Challenging High-Risk Drinking at MSU

A Social Norms Approach

An Olin Health Center and

Health and Risk Communication Center Project

In

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Introduction

Without the assistance of numerous people and organizations this manual would not have been possible. We would first like to thank the U.S. Department of Education whose grant helped fund this manual and other various research endeavors. We would also like to thank the MSU administration, the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, the Department of Communication at MSU, the East Lansing Police Department, and the contributions of the East Lansing community.

This manual was produced to give a brief overview of the social norms approach, the social norms projects that have been undertaken at MSU, the methods we have used, and the results we have seen. Since we began using the social norms approach to drinking, we have seen dramatic decreases in both drinking behavior and harm caused by drinking behavior. In addition, dramatic increases in harm preventing behavior have also been observed. We hope that the manual will give the beginner insight into how the social norms approach to countering high-risk drinking can be implemented, and we hope that the individuals already using the social norms approach might be able to learn from our endeavors.

The manual is divided into several distinct sections. The first section, entitled “A Series of Unfortunate Events,” will provide you with the historical context of the drinking culture at MSU, the university’s response, and the early prevention strategies. “Social Norming – A Brief Introduction” describes the distinguishing characteristics of a social norms approach and gives a glossary of terms regarding social norms. In the next section, “The MSU Social Norms Research Project” outlines our implementation of the social norms approach including our formative evaluation, our interventional strategies and process evaluation and how we have evaluated the
outcomes. “Bumps and Bruises” shows areas where we still need improvement, some mistakes we made along the way, and general words of advice for anyone who is thinking about implementing a social norms approach and for those who are already involved in a social norms campaign. Finally, the manual ends with a list of resources for future reading.
A Series of Unfortunate Events

In the late 1990s several unfortunate events occurred on MSU’s campus in which alcohol and high-risk drinking were identified as being contributing factors. In May 1998, a civilian disturbance occurred on MSU’s campus and in the surrounding city of East Lansing resulting in thousands of dollars of property damage. The disturbance began as an on-campus protest to MSU’s newly adopted policy that banned alcohol from tailgate parties. The disturbance moved from on-campus, however, into the surrounding community. The disturbance raised tensions between the city and the university. The MSU President at the time, Peter McPherson, soon formed the Action Team in response to the disturbance. The Action Team was a committee made up of MSU students, faculty and staff, East Lansing residents, and city officials.

The Action Team was charged with discussing issues regarding high-risk drinking on MSU’s campus and recommending a course of action to improve the mutual atmosphere of the campus and community by challenging this environment of high-risk drinking. Several Action Team meetings took place in 1998, and a final report was released in November 1998 that included thirty-three recommendations for improving the campus and town environment. These recommendations fit into five categories: education; communication; health, safety, and consequences; social environment; and law and policy. Some of the specific recommendations included creating a “Safe Ride” program, increasing alcohol-free residence halls, widely publicizing ordinances that affect students before enactment of those ordinances, informing students of the harmful consequences or high-risk drinking, and educating students on appropriate alcohol use.

*For a complete copy of The Final Report of the Action Team, see http://www.msu.edu/unit/act/ACTfinRpt.pdf*
The education portion of the recommendations revolved around message campaigns that could reduce harm by reminding students of the negative consequences of high-risk drinking and by providing accurate information regarding the attitudes and drinking habits of other students. Rather than implement an “abstinence” or fear-based campaign, the Action Team believed that the most effective way to reduce high-risk drinking was to educate students on moderation and to encourage protective behaviors to reduce the potential for harm when drinking. It was decided that a social norms approach would be the most effective method for addressing the recommendations of the Action Team. Olin Health Center in conjunction with the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, University Media Relations and the Department of Communication began work collecting data, crafting messages, pretesting those messages, and implementing an interventional social norms campaign.
Social Norming – A Brief Introduction

The social norms approach is an environmental strategy gaining ground in interventional health campaigns (Perkins, 2003, p. 3). While conducting research in the mid 1980s, two researchers, H.W. Perkins and A.D. Berkowitz discovered that university students at a small U.S. school had exaggerated beliefs about the normal frequency and consumption habits of other students with regard to alcohol. These inflated perceptions were not exclusive to that one small college; they were also discovered in universities of all types, with varying populations and locations. And, despite the fact that college drinking is at elevated levels, the perceived amount nearly always exceeds actual behavior (Perkins, 2003).

According to Perkins, individuals associate the most memorable and salient behavior to be indicative of the behavior of the majority. Thus, people will remember the one individual who had eight beers and danced on the table more than the majority of the attendees who consumed moderate amounts of alcohol or abstained all together. Individuals will then strive to be in the presumed majority by adhering to the pseudo-norms and elevated perceptions that are most memorable and salient. The exaggerated perceptions, or rather misperceptions, of peer behavior will continue to influence the habits of the majority, if they are unchallenged (Perkins 2003). A social norms approach determines the exaggerated and actual norms of a population through formative research and informs the population of the actual norms through a message campaign. The final step, which is incredibly important, is determining the effectiveness of the messages through evaluative research. In addition to determining effectiveness, the results from the evaluative research can be used to craft new messages to revise the message campaign.

The social norms approach overall is not intended to alter individual behavior directly. Instead, the social norms approach is utilized to change the population’s misperceptions about
the environment into accurate perceptions, thereby allowing changes to occur. Below, you will find a glossary of important terms with regard to the social norms approach.

Types of Norms

**Norms** – a pattern or trait taken to be typical in the behavior of a social group

**Descriptive Norms** – What people actually do. Descriptive norms “refer to beliefs about what is actually done by most others in one’s social group” (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005, p. 130) or “refer to individuals’ beliefs about how widespread a particular behavior is among their referent others” (Rimal & Real, 2003, p. 185).

**Injunctive Norms** - What people feel is right based on morals or beliefs. Injunctive norms are perceived social pressures or guidelines associated with attitudinal disapproval or approval of one’s behavior by a family or peer group or by the wider community.

Types of Misperceptions

**False Consensus** – the incorrect belief that others are like oneself when in fact they are not (Ross, Greene & House, as cited in Berkowitz, 2004.)

**False Uniqueness** – the incorrect belief that occurs when individuals who are in the minority assume that the difference between themselves and others is greater than is actually the case (Suls & Wan, as cited in Berkowitz, 2004).

**Pluralistic Ignorance** – the false assumption of an individual that most of their peers behave or think differently from them when in fact their attitudes and/or behavior are similar (Miller & McFarland, Prentice & Miller, and Toch & Klofas, as cited in Berkowitz, 2004).
The Social Norms Lifecycle

A social norms approach is cyclical in nature; it is a marathon rather than a sprint. A successful social norms project builds momentum through repetition and time. In other words, running a social norms campaign one year and switching to a different tactic the next will generally fail to show results. The social norms approach requires diligence and perpetual motion. The lifecycle of a social norms approach consists of several distinct stages. They are: formative evaluation, intervention, and summative evaluation, which will ultimately feed back into the campaign fueling future efforts.

Formative Evaluation

Formative Evaluation is the first step in a social norms campaign. Formative evaluation consists of surveying the population and message creation based on the survey results. The formative evaluation phase is the time when information regarding perceived norms and actual behaviors are garnered from the audience. In order for a social norms approach to be the appropriate means for intervention, two conditions must first be satisfied:

1.) There must be misperceptions between actual behavior and perceived behavior - This simply means that there must be a difference between what people do and what they think other people do. If there is no difference, the social norms approach is not the correct way to go. A caveat is that there is almost always a difference. Sometimes a more sensitive instrument is necessary to uncover the misperceptions.

2.) At least half of the population must behave “correctly” – If over half of the population behaves in a way that is contrary to the intervention, a social norms approach is not the best interventional strategy. For example, social norms approach
assumes that individuals want to be normal. If most of the individuals (i.e., over
50%) behave in a way that is harmful, a social norms message campaign might
courage the harmful behavior. It is important to ask questions about both
descriptive and injunctive norms.

Surveying
The most effective way to establish the baseline levels of behavior and perceptions in
your population is through the use of surveys. During our work, we found that web surveys were
the most effective way in getting a large response rate. Web surveys are especially suited for
college students because of their familiarity with the technology, the containment of the
population (i.e., all are part of a very specific community), and the ability for the students to take
the survey at their own pace and during the time that works best for them. Not only are web
surveys great for students, but they are also highly advantageous for researchers. They provide
quick turnaround for data analysis, higher response rates, less missing data, and they eliminate
interviewer effects.

Surveying can be a daunting experience, but the following are several tips intended to
help along the way.

1. Plan – It is incredibly important to be exacting when planning the survey. Make sure to:

   1. Decide what topics will be covered (e.g., drinking behaviors, perceptions,
      protective behaviors, environment specific events, etc.). The more
      knowledgeable about a topic, the more likely people will participate.

   2. Decide when to administer the survey. Be sure to take into consideration
      breaks (e.g., Spring break, Fall break), midterms, and final exams, Holidays.
3. **Develop useful questions.** It is ok to borrow questions from other researchers or use already developed and tested material. Think about what you want to gain and whether each question will help to achieve that goal.

2. **Incentives** – Offering incentives for survey completion is a must! It will provide a definite increase in response rates. There are two different types of incentives: Individual rewards and lottery rewards. Individual rewards are given to every person who completes the survey (e.g., a coupon for a free pizza). Lottery rewards are awarded to individuals at random (e.g., 10 people receive a $50 gift certificate to the campus bookstore). Individual rewards are more expensive but provide higher response rates.

1. **How to get low cost incentives** – By working with local businesses you can acquire low cost incentives. Tell local businesses how many people will see the survey and approach student-focused businesses, such as local pizza places. A lot of local businesses are happy to provide the incentives at cost for the free advertising.

3. **Survey Design** – For web surveys it is important to keep in mind variable operating systems, screen resolutions, different kinds of browsers, and different Internet connection speeds. If you design below the cutting edge, more people will be able to complete the survey. Here are 12 simple rules for designing a survey:

   1. Emphasize security by providing login screen with PIN or password to control access

   2. Keep font face (Arial, Veranda, Helvetica) and color simple (black) -
3. Avoid having to “page or scroll down” by limiting the number of questions per page.

4. Avoid question wrapping

5. Use Next/Previous page buttons

6. Use a progress bar

7. Number the questions

8. Bold question numbers

9. Begin with an interesting, simple to answer question applicable to all on the topic

10. Use simple question styles, radio button, check boxes, matrixes, and simple fills as often as possible

11. Avoid questions that require lengthy text responses

12. Group similar questions together

4. **Notifying the Sample** – Once a survey has been designed and tested it is time to notify the sample. The best way to notify the sample is through a double-barreled method.

   1. **Pre-Letter or Pre-Email Notification** – Send the sample a personalized letter notification several days before the survey opens. The letter should include the purpose and goal of the research, when and at what email address they will received the email notification, how long the survey will be active, access information (ID’s, pass codes), what they will get out of it (i.e., incentives), how their privacy will be protected, and contact information for the surveyors.
2. **Email Notification** – This email repeats much of the information of the original letter, but also provides a link for the survey.

3. **Reminders** – Be sure to send one or two reminders for the survey. Mention previous notifications, sympathize about why the student might not have responded, mention the importance of the survey, and include the incentive information again.

**Adapting the Campaign**

After completing data collection, it is time to mine the data and look for patterns. When you are analyzing the results from your survey, look for inconsistencies between actual behavior, attitudes, and perceived norms. When these differences are consistent with your campaign and the majority of students adhere to the beneficial idea, use them in your message creation. One inconsistency that might be present in the data could be differences between actual behavior and perceived behavior. For example, you might find that students report they consumed 0-4 drinks the last time they partied, but they believe that the average student consumed 5-8 drinks. After discovering this statistic, you might craft messages such as, “Most students drink 0-4 drinks when they party,” to correct the misperception regarding descriptive norms.

The most important descriptive to look for in the data is the 51% or greater stat. Look for items where “most” (i.e., over 50%) of your students adhere to the beneficial behavior. These stats could occur in injunctive norms (i.e., “Most students believe passing out from drinking too much is wrong.”), protective behaviors (i.e., “Most students use a designated driver, even when only having one or two drinks.”), or any other numerous behaviors.

After finding some important trends, use those trends to create messages. Experiment with these early messages by using different vocabulary (e.g., “66%” vs. “Most” vs. “Majority),
using different behaviors to find out which ones are the easiest and most acceptable to perform (e.g., “eating while drinking” vs. “keeping track while drinking”), using varying degrees of citations (e.g., large citations vs. small citations of data source”), and other various message components. After creating preliminary messages, pretest those messages on small groups so that you can refine your messages before presenting them to the entire population. Some things you might examine in pretesting include which messages are most socially acceptable, which are believed to be the most effective, and which messages have the highest believability.

Believability is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for an effective campaign. If believability in messages is low, change will probably not occur due to the fact that the persuasive messages are falling into the audience’s latitude of rejection. In other words, the audience will reject the message without even considering it. While there are no specific guidelines, we feel that believability should be around 50%. It is also important to note, however, that if believability is extremely high (e.g., over 90%), change is also unlikely to occur due to the fact that the message is not challenging enough. In other words, it serves only as a reinforcement rather than an element of change.

**Summative Evaluation**

After implementing your campaign through careful planning, there should be some measure of success. This measurement is summative evaluation. It consists of examining and evaluating the progress made by your intervention through assessing the outcome and impact, cost and benefits, and cost effectiveness of your program. Using surveys similar to the ones in your formative evaluation can give you a good start to the evaluation. Specifically, your survey should help you answer the following questions:
1. **Did change occur in perceptions?** – This is perhaps the most important question. A social norms approach is based on correcting misperceptions, not changing behavior. The changes in behavior are thought to occur as an outcome of corrected perceptions. You want your population to understand the prevalent behavior so they do not feel they have to live up to misperceived notions of behavior.

2. **How much change occurred?** – Is the difference significant or is it equally likely to have been caused by chance? Did perceptions get worse? These are questions that are very important when evaluating your program.

3. **Is the change associated with your program?** – Are the changes you are seeing the result of some other factor or is there reason to believe your program was the basis for the change? You can answer this question by comparing the results you are seeing with nationwide averages which can be found in the NCHA data.

4. **How much did it cost?** – If money were no object, it would not matter if our programs were only marginally effective. However, this is not the case. It is incredibly important to weigh the benefits achieved by a program with its cost.

Once the evaluation is complete, use it. What we mean by this is summative evaluation not only tells whether your program is working, but it can also feed new messages and new campaigns. Look for your successes and use that new data you to craft new messages. For example, if you find that most of your students now drink 0-4 where before it was 0-5, craft new messages around this new found norm. Other areas to look for new message data include:

1. **Protective Behaviors** – Are new protective behaviors being used? Is the use of preexisting protective behaviors going up?
2. **Injunctive Norms** – Are there new injunctive norms? Do students feel differently now about certain behaviors (e.g., getting drunk to the point of being sick) than they did before?

3. **Perceptions of Harms** – Is high risk drinking now seen as more harmful than before? Are students more aware of the harms?

4. **Gaps between Perceived Norms and Actual Behaviors** – Is the gap increasing or decreasing? If it is decreasing you might be making progress and can feed that information into new grant proposals and research endeavors.

5. **Areas to which You Stopped Messaging** – If you stop creating messages for one particular behavior, keep track of it. When we stopped messaging towards designated driver programs, its prevalence came down.
The MSU Social Norms Research Project

The Social Norms Project at MSU has focused on several different types of behaviors regarding alcohol. We have looked at drinking in general, differences between types of drinkers, differences between contexts (i.e. typical drinking behavior and celebratory drinking behavior), the protective behaviors which students implement when they are drinking, and what students believe to be normal behavior when it comes to alcohol consumption. Our goal has remained the same throughout the different projects: To challenge the environment of high-risk drinking on our campus by changing students’ misperceptions regarding alcohol consumption, encouraging safe and protective behaviors, and discouraging risky behaviors. One outcome of the Action Team process was a clarification of terminology to use which would support our goal and lessen confusion among our stakeholders as to how we have identified the ‘problem’. We decided upon the term “high-risk” as opposed to “binge” to describe our ‘problem.’ The next short section clarifies the difference between binge drinking and high-risk drinking and why the distinction is important. We also outline other vocabulary we have used with regard to our program.

Binge Drinking vs. High-Risk Drinking

The phrase “binge drinking” is used widely, and often inaccurately. Traditionally, the term binge drinking referred to a period of prolonged alcohol use (usually two or more days) during which a person repeatedly uses alcohol or another substance to the point of intoxication, and gives up his/her usual activities, interests and responsibilities in order to use the substance. This is the definition most commonly used within the field of substance abuse, including the clinical treatment of addiction, and in associated scholarly publications.

Recently, binge drinking has been defined as consuming a certain amount of alcohol in any one setting: typically, 5 drinks for males and 4 drinks for females. Understanding that the
pace of drinking often predicts level of intoxication and harm much more adequately than simply the amount consumed, some researchers have added a time period of consumption (typically 2 hours) to more accurately reflect higher risk drinking patterns. These definitions are much more common in the field of substance abuse prevention and health promotion. It is also the definition used most frequently to characterize abusive drinking patterns among college students.

Despite the fact that our campaigns have been predominately prevention-focused, we use the first definition to define binge drinking, mostly because it has withstood the test of time as a reliable clinical indicator for the diagnoses of a chronic alcohol abuse disorder. This does not mean we would endorse the consumption of 4 or 5 drinks over a 2 hour period as moderate or safe, but we would not consider it binge drinking. Instead we might use the term “higher risk drinking” to describe the behavior, particularly if it occurred in conjunction with other factors which are likely to contribute to harm, i.e., driving a car, having untreated depression, drinking with strangers, drinking while taking other drugs, including prescription drugs, etc. Indeed, a 200 pound male could consume 5 drinks over the course of 2 hours and if he were in the company of good friends, in a known environment, had consumed food with the alcohol and had no other confounding factors, we might very well consider this lower risk drinking. On the other hand, let’s take that same male and place him in an unknown situation, operating a motor vehicle and taking prescription medications, and we would consider him to be at much higher risk. As prevention educators, our objectives and thus, our prevention strategies, are aimed at reducing this incidence of higher risk drinking. Our strategies address the entirety of the behavior, circumstances and environment of the drinking episode, not just the amount and pace.

Clarifying our Language
**Protective Behavior** – “Behaviors that individuals can engage in while drinking in order to limit negative alcohol-related consequences” (Martens, et al., 2004, p. 390). Examples of protective behaviors include staying with the same group of friends, alternating drinks, or using a designated driver.

**Celebratory Drinking** – Drinking during celebratory occasions, such as “Welcome Week,” holidays (21st birthday, St. Patrick’s Day, Halloween, et al.), football games, spring break, etc.

Formative Evaluation

Formative evaluation is an empirical method of determining who your audience is; what knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors you should focus on for improvement; and what messages should work and where they should be placed (Atkin & Freimuth, 2001). We used both the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) and surveys that we designed for our specific college environment. Because a social norms approach focuses on norms and perceptions of norms, our formative research revolved around determining actual behavior (norms), estimates of others’ behavior (descriptive norms), and attitudes regarding proper behavior (injunctive norms) through the use of the aforementioned surveys and focus groups. Our formative evaluation included the following findings:

- Differences between descriptive norms and self-reported behavior
  - In general, MSU students thought their classmates were drinking 6.1 drinks the last time they partied, when in reality their classmates consumed 5.4 drinks the last time they partied on average

- Differences between behavior and injunctive norms
We found that most students implemented some form of protective behavior (i.e. designated driver, eat before or during drinking, staying with the same group of friends).

- Differences between types of drinkers
  - We divided the drinkers into four different groups:
    - Anytime drinkers – individuals who drink on typical days and during celebrations
    - Celebration drinkers – individuals who drink on special days, but not on typical days
    - Non-celebration drinkers – individuals who drink on typical days, but not on special days
    - Seldom drinkers – the drinkers who neither drank on typical nor special days

- Different drinking habits for different contexts
  - Consumption habits were found to be significantly different depending on whether or not the drinking occurred during a celebratory event. The amount of people who drank, the consumption rate, and the drunkenness rate were all higher during celebratory events, such as football games, holidays (such as St. Patrick’s Day and Halloween), and “Welcome Week,” than during the typical week at MSU.

- Perceived risks regarding alcohol consumption
  - Protective behaviors implemented by students
Intervention

For our campaigns, we did not segment the audience along any particular racial, gender, or biological differences. Instead we appealed to our students shared identity as Spartans, the MSU mascot. By appealing to the population as a whole rather than groups or sub-groups within that population, we felt we could effect the most change with regard to harmful behaviors and protective behaviors.

We crafted our interventional stimuli from the information we found in our formative evaluation. Messages centered on descriptive norms and injunctive norms for both consumption habits and protective behaviors. The “descriptive norm”-stimuli addressed the behaviors of MSU students. Below is an example of a descriptive norm poster that addresses consumption and protective behaviors:

The statement “0-5 drinks (at most) when they party” addresses consumption and the statement “79% of those who drink keep track of how many drinks they’re having” addresses protective behavior. A poster that addresses injunctive norms is featured below:
This poster addresses beliefs regarding what students think is right regarding consumption.

After crafting posters like the ones above through careful development and pretesting, the posters were placed in numerous, prominent locations to ensure adequate exposure. We have placed our posters and fliers in residence halls, in newspapers, on bulletin boards, in the bars and restaurants around town, and numerous other places around campus.

The Intangibles

Creating messages and distributing those messages to your audience will only effect so much change; there are certain intangible influences that will moderate how much change you will see. These include securing community buy-in, creating shifts in language, generating buzz, and stretching the finite dollars.
As you will recall, when we started our social norms project, we had the backing of the community and university. We involved members of the community in our Action Team and in our social norms project, and we have included them in our evaluations and successes. We hold annual stakeholder meetings that give us the opportunity to show where we are being successful and to gain feedback that might increase the effects of our future campaigns. By being inclusive rather than exclusive, not only have we gained invaluable advice from the community, but we have also come to mutual understandings about the goals and outcomes of our program.

This mutual understanding has allowed us to shift the language surrounding our alcohol campaigns. Many campaigns focus on stigmatizing harmful behavior. For example, we have all seen ads that provide us with statistics such as “Every 30 minutes someone is killed by a drunk driver.” In many ways, ads such as those normalize drunk driving by making it seem that drunk driving is far more prevalent than it is. Our ads instead focus on the actual norms. For example, one of our ads states, “74 percent choose not to drive after drinking, even if they have only one drink.” By securing community buy-in, shifts in language become community wide, standardizing the messages that are sent out. These standardized messages should cause more change than a diverse group of messages sent by different entities.

In addition to securing community buy-in and shifting the language, we have also attempted to generate buzz surrounding our program. We create press releases that emphasize the progress we are making and maintain the consistent shifts in language. Many times newspapers and news stories sensationalize the outcomes of a few bad decisions by a few individuals. Our releases, however, focus on the progress we are making overall and the many good decisions made by the majority of students.
Evaluating the Outcomes

It is important to understand the environment and craft interventional messages to address that environment. However, if you do not evaluate the outcomes, you cannot be sure whether your efforts were effective at all. When evaluating the outcomes of our programs we asked several different questions:

1. Did the interventions reach the audience?
2. Did change occur in normative perceptions?
3. Did change occur in protective behaviors?
4. Did change occur in drinking behavior?
5. Did change occur in amount of harm?

Did Interventions reach the audience?

To answer this question, we used surveys that presented students with real ads and fake ads. We then asked the students if they saw the ad. By presenting both real ads and fake ads, we increased the reliability that students were not just responding that they saw all of the ads. The tables on the next page overwhelmingly demonstrate that our students did see the ads and that the responses were reliable.
Percentage of Undergrads Reporting Seeing at Least 1 of the Norming Ads During the Semester, by Semester and Year

Source: Celebration Surveys 2-9, n=1,211; n=1,040; n=1,277; n=1,073; n=1,334; n=1,110; n=891; n=1,4

Percentage of Respondents Who Claimed to Have Seen Each Ad/Poster

Source: Spring Celebration Survey, 2005
Did change occur in normative perceptions?

To measure whether changes occurred in normative perceptions, we compared data from surveys over time. In 2000, when we administered the NCHA, we found that the perceived average number of drinks the typical student consumed was 6.24. In 2006, when we administered the same survey, that number dropped to 5.87, a 6.8% decrease. It is important to remember that a social norms program will not work overnight. It is not a quick fix. But, if messages are persistent and consistent, changes in perceptions can occur.

In addition to finding the perceptions of average consumption decreasing, we also measured how many students believed that the typical student drank 0-4 drinks the last time they partied. The following chart demonstrates that the percentage for all populations, grad, undergrad, male, and female increased from 2000 to 2006.
Did change occur in protective behaviors?

Since beginning our interventional programs we have seen some progress in the adoption of protective behaviors. Particularly, we have seen increases in both the percentage of students who usually eat before drinking and in the percentage of students who use a designated driver.

Percentage of Undergrads Who Always or Usually Use Various Protective Behaviors, by Year

In addition to these specific protective behaviors, we have seen increases in protective behaviors for the heavy drinkers. The percentage of heavy drinkers who are using one or more protective behaviors increased steadily from 2000-2006 while the percentage of heavy drinkers using no protective behaviors decreased steadily from 2000-2006.
Did Change Occur in Drinking Behavior?

As you can tell from the chart above, we have witnessed dramatic drops in the average number of drinks with regard to graduate students and the student body in general. The largest change came in 2002, the year after we began our social norms campaign.
Did Change Occur in the Amount of Harm?

Perhaps the most important question for us as preventative care health researchers is, “Were there changes in the amount of harm students experienced?” In all of our surveys, we have asked students whether or not they experienced harm as a result of their drinking with regard to several topics. These topics included doing something that was later regretted; forgetting actions and places; injuring self; injuring others; having unprotected sex; having forced sex; and being involved in fights. From 2000 to 2006 we have seen an 8.5% reduction in self-injury, a 34.8% reduction in unprotected sex due to alcohol, a 17.0% reduction in fights, and a 78.3% reduction in forced sex. Furthermore, there have been significant reductions in academic harm by year.

Change in Academic Harm, by Year

2007 National Social Norms Conference
Bumps and Bruises

In 2006, Dejong et al. released a study that examined social norms marketing campaigns on university campuses. The study compared universities using a social norms campaign to a control group of universities. The results of the study showed that the universities who were using a social norms program had either no increase or a very small increase in perceptions of drinking norms, actual consumption, or harm relating to alcohol use; the control group of schools had substantial increases in all three. This study helps to show that the changes we have seen at MSU are not just the result of some secular trend in lowering alcohol consumption.

Despite all of the successes reported above, there have also been bumps and bruises along the way. One particular problem manifests itself in the results between our 2004 and 2005 surveys. In 2004 we found that the average number of drinks consumed was 5.3; in 2005 that number had dropped to 4.5. Those numbers do not necessarily sound bad. However, when we examined what might have caused such a drastic difference we found a few problematic methodological elements. The survey we administered in 2004 was the NCHA survey, which provided a definition of what was considered one drink. The 2005 survey, however, did not define what was considered a drink. When we later conducted some cognitive interviews with focus groups, we found that in the absence of a definition, students were considering a drink to be one container (e.g., a solo cup) rather than a particular amount (i.e., a twelve ounce can).

Another problem that manifests itself through our focus group interviews was that our language was not matching up with our students’ language. Students had different definitions regarding partying vs. socializing. For students partying and socializing are not one and the same. Partying means that alcohol was consumed; socializing does not. On account of this definitional inconsistency, there is a large measurement error regarding the number of drinks
consumed at the last social event. In our 2006 survey, the percentage of students who stated that they had one or more drinks the last time they partied/socialized was around 84%. We also asked and additional question: “Since the last time that you ‘partied’/socialized was there another more recent occasion when you got together with friends and did not drink alcohol?” 85% of the students answered the previous question with a “yes.” When taking those numbers into account we get a drastically different estimate for the percentage of students who did not drink the last time they socialized/partied; that number increases from 16% to 88%.

The preceding examples are given to demonstrate how important the crafting of messages and surveys can be. It is incredibly useful and informative to involve focus groups from the very beginning and to continue their use throughout. Also, the evaluative research you conduct in addition to providing you with measurable change can also stir new research questions. Recently, we have begun looking at different personality types. One personality type that is particularly interesting to us is the thrill-seeking personality. In preliminary investigations we have found that risk-taking and thrill-seeking is positively correlated with several risky drinking behaviors and negatively correlated with many protective behaviors. Further research needs to be done, but we are very interested and concerned about how this might affect our normative messages.
Resources and Works Cited

We hope this manual has been informative for you. Below you will find the works that were used in putting together this manual and several other resources that we feel might be helpful in any social norms campaign. For further information on our program, please go to http://socialnorms.msu.edu/. The site features a forum where individuals interested in the social norms approach can exchange information and pose questions related to their work.


