

A MATTER OF DEGREE

Setting the Stage for Change

By Richard A. Yoast, PhD

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The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students
(AMOD), started in 1996 as an \$8.6 million, seven-year program.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CHANGE

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation decided to address college binge drinking after reviewing a Foundation-supported 1993 Harvard University School of Public Health College Alcohol Study of more than 17,000 students at 140 four-year colleges. The highly publicized results of this study, responsible for placing the issue of college binge drinking on the nation's radar screen, found that 44 percent of students surveyed were binge drinkers (binge drinking is defined as the consumption of at least five drinks in a row for men or four for women in a single sitting during the two weeks before the survey). Binge drinking is also referred to as high-risk drinking in this report.

These binge drinkers were at substantially increased risk for alcohol-related problems such as getting behind in schoolwork, engaging in unplanned sexual activity or getting injured. The survey also showed that binge drinkers created problems for classmates who were not binge drinkers. Students at schools with higher binge-drinking rates were more likely than peers at schools with lower binge rates to experience problems such as being pushed, hit or assaulted,

- Citizen, including youth, empowerment through the organizing of coalitions or partnerships
- Media and policy advocacy and public awareness to highlight problems
- Policy advocacy of research-based solutions concerning alcohol price, services and availability; access by youths; and advertising, promotion and sponsorship
- Public activities augmented by targeted media strategies that influence norms supportive of policy changes and healthier behaviors

The Foundation's initiative, called A Matter of Degree: The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students (AMOD), started in 1996 as an \$8.6 million, seven-year program. The national program is funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and administered by the American Medical Association. Working with ten university-community coalitions, together they are leading a national effort to reduce high-risk drinking among college students. AMOD is designed to foster collaboration between participating universities



experiencing an unwanted sexual advance, or having study or sleep interrupted. Newspaper reports also indicated higher levels of alcohol-related problems in communities surrounding these colleges.

The Foundation also found that a growing body of research demonstrated that the common use of alcohol education as the main prevention strategy was costly and only produced insignificant outcomes. Other research, however, indicated that changing the policy environment showed the greatest potential for successfully reducing underage drinking and related problems. That research is summarized in the 2002 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism panel reports on high-risk drinking in college (www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov) and the 2003 Institute of Medicine report *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility* (www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=15100). The scientific literature pointed toward a number of combined key features integral to this public health approach:

and their surrounding municipalities to address the important public health issue of high-risk drinking and its adverse consequences for college students, and to improve the quality of life for all community residents. The program is being evaluated independently by the Harvard University School of Public Health College Alcohol Study. Reports from this multi-method, multi-year study evaluation, which track the AMOD experience from its inception in 1996, are forthcoming.

AMOD awards were offered through an invitational process in which universities and their local municipal representatives were asked to apply on several criteria:

- Participation in the national Harvard University School of Public Health College Alcohol Study of randomly selected schools
- High rates of student binge drinking
- Willingness to publicly address their campus's alcohol-related problems and student drinking behaviors

- Explicit project support from the chief campus administrator and high-level community representatives (for example, mayors and police chiefs)
 - Demonstrated history of campus activities designed to reduce alcohol problems
 - Active student participation in the proposed project
- Six grants were awarded in 1996, four in 1998. The AMOD sites are the following:

- Florida State University—The City of Tallahassee, Florida
- Georgia Institute of Technology—The City of Atlanta, Georgia
- Lehigh University—The City of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
- Louisiana State University—The City of Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- University of Colorado—The City of Boulder, Colorado
- University of Delaware—The City of Newark, Delaware
- University of Iowa—Iowa City, Iowa
- University of Nebraska-Lincoln—The City of Lincoln, Nebraska
- University of Vermont—The City of Burlington, Vermont
- University of Wisconsin—The City of Madison, Wisconsin

All AMOD grants are overseen by campus divisions of student affairs and have easy access to the university president or counterpart. Structurally, the partnerships are organized as shared campus-community committees or as broad-based campus-community coalitions. Participants typically include high-level city and university officials and law enforcement, campus faculty, neighborhood associations, student and school district leaders, local prevention agencies, local and campus health care professionals, and, frequently, representatives of state government, liquor enforcement authorities and local alcohol retailers. Staffing includes a project manager teamed with a high-level university administrator, communications staff and a project evaluator.

The AMOD programs are governed by two underlying principles:

- Environmental factors such as alcohol advertising and marketing, institutional policies and practices, and local ordinances—even social and cultural beliefs and behaviors—converge to encourage high-risk drinking, but those factors are subject to change

through a range of policies and activities designed to prevent and reduce harm.

- Formation of broad-based campus-community coalitions and collaborations can create long-lasting environmental changes to support healthy lifestyle choices and discourage excessive alcohol consumption.

By the end of year two (the first year that plans were implemented), each campus reviewed and revised its alcohol policies and procedures and increased enforcement for greater consistency and effectiveness. Campus literature, recruitment and communications



were changed to reflect an intentional theme: Students who want to learn and enjoy all the campus and community offered would be sought—but students looking primarily for a party school need not apply. This message was repeated in staff education, letters to parents and interactions with alumni and media.

Most projects addressed campus issues first and thus helped convince skeptical community members that the universities were serious about change. Early actions to share campus police, emergency room, health care and other data and procedures fostered the idea of

a true campus-community partnership. Lehigh, Vermont and Iowa students and neighborhood groups began to develop projects to get to know each other, to communicate expectations and to jointly address concerns. The Delaware project staff and Newark's mayor increased their shared planning activities. Although the grants were awarded to the university, funds were commonly allocated to address community needs and student needs for alcohol-free special events, social activities and housing.

Most of the campuses also took steps to

- develop new student-faculty interactions to support better student integration with aspects of the campus



community and culture not focused primarily on drinking;

- involve Greek chapter leadership to bring fraternities back to their original mission of academic achievement, fellowship and community service; and
- use social marketing campaigns to counter pro-bingeing social pressures and pro-consumption messages.

Establishment of Coalitions

All the projects devoted much of the first year to building coalitions, developing action plans and cementing working relationships among participants. In almost every case, campus, local and state policy change opportunities arose during this planning phase. This prompted new connections among all of the AMOD

projects (via a listserv, training events and an annual meeting); among the projects and national advocacy groups; and with law enforcement (for example, city and campus police, highway patrol and liquor-licensing authorities), which all grantees recognized as playing a key role in project activities and success.

Universities provide ready-made infrastructures for discussion and problem solving and can serve as bases from which to speak out and effect change. Each campus has sophisticated communications, planning and political resources with easy access to the mass media and government officials. AMOD extended these resources into the community. Campuses typically have a great deal of control over their internal environments and student life. AMOD projects are thus able, to a great extent, to negotiate the terms and rates of change. The more politically and socially complex off-campus environments addressed by the projects have been primarily limited to the immediate campus vicinity with additional major impact on the entire community.

The campus administrations often moved cautiously at first so as not to alienate their constituencies and, in part, to establish a credible long-term commitment to addressing alcohol-related problems. They were able to integrate the projects into institutional strategic planning. Their activism increased as they had success in campus areas where they had the most control. They saw that it worked.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

In the AMOD sites, campus and community police were encouraged to be active partners—and often became leaders. Project staff consulted with those in enforcement to assess and alter campus policy. Coordination of campus police and community police was quickly identified as necessary to effective enforcement. City and campus participants supported the coordination by broadcasting new policies and enforcement measures to all key audiences. The universities brought parents onto the enforcement team—parents often pay the bills, are legally responsible for children who are minors and, most importantly, care about their children's well-being. Parent organizations were invited to join policy discussions. Some campuses informed individual

parents of policy changes, campus expectations and a son or daughter's infraction. Other steps streamlined student judicial and disciplinary processes and supported staff implementation of alcohol policies.

Through the AMOD collaborations, the community and campus police forces began regular meetings to share information about incidents and infractions, coordinate activities and explore ways to make their reporting mechanisms more compatible. Several universities were thus able to hold students accountable for off-campus alcohol infractions—knowing that the city police would share the information. Others explored whether campus–city police jurisdictional divisions were effective or counterproductive.

The cooperative tenor gave further support to active community enforcement of laws barring service and sales of alcohol to minors. This helped reduce student opposition to enforcement because they no longer felt singled out or treated unequally while servers of minors went unpunished. The campuses also began to bring their concerns (such as about bars serving minors or the negative impact of licensing large numbers of alcohol-serving establishments close to campus) to local alcohol control authorities. Local merchants who support project goals have been helpful in providing insights about how best to have their clerks and servers comply with state and local laws. A major change experienced in all the communities and universities has been a new recognition that alcohol-related problems, solutions and prevention are shared mutually.

A Renewed Understanding of the University as a Social Change Agent

The AMOD policy partnerships set the stage for a renewed consideration of the university as social change agent and leader. As one would expect, until recently most campuses addressed alcohol problems through small-group and peer education, awareness campaigns and student counseling services. The university was perceived as a reactor or observer, limited to using persuasion and not fundamentally connected to the sources of student alcohol problems. Most campuses and surrounding cities treated alcohol problems separately—as a campus-student problem or as a city problem.

The AMOD environmental model was an eye-opener. It illustrated how the university was affected by and could influence external factors, such as parental expectations,

the presence of large numbers of bars surrounding campus and the availability and promotion of cheap alcohol. As the project progressed, staff members began to see change effected through policy and enforcement



collaborations of concerned people and through the university creating new expectations. For the first time campus administrators appeared before local liquor-licensing authorities to express what they had learned about the impact of licensing decisions on their students. Many community members welcomed their new collaborations and worked with students to reduce

conflicts between students and older neighbors. An often overlooked facet of university life also came to the fore—university staff live in the community, raise children and have the same concerns everyone else has. Similarly, university administrators have also recognized that they can play a more active role in shaping the public health environment on and off their campuses.

The AMOD model emphasizes the university as a dynamic community force—one that can positively or negatively affect the health of its students, its staff and the wider community. Change is found to come not just through discussion and persuasion but from active, purposeful changes in environments. But time spent listening to the community and engaging in dialogue with concerned residents has been a necessary precursor to identifying problems and setting explicit shared goals and strategies to reduce or prevent problems. If universities are to successfully engage with the community in addressing these problems, they need to reorganize how they think about what they do and the skills that they need to bring to these collaborations. They have to move from simply observing community life to being active partners and leaders. For universities this is as much a transformation process as it is an attainment of a specific goal. The AMOD experience has transformed the university from being an outside observer to an active political force in its community.

The experience has also required that in nonacademic activities the university needs to be willing to openly discuss and engage noncampus actors in problem analyses and solutions. Although campus and city administrators still have distinct areas of concern and responsibility, they have agreed to regularly and actively work together to solve problems in both realms. The common framework is now that alcohol-related problems are not seen as a student or a city or a campus problem but a shared problem and responsibility.

A clearly defined set of needed skills and understandings has emerged from this process. First, universities have had to learn media advocacy

techniques and how the local media work in order to get coverage of alcohol issues from their perspective rather than the adversarial perspective that often marks public discourse in surrounding communities. Second, universities need to have community organizing skills, much in the same way that student personnel need to have student personnel skills to deal with students. They need to understand that communities are systems with dynamics different from their campuses. This requires greater knowledge of state and local public policy formation and advocacy. Both sides need to gain a better understanding of how to collaborate in order to avoid the finger-pointing that so often arises when it comes to problems of student drinking.

Universities have a tremendously powerful platform to challenge the status quo and call for reforms. The AMOD project has seen what can occur when universities actively participate in changing the environments surrounding student drinking, both on and off campus. The lesson we have learned through the AMOD experience is that we can reconceive the role of the university in society and be an effective partner for social change. In fact, universities and communities mutually benefit from such a role.

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