THE ADVOCACY INITIATIVE MODEL

and Emerging Themes

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When The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and American Medical Association (AMA) launched A Matter of Degree (AMOD) to reduce binge or high-risk drinking by college students, it embarked on a grand, real-life experiment to test a prevention model that, while grounded in prevention research, had not been applied with rigor at any university. The model called for universities not only to publicly acknowledge the extent of high-risk drinking by students, but also to reach beyond their ivy-covered walls and engage the community in a collaborative process to address a complex problem that is a long-standing source of strained town-gown relations.

All ten AMOD sites initially agreed to engage in campus-community collaboration, develop coalitions and focus on environmental change, but campus-based staff often have little experience working in the community. In addition, the communities that are home to colleges and universities are often skeptical about what the campus is doing to address problems. That's especially true in smaller cities or towns with a large student presence, where the university can seem like the big gorilla on the block.

Problems related to student behavior cause much finger-pointing between communities and universities. Measures taken by campuses over the years had little impact on reducing problems. Community residents and city officials are frustrated because the university doesn't control its students when they are off campus. However, community environments that promote high-risk drinking behavior and provide students with easy and often illegal access to alcohol frustrate universities.

No one had gone down this road before, so many involved felt some level of discomfort as they engaged in this process of fostering community change. Most of the AMOD sites felt that before they could begin to call for changes in community environments, they had better "get their own houses in order." That meant taking a long, hard look at campus policies and environments, making changes to reduce problems, communicating those changes to the campus community, and then consistently enforcing policies to hold students accountable for their behavior.

This new approach appeared to have merit. Universities gained the confidence needed to engage the community in the often-rancorous dialogue that accompanies measures aimed at changing the status quo. Community members, including politicians, businesspeople and neighborhood residents, began to understand that there was much to be gained by the community and the university doing the hard work necessary to achieve meaningful change.

The training and technical resources brought to bear by the Advocacy Initiative were different from the traditional model of technical assistance, in which experts are brought in to train people on things that they don't know about. After the experts leave, projects may or may not use what they learned. According to Richard Yoast, director of the AMA Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and national program director of AMOD, the Advocacy Initiative model was to be a collaboration among the training and technical assistance staff at Pan American Services (PAS) and the four AMOD sites that volunteered to be a part of the initiative.

Yoast said that one of the lessons learned from the Advocacy Initiative experience is that the more the assistance is directed by the coalitions themselves in terms of assessing what they do and don't know and where they need to move, the more effective the technical assistance is. The Advocacy Initiative helped coalitions determine what they needed, but each decided how much assistance it needed, when it needed it and in what format. To some extent sites were also able to select which persons or organizations helped them.

"This project was a meshing of knowledge and skills and strategic planning. At all four sites it was a matter of bringing in somebody from outside the project to help strategically plan where it needed to go. In some cases the project said that was all that was needed. Others wanted more," said Yoast.

James Baker, president of PAS, describes the Advocacy Initiative process as "very participatory." Regularly scheduled site visits by PAS and NPO staff—and periodic visits by other consultants and resource group members—helped build personal relationships with

project staff, coalition members, city officials and so on. Those visits provided the base upon which the work could go on through phone calls, e-mails and other contacts.

"At some sites it was usual to have daily phone conversations. We even sat down at the computer with folks to help edit an op-ed piece or a news release. We worked with city officials and staff on potential laws or ordinances. At some of the sites we became a part of their family. And when sites experience staff turnover we are able to step in to help with the transition," said Baker.

The Advocacy Initiative Approach to Environmental Change

PAS based its AMOD training and technical assistance services on its Building Blocks of Effective Prevention model, which includes intentional organizing, applied data and research, policy, media advocacy and enforcement.

Intentional Organizing

Campus-community partnership is at the heart of each coalition participating in the Advocacy Initiative. But achieving effective partnerships is more than just having people come to meetings.

"This isn't about just bringing everybody in and hoping that you are going to get the right people at the table. You have to be strategic about it and bring the right people to the table at the right time," said Lisa Erk, communications director for the AMOD Initiative from 1997 to 2002 "When you've not done it before, you need someone to help guide the way and to help you think strategically about who should be involved."

According to Baker, for the most part the project staff at the sites had done organizing work for their projects within the campus community but not in surrounding communities. Therefore, the community organizing training and technical assistance focused on issues such as how project staff could approach the community beyond the campus walls.

"Whom do you talk to? How do you talk to them? Who draws people together? Should we as the campus draw these people together or should we encourage community people to invite us to their meetings? How does this work?" said Baker. "We provided specific skills building and examples from prior projects

around the country. However, a lot of it was simply having strategic conversations."

Erk said that in community organizing it is important to have people at the table who understand community change—that is, people who understand the underlying model of the project as well as the political processes needed to implement the model. "Since there are different dynamics in communities, you can't apply a cookie-cutter approach."

Applied Data and Research

Too often people jump to solutions before they are clear on what problems are most pressing and amenable to solutions. Data from a range of sources

can help show the nexus between problems and solutions. Throughout the project all participants and NPO staff expressed an ongoing need for research, synthesis and advice about various alcohol policies, alcohol-related problems and related data. PAS had the

Booze culture at university can be altered

Setting out to change cultural attitudes is a daunting task, but it can be done.

One of the most cited successes is how attitudes toward smoking have changed in the United States in the past quarter century.

Now early trend lines at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln provide an encouraging sign that the same sort of change can take place in campus attitudes toward binge drinking.

The number of UNL students who reported drinking seven or more drinks at one sitting dropped from 21.7 percent in 1997 to 12.5 percent in 2000. The number of students who reported drinking four to six drinks in one sitting also dropped to 38.6 in 2000, down from 42.4 percent in 1997.

The validity of those self-reported statistics is buttressed by other findings. The number of students who reported they had to baby-sit a drunk student dropped from 65.2 percent in 1997 to 55.2 percent in 2000.

The statistics in part show the impact of measures coordinated and started by NU Directions, a campus-community coalition created in 1998 that put together an array of programs ranging from a police crackdown on off-campus parties to popularization of alcohol-free student events. The program is funded by a $700,000, five-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Concern that binge drinking at universities had reached intolerable levels spread across the United States in the 1990s. Surveys conducted by Harvard University researchers documented that the problem was more than anecdotal. Nationally, about 44 percent of college students binge drink. About one in four binge drink frequently.

In Nebraska attitudes seem to be changing because the NU Directions program has succeeded so far in fostering a broad-based effort. On campus the cooperation of the Greek system has been important to changing attitudes. One indication of changing attitudes, Tom Workman, associate director for the program, said, is that the number of requests for medical aid related to alcohol — anything from aspirin for a hangover to acute intoxication — has dropped from 300 requests a year in fraternities and sororities to approximately 50.

But to truly succeed the program needed to be broader. "Congratulations go beyond the coalition to the community," said Workman. When the Lincoln City Council denied several requests for beer gardens during NU home football games, Workman said, that showed a commitment to reducing university alcohol problems.

People should not delude themselves that UNL students are on the verge of becoming neo-prohibitionists. But the student peer culture may at least be starting to recognize that binge drinking is not a mandatory rite of passage. That's an accomplishment that is worth celebrating.

capacity to quickly find policy information and provide assistance in conducting and synthesizing research on a particular policy or topic.

PAS developed a private AMOD project Website that included an extensive and searchable research database that was accessible by all the AMOD campus-community partnerships, not just those participating in the Advocacy Initiative. In addition, PAS staff conducted literature reviews and policy searches at the behest of sites so that they would have reliable data and research to back up proposed policy initiatives.

Ed Sypinski, a senior policy strategist with PAS, said that data and research provided to the sites armed them with the information they needed to respond to arguments from policy-makers and others who either didn't understand or were opposed to the policy solution being advanced.

Policy

According to Yoast, the Advocacy Initiative was designed to facilitate passage of local community policies that would effect environmental change and ultimately reduce problems. One component of the PAS training and technical assistance was support to the sites for developing strategic plans that included two policy objectives.

Sypinski said that one of the roles PAS played was to help the coalitions understand that a number of the problems they identified actually had a nexus with some policy solutions. Secondly, "We helped the sites understand that they could have an impact on the problems they saw in their communities through policy change."

The policy objectives developed at the sites differed. Examples are restrictions on drink specials and other promotional activities and mandatory alcohol server training. Nebraska opted to focus on a statewide policy regarding driver's licenses rather than on local policies. The training and technical assistance provided by PAS focused on defining the objectives, activities and tasks needed to reach those different goals.

Media Advocacy

The media can keep attention focused on alcohol-related problems, building momentum for legislative change and assuring policy-makers that such change has broad community backing. PAS provided sites

with training and assistance on how to use the media strategically to support the policy goals adopted in their strategic plans.

Yoast said that this component of the Advocacy Initiative helped sites learn how the local media work and how to use media advocacy tactics to get media coverage on the issues from the AMOD project's environmental perspective rather than focusing on "problem students."

Yoast credits the national media component of the Advocacy Initiative with being a powerful tool as the storyteller. "It tied people together. It made not only the project people and their superiors realize that they weren't alone, but it made the whole community really support and understand that dealing with alcohol issues requires addressing the whole environment."

The national media helped the sites build local media capacity by providing a news hook for them to join in on. It encouraged local reporters to respond to the stories that the sites were pitching. The NPO and PAS also worked with the sites to add local data, stories and policy goals to local coverage of the national story.

"Because it was a national story, it was an opportunity to talk about what other communities in the AMOD system either had accomplished or were considering. All of those factors were very empowering," said Yoast.

Participants found that the college alcohol issue is much more palatable to a larger slice of the population when framed as a "public health and safety issue" as opposed to "reducing underage drinking" or "reducing binge drinking."

Enforcement
All four coalitions in the Advocacy Initiative made the publicity about and administration of laws a central priority, with campus and police officials reporting that the continued oversight by the coalition has been an incentive for such enforcement. Continuous oversight by the coalitions affirmed expectations and norms that don't tolerate overservice of alcohol and sales and service to youths under the legal purchasing age.

Some Observations
All four campus-community coalitions agreed that the effort has been worth the gain. They report that alcohol-related problems are decreasing, quality of life both

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on campus and off campus is improving, town-gown relations are less strained and the community as a whole has benefited from the changes that have taken place. For example, sites report that neighborhood complaints about student house parties have declined, fewer students complain of disruption due to the drinking of others, and alcohol-related campus judicial cases have declined.

The experiences of these coalitions can be translated into recommendations for others considering embarking on a course of action to address student drinking and related problems.

Take It Seriously
Serious problems require serious attention. Too often such problems have been approached with Band-Aid solutions or viewed as something to be taken care of through public relations efforts. High-risk drinking is a just concern of campus and community alike. Both suffer from the negative consequences of that behavior, so both have a legitimate interest in taking measures to curb it. Taking these problems seriously—and publicly acknowledging them—is the first step toward making progress.

Embrace the Environmental Model
Education, the business of the university, is an important component of alcohol problem prevention, but it is not sufficient to have a significant impact on problem reduction. Although people on and off campus do not readily understand the environmental approach, evidence exists that changes in the legal, social, physical and economic environment can, in fact, reduce problems related to high-risk drinking by students. Changing the environment around drinking can make it easier for students to make healthier, safer decisions and harder to engage in unhealthy, high-risk behaviors.

Think Long Term
The cultural environment surrounding student drinking did not develop overnight. Changing that environment takes time. Too often responses come in the aftermath of a crisis when there is pressure to do something right away. Thinking long term allows for strategic planning that takes into consideration problem definition, community norms and community values before implementing solutions.