

A MATTER OF DEGREE

The Advocacy Initiative

Brief Overview

of the Initiative's Purpose

and Planning

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THE ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

The Advocacy Initiative was a two-year project designed in 1999 and implemented from 2000 through 2002 to help the A Matter of Degree (AMOD) college-community coalitions become more effective change agents in their communities. A goal of this effort was to help the coalitions shift their focus to the community environment, which was the source of alcohol and the location for much student drinking as well as the place where local policies have major impact in promoting or discouraging student high-risk drinking. The initiative was part of the original Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funding of AMOD and was designed and managed by the National Program Office (NPO) at the American Medical Association's Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse, under the direction of Lisa Erk, communications director from 1997 to 2002.

The initiative was structured to provide on-site intensive training and technical assistance in media advocacy, strategic planning and community organizing to four selected AMOD campus-community coalitions. It also developed national media materials and news stories aimed at both supporting AMOD site activities and influencing the public's perception of college drinking problems and what can be done about them.

Through these activities AMOD staff hoped to increase community understanding of the environmental influences on alcohol use, policies and strategies to reduce problems. Staff also hoped to increase community, citizen, decision-maker and media support to change and then enforce new policies. By engaging in the initiative, the participants also hoped to create resources and a model for providing technical assistance that may be used by other universities and community groups wishing to pass community policies.

The four AMOD campus-community sites selected for participation in this initiative are:

- Building Responsibility Coalition of the University of Delaware
- Coalition to Create a Quality Learning Environment of the University of Vermont
- NU Directions of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Stepping Up Coalition of the University of Iowa

Their selection was based on their readiness and their perceived need to engage more fully in community policy development, the policy changes they proposed and their ability to carry out the initiative. All ten original sites agreed that it would be better to focus the efforts and funds at a few sites rather than simply disperse the funds to all. However, although four sites would receive intensive assistance, all ten sites would have access to some resources and the materials produced for and by those four sites. According to Erk, the emphasis of the Advocacy Initiative was to provide all AMOD sites with the tools and resources needed to generate a broader awareness and support for environmental policy solutions that will lead to public engagement in advocacy activities.

Pan American Services (PAS), based in Bozeman, Montana, is a consulting firm providing leadership and strategies that support changes in public and private policy, community standards and norms. AMOD's NPO at the American Medical Association (AMA) contracted with PAS to provide intensive strategic planning, training, media advocacy and policy research assistance to the AMOD sites, with the aim of helping them select and achieve their community-based policy goals.

Through a subcontract with Fenton Communications, the NPO provided additional support to participating campuses and communities through a national communications campaign. The campaign was designed to help the public make connections between binge or high-risk drinking, its secondhand effects, and those factors in the environment that contribute to problems, in order to generate support for research-based policy solutions shown to reduce problems.



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Initiative Design

Sandra Hoover, deputy director for AMOD at the NPO through 2001, said that from the beginning environmental strategies were central to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grants. “The understanding was that this was not going to be the usual college program focused on education. AMOD was really going to focus on changing policy and changing the environment.”

From the outset, the NPO provided a range of training and technical assistance to all the sites, bringing in consultants to train coalition spokespeople on the environmental approach to prevention. At each of the joint annual meetings of AMOD and Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions (RUDC), nationally known experts in the area of policy-based environmental prevention conducted workshops and sessions for campus and community representatives. RUDC is another RWJF national program with statewide coalitions in 12 states creating environmental change to reduce underage drinking.

While progress was being made in changing campus environments through policy changes and enforcement, most of the sites were not making as much progress in the surrounding communities. Part of the problem lay in the difficulty of getting people, both on campus and off campus, to understand that changes in the physical, social and economic environment can, in fact, influence drinking behavior and related problems. This goes against deeply held societal views that drinking behavior is solely a matter of individual choice and personal responsibility.

“While from the beginning the project has looked at this problem from that environmental perspective, even for us as an institution it took a while to really begin to get it. It’s a unique approach that doesn’t click with people immediately. It’s harder to wrap your arms around it when we’re talking about all sorts of factors that directly and indirectly influence drinking behaviors among the student population,” said Enrique Corredera, director of communications at the University of Vermont.

With Erk’s urging, the NPO received approval from the Foundation to use funds from the

communications campaign to test whether intensive training and technical assistance at some of the sites could help them more readily advance policies aimed at environmental change in a strategic manner. Such community policies included those that affect the practices of alcohol retailers and the enforcement of existing laws pertaining to alcohol licensing, sales and service. Some of the funds were used to provide on-site technical assistance from PAS in strategic planning, policy development and media advocacy.

The initiative’s technical assistance model was somewhat experimental—it had not been tried with universities or in many communities. A technical resource group of leading researchers, alcohol problem prevention advocates and communications experts (including representatives from the AMOD sites, the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, and the RWJF communications and program liaison) was brought together to answer these questions: What was needed to help a community coalition learn the skills and gain the experience of planning an effective advocacy initiative that would result in local policy change and that would enable the coalition to run advocacy initiatives on its own? Could this be done with a coalition that was primarily based at a university? Could that coalition, as a result of this effort, become more community oriented?

The resource group helped develop the initiative’s objectives and strategic plan. In looking at research and their own experiences, the resource group felt all of this could be done, but not in the usual way. Typically coalition volunteers and staff receive some training at a workshop and some materials to help them afterward. Sometimes staff at a national agency can offer additional help. The resource group said that to really make changes requires a much greater commitment of on-the-ground help, over a longer period of time and with specific assistance and training designed to meet the specific needs and environment of the coalition. Unlike the technical assistance services usually provided (that is, a few training, consulting, advice and planning sessions) in

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similar policy advocacy efforts, this one was intended to provide the following:

- ongoing, intensive support, both on-site and through access to national resources (electronic, media, consultant, and research);
- a combination of direct services to local advocates (training, feedback, problem-solving advice, background policy research and communications resource development);
- supportive professional media and communications services directly to local advocates; and
- national communications advocacy efforts to place these local projects in a more favorable national media context.

Once the initiative was under way, some members of the resource group occasionally served as consultants for problem-solving with individual grantees and the NPO.

As Ed Sypinski of PAS later said, “The larger role for us to play here is to develop the capacities and resources of the local coalitions and the project managers and the volunteers who work with those coalitions—to have them focus on policy change that will have long-lasting effects on the larger community and assist them in that process of change on a political, social and economic level.”

According to Erk, PAS played a role in the Advocacy Initiative in three areas. “One was community organizing. Some sites needed that more than others. The other areas were media advocacy and technical assistance—such as helping sites prepare for an actual media event or training coalition members in what media advocacy is. But the way I define media advocacy, it is also a political strategy. The two have to work together strategically to advance policy goals.”

PAS based its technical assistance to the AMOD coalitions on what it calls “building blocks of the environmental prevention model to establish an infrastructure that promotes policy solutions and community norm changes.” (See page 21 for a more detailed discussion.) The building blocks are the following:

- *Intentional organizing* builds support among necessary community members and organizations,

businesses, law enforcement agencies and policy-makers by engaging them in creating positive change within their community. Intentional organizing develops the community leadership necessary to define and support the change process.

- *Applied data and research* identify the magnitude of the problem and guide intervention planning throughout the campaign. Data collection supports the need for community interventions and can demonstrate change.
- *Policy* provides direction to develop an overall campaign strategy. The policy design is based on community data collection and citizen input.
- *Media advocacy* links individual components of the model into a cohesive whole. Media advocacy is a critical element that raises awareness of the problem on the public agenda, provides a vehicle for high-visibility community response, highlights project successes, demonstrates community support and promotes policy change.
- *Enforcement* ensures consistent application of new and existing policies.

Within that framework, PAS provided

- ongoing, on-site strategic planning and implementation assistance (PAS staff traveled to the four sites at least monthly to help drive local and state policy change, and weekly strategy calls were held with NPO staff to discuss challenges and problem-solve);
- ongoing training in community organizing, media advocacy, strategic planning and the environmental management model; and
- research and consultation on site-specific issues such as, driver’s license reform (Nebraska) and government land-use options for controlling alcohol outlets and linkages between alcohol and crime (Iowa, Vermont).

The media advocacy training taught staff and coalition members how the media work, how to get media attention in a way that focuses on the definition of the problem and how to promote solutions to those problems. It also showed how to do all this effectively without much money. Depending on individual needs, the training also included selecting a good spokesperson; coaching that spokesperson; using data to make the case; approaching

local media; using specific media tools (issue briefs, editorials, letters to the editor); implementing strategies to reach out into the community through the media; creating effective leaflets and newspaper ads; and learning how to get points across during media interviews.

In addition, general technical assistance by PAS staff, which was available to all ten AMOD sites, included the following:

- Daily Internet searches for media items relevant to policy work were provided to all AMOD sites.
- A private AMOD project Website was developed, which provided a daily media report, an extensive and searchable research database, bulletin board and training materials to support AMOD campus-community partnerships and facilitate communications among sites, and links to other organizations and resources. The idea was to build a one-stop resource to support policy change at the community level. The site was also a repository of all project-related materials. This Website, now closed, formed the basis for the current public access Website: www.alcoholpolicysolutions.net.
- Media articles, as requested from the daily media report and media database, were provided.
- Advocacy materials produced by the campaign sites and by the national communications initiative were provided.

Local Media Component

Some of the funds for the initiative were set aside to enable each of the ten AMOD grantees to purchase advertising space to promote the policies they were advocating, educate the public and use the ad templates provided by the national media consultants. Many of the sites advertised their policy agendas either by designing their own ads, using ad templates provided to them or working with PAS-provided background research and design copy.

THE STEPPING UP PROJECT
TO REDUCE THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF HIGH RISK DRINKING

news
February, 2000

Stepping Up
Executive Committee

Carolyn Cavitt, Chair
Jim Clayton
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Dale Helling
Phillip E. Jones
Pat Ketcham
Mary Khowassah
Ernie Lehman
Steve Parrott
Dan Patterson
Julie Pfyfe
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Tom Rocklin
Cathy Solow
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Tailgating: All the fun, without the beer!

New! www.uiowa.edu/~stepping

National Media Component

The national communications component of the initiative provided a wide range of services to help create an effective national media presence. Fenton Communications assisted in the development of a strategic communications plan; media targeting and selection; development of advocacy frameworks (that is, which issues to choose and how to frame responses); national and several site-specific public opinion surveys; focus groups; advertising templates and placement; media information kits; advice to staff in handling media relations; media contacts; and assistance to sites to enable their participation in the national efforts and to feature their local accomplishments. The AMA's communications office reviewed press releases, provided assistance to AMA officials serving as mass media spokespeople for the initiative, developed and disseminated video news releases, arranged press teleconferences and developed print advertising.

To gain a better understanding of what messages would have the greatest likelihood of getting people to

think differently about college drinking problems, the NPO contracted with Lake Snell Perry & Associates to conduct focus groups in August 2001. The focus groups explored attitudes toward binge drinking among college students and the environmental factors that contribute to the problem. They also explored attitudes toward community responsibility and solutions that focus on restrictions on bar owners and the alcohol industry to eliminate marketing practices that promote high-risk drinking.

The focus groups found that the first step was to make the public aware of the problem.

Using information from the focus groups and public opinion polls—one of which was conducted with Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Center for Science in the Public Interest—Erk at the AMA and Fenton staff created national media campaigns strategically designed to provide local media “hooks” that the coalitions used to advance their specific policy goals. In advance of each national media event, Erk held conference calls with staff at Fenton and PAS to develop local media strategies with AMOD sites. For example, on August 29, 2001, staff at the NPO organized a national media event featuring then AMA chair-elect J. Edward Hill, MD, who emphatically called college binge drinking a major public health problem while reporting on a new survey of parents of college students.

According to the AMA survey, parents were not only worried about the drinking culture enveloping their children when they go off to college; they also supported a wide range of policy changes designed to reduce the availability

of alcohol on and around campuses. This media event generated a tremendous amount of coverage, including a major segment on the television show “Good Morning America.”

Newspapers in all AMOD communities picked up on the story, often including local information about the efforts of the campus-community coalitions and their successes in reducing problems related to college drinking. Both the University of Vermont and the University of Delaware received unprecedented media attention as a result of the national media event and used the opportunity to get the message out about actions they were taking to reduce problems.

While the media climate changed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, other national media events garnered attention, but not to the same extent as the parents’ survey. Among them was the release of the AMA poll on Spring Break in March 2002.

“I think that we did a great job of demonstrating how coalitions can use national media to begin to question and challenge the role of alcohol in society. It got people thinking about the appropriateness of things such as Spring Break and drink specials and promotions. It demonstrated how national media could be used to drive change at the local level,” said Erk.

For James Baker, president of PAS, the national media campaign was extremely powerful in supporting the AMOD Advocacy Initiative because it helped tell the story of what the coalitions were doing. “It tied people together. It made project staff and others realize that they weren’t alone. It helped the whole community understand that dealing with alcohol issues on a structural basis is perfectly okay.”

