

A MATTER OF DEGREE ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation initiative 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 program is funded by the Foundation and administered by the project's National Program Office (NPO) at the American Medical Association's Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse. The program fosters collaborations among ten universities and their surrounding municipalities to jointly address issues of high-risk drinking, the resulting adverse consequences for college students and the surrounding community, and how to improve the quality of life for all community residents. The ten coalitions examine how the on- and off-campus environments affect student drinking and identify and implement science-based approaches to changing those environments to promote communities with healthier, safer conditions for all. The Harvard University School of Public Health independently conducts the program evaluation.

A major activity of the AMOD coalitions is to advocate for and implement science-based solutions to changing the environment that contributes to high-risk drinking, particularly policies and practices related to alcohol:

- Access and availability
- Price
- Service
- Advertising and promotion
- Social norms
- Policy enforcement

The program used a range of activities to create change: policy formation and advocacy, media advocacy, education of the public and decision-makers, development of new social norms, and broad-based community involvement.

During the first years of the project, activities centered around making changes in campus policies and improving enforcement of campus and community alcohol policies. As the program began to look more

at community (off-campus) influences, in 1999 the NPO provided additional support to four selected AMOD coalitions through a two-year Advocacy Initiative. The initiative provided intensive training and technical assistance in the areas of media advocacy, strategic planning and community organizing to help them change community policies. Additional national media materials were developed both to support those activities and to influence public perceptions of college drinking problems and what can be done about them.

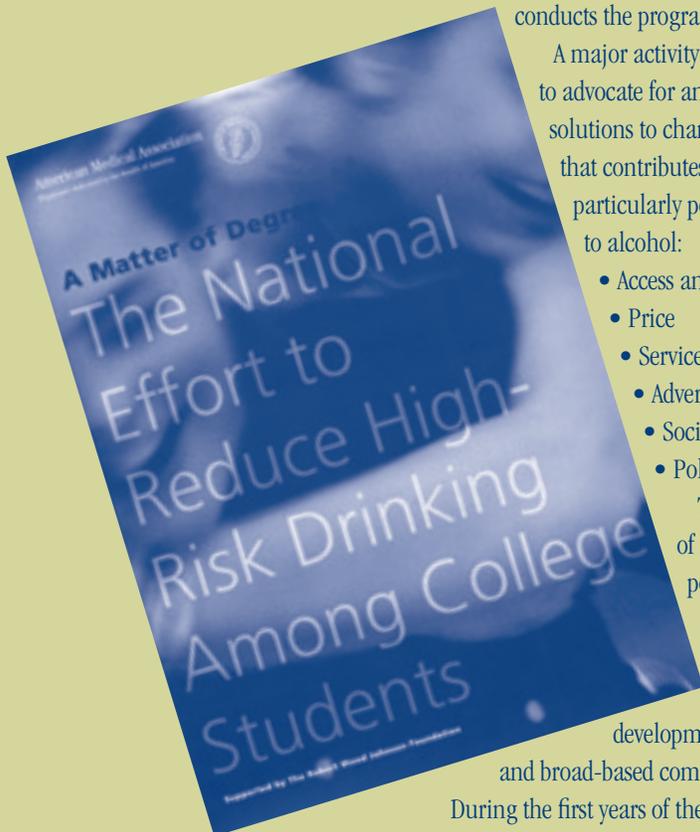
The four AMOD campus-community coalitions participating in this initiative were:

- Building Responsibility Coalition (University of Delaware and the city of Newark)
- Coalition to Create a Quality Learning Environment (University of Vermont and the city of Burlington)
- NU Directions (University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the city of Lincoln)
- Stepping Up Coalition (University of Iowa and Iowa City)

The NPO contracted with Pan American Services (PAS), based in Bozeman, Montana, to provide intensive assistance in strategic planning and media advocacy to the AMOD sites, to help them achieve community-based policy goals intended to reduce student high-risk drinking and its secondhand effects. A contract with Fenton Communications (New York, San Francisco and Washington) was used to develop national media strategies, media materials and campaigns to attract media attention.

PAS based its technical assistance to the AMOD sites on "building blocks of the environmental prevention model to establish an infrastructure that promotes policy solutions and community norm changes." They 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.



The theory underlying the Advocacy Initiative was that community policy decisions and public and decision-maker perceptions are greatly influenced by the mass media as well as by personal relationships.

- *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 that changes occur.
- *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.

Campus-community partnership is the heart of each coalition participating in the Advocacy Initiative. The Advocacy Initiative's community organizing training and technical assistance focused on helping project staff to approach and actively involve the surrounding community. PAS taught coalitions how to identify, build support for and implement science-based (that is, research-based) policy changes.

The Advocacy Initiative used data and research from a range of sources to show the nexus between problems and solutions. Throughout the project, all participants and the NPO staff expressed a need for research, synthesis and advice about various alcohol policies, alcohol-related problems and related data. PAS offered assistance through

- on-site training and mentoring adapted to the needs and skill levels of staff and volunteers. Participants were taught how to develop effective media messages, approach the media and decision-makers, research local alcohol-related problems, create advocacy that would capture media attention, and organize in the community;
- ongoing phone and electronic access to research, advocacy advice and communications materials; and
- development of strategic plans.

A private AMOD project Website (now part of www.acholpolicysolutions.net) was developed and contains an extensive, searchable research database accessible to all ten AMOD campus-community partnerships. In addition, the PAS staff conducted rapid response literature reviews and policy searches so that sites would have reliable data and research syntheses to back up proposed policy initiatives.

The Advocacy Initiative was designed to facilitate passage of local community policies that would create environmental change and ultimately reduce problems. Each site was asked to develop a strategic plan to implement one or two policy objectives of its choosing. The primary policy objectives differed across the sites. Nebraska chose a statewide policy regarding driver's licenses rather than local policies. Vermont chose improvement of local alcohol-server training. Iowa worked to reduce cheap drink specials and ads targeting students. Delaware sought to help the city undertake an examination of several alcohol policies and to implement strategies to reduce service to underage drinkers. PAS helped to define these objectives and identify activities and tasks needed to reach those goals. At first, it provided intensive assistance to the coalitions to help them carry out their plans; but as the coalitions gained skills and experience, less help was needed and was limited to addressing specific tasks.

The theory underlying the Advocacy Initiative was that community policy decisions and public and decision-maker perceptions are greatly influenced by the mass media as well as by personal relationships. To create policy and perceptual change requires development of relationships and the capture of media attention through new ways of looking at and solving problems. Media also can maintain attention and focus on alcohol-related problems and solutions. This helps build momentum for legislative change and assure policy-makers that such change has broad community backing. On-site training and assistance helped teach strategic use of the media to support policy goals in their strategic plans. Sites learned how the local media work and how to use media advocacy tactics to get media coverage on the issues from an environmental perspective rather than focusing on "problem students."

The initiative's national media component helped sites build local media capacity by providing a national news "hook" for them to join. It encouraged local reporters to be responsive to the local stories that the sites were pitching. The NPO and PAS worked with the sites to add local data, stories and policy goals to local coverage of the national story. Fenton Communications conducted research on public opinion, issue selection, strategic message development and national media contacts.

All four coalitions participating in the Advocacy Initiative made the publicity and enforcement of laws a central priority. Campus and police officials reported that the continued oversight by the coalition was an incentive to such enforcement. Through their oversight, the coalitions also affirmed expectations and norms that overservice of alcohol and sales and service to youths under the legal purchase age would not be tolerated or approved of by the community at large.

All four campus-community coalitions agreed that the effort was worthwhile. Their policy goals were achieved and the city councils involved in the policy efforts all began to develop their own broader alcohol policy agendas. They report that problems are going down, quality of life both 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.

The experiences of these coalitions can be adapted by others who are considering embarking on a course of action to address student drinking and alcohol-related community problems.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE AMOD ADVOCACY INITIATIVE

Take It Seriously.

High-risk drinking and its negative effects on the community are serious problems requiring thoughtful and ongoing attention. Too often such problems have been approached with occasional Band-Aid solutions or viewed as something to be taken care of through public relations efforts. The high-risk behavior of students is the just concern of campus and community alike. Both suffer the adverse consequences of that behavior, both influence that behavior and thus both have legitimate interests in taking measures to curb it. Taking these problems seriously—and publicly acknowledging that we are going to address them—are first steps 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. While people on and off campus do not readily understand the environmental approach, the evidence shows that changes in the legal, social, physical, economic and communications environments can reduce problems related to high-risk drinking by students. This requires that all sectors of the community, not just the students, examine how they contribute to the problem and join in its reduction.

Look at the Environment—How It Is and How You Want It to Be.

Effective solutions require a careful evaluation of how alcohol problems are influenced and affected by the on- and off-campus environments. This enables selection of appropriate solutions. Part of the analytical process will lead to consideration of what we want our communities to be like. How do we expect individuals, groups, government, businesses and other institutions to behave? What new relationships and collaborations do we need? What would an economically, socially and physically healthy community look like?

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 pressure develops to do something right away. Thinking long term allows for strategic planning that considers problem definition, community norms and community values before implementing solutions.

Use Targeted Technical Assistance to Make a Difference.

University student services staff typically lacks skills and experience in community change processes or in policy advocacy. Community citizens often lack access to the research and training needed to make their advocacy efforts effective. Technical assistance is often provided on a schedule without consideration of specific needs, local conditions or appropriate timing. However, the provision of on-site assistance as it is needed, with backup research and communications support, can enable coalitions to acquire the skills, experiences and information they need. Once taught, they can proceed on their own to effect the environmental changes they think are important.