primary target audience is composed of students who are close friends or mates of high-risk celebrants and partiers.

- The channels of dissemination include ads and feature stories in the student newspaper, and pages on the health center alcohol website.

Evaluation

The campaign's effectiveness will be analyzed via a telephone survey of a random cross-section of 500 undergraduates beginning at a set time near the end of the media campaign. This is planned for the latter part of fall semester 2002. A random sample of undergraduates will be selected from the Academic Information System's database of currently enrolled students at MSU and forwarded to the

Office for Survey Research (OSR) which will conduct the survey as a series of telephone interviews. The average interview is expected to last approximately 10 minutes.

The survey will be designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the media campaign. Specifically the survey will be designed to determine the following:

- Did the campaign reach the intended audience? That is, did respondents see or hear the ads? Have they heard the slogan? Where do they remember seeing or hearing the ads? How many times did they hear or see the ads?

- Did the campaign reach similarly across all major segments of the targeted audience or did the campaign differentially reach some groups and not others?

- Did those who remember seeing or hearing the ads and slogan understand its message? That is can they summarize the key message of the ad or slogan?

- Did those who understood the message change their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations in association with the media campaign?

- Overall, did the respondents report behaving differently as a result of exposure to the campaign messages?



Game Day Ad

Endnotes

¹ Based on the aggregated responses to the questions regarding drinking on the previous Thursday, previous Friday, or previous Saturday during the field period of the survey (i.e., the latter half of the Spring Semester).

² Hours spent drinking cannot be used to calculate the number of drinks per hour.

³ Midweek day occasions in 2001 and 2002.

For More Information

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Copies of this executive summary are available in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) at the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research website: www.ippsr.msu.edu/OSR/CelebrationDrinkingStudy.htm.