



Looking at High-Risk Behaviors

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Increased alcohol use and the accompanying negative consequences of such use have powerful impacts on the first-year experience. Even if a student is not one of those who, according to the most recent study from the Harvard School of Public Health (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002), is missing class as a result of drinking the night before (30%) or blacking out (27%), he or she is probably one of those whose sleep or studying is being interrupted by drinkers (60%) or who is having to baby-sit friends who have had too much to drink (48%).

The above figures from the Harvard study are from a nationally representative dataset and usually show great variability from campus to campus. National statistics are helpful in determining how your campus compares to others; but because each campus climate is unique, one cannot assume that a national problem is also a local problem. With limited resources for education and prevention, it makes sense to target those resources on specific issues that are demonstrable problems. For example, a well-designed survey might reveal that key issues for a particular campus are impaired driving or inadequate training of bartenders on recognizing signs of intoxication. Thus, resources for alcohol and drug education might be directed toward these issues.

There are many valid reasons to survey first-year students about high-risk behaviors. Surveying students as they enter college helps institutions better separate pre-college experiences from college experiences and to program accordingly. Surveying your first-year students as part of an ongoing assessment of all classes (e.g., a representative sample of all students in the spring term) will help illuminate how substance use and other high-risk behaviors change as students pass through college.

A number of instruments are available for examining patterns of alcohol/drug use and other high-risk behaviors among college students. Institutions also have the option of creating their own. A locally developed instrument ensures that particular institutional concerns are addressed and is more likely to reflect the unique institutional culture, but an effective instrument can be very difficult to develop and should not be tackled by a novice. A good reason to use the available instruments is that they allow institutions to compare their students' responses with national norms, and this might not be possible with a locally grown survey.

The Core Alcohol and Drug Survey was very popular in the 1980s and 1990s, mostly because of its roots in and promotion by

the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) alcohol branch. It is an inexpensive and low-tech effort to examine alcohol and other drugs and their effects. The Core is available for paper and pencil administration only. Participating institutions order copies of the Core survey from the Core Institute and administer the survey themselves and mail in the completed instruments. Several months later the institution receives a frequency report of the responses and can also request an executive summary of the responses, cross-tabulations on several key demographic variables (e.g., sex, race, age), and a computer file containing the unit-record responses.

More schools are recognizing the need for broader assessment now and are using instruments that include sexual behavior, eating behavior, violence, and other areas of risk for college students beyond just alcohol and other drugs. The American College Health Association developed the National College Health Assessment (www.acha.org/projects_programs/assessment.cfm) as a comprehensive health survey for college students. The survey includes alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, but also covers sexual health, mental health, injury prevention, nutrition, and other areas. It is available in both paper-and-pencil and web versions. The paper-and-pencil forms are machine scannable and are mailed to a central source to be scanned. Several months later participating institutions will receive a frequency list and an executive summary and can request a data file and a reference group report.

TheHealthSurvey is another comprehensive survey for college students, examining alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs as well as sexual behavior, eating behavior, violence and safety, suicide, and use of campus education, prevention, and counseling sources, among other topics. While there is overlap with the topics covered in the NCHA, the emphasis in TheHealthSurvey is less on issues of general health (such as injury prevention and what vaccinations the student has received, as in the NCHA) and more on areas of college student risk. A unique feature of TheHealthSurvey is an optional "Social Marketing" evaluation component. This feature allows schools to provide graphic files of social marketing materials (such as a "social norms" poster) that will be embedded in the web-based questionnaire in order to obtain feedback from students. TheHealthSurvey was designed exclusively for Internet-based administration and is not available in a paper version. Institutions provide student e-mail addresses to the company that created the survey, which administers the survey to students. E-mail addresses are kept confidential and are erased after the survey project is completed. The turn around time for TheHealthSurvey is shorter than the previous two surveys examined, often about a month from the end of the survey until the reporting is received. Participating institutions receive a frequency list and the unit-record data in SPSS format. They can also choose from a menu of other reporting options, including a PowerPoint presentation of their data, an extensive list of crosstab options for sub-group reporting, an executive summary, and customized analyses.

One of the more well-known alcohol surveys is the Harvard School of Public Health survey. This nationally representative study is frequently quoted in the media, and 130 campuses across the country have participated in this research project. Until recently, the survey was available only to the institutions involved in the study. Now, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health have created a comprehensive health survey, based on the College Alcohol Study, called the Study of College Health Behaviors (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/chb/>) and scheduled to be released in spring 2004. Promotional materials suggest that the instrument will closely resemble the NCHA topics.

The cost to participate in these survey projects varies considerably. Because of the many options available, such as paper versus web administration, how many follow up contacts one initiates, and the various reports, it is difficult to put a specific number on

each survey package. In general terms, however, the Core survey is the least expensive option, the NCHA and TheHealthSurvey are in the moderate category, and the Study of College Health Behaviors is in the expensive category. Specific information is available at each project web site.

In summary, surveying first-year students helps campuses identify the presence of high-risk health behaviors associated with attrition and academic failure. Various instruments are available to help campuses explore these issues, with the field moving toward a more comprehensive health survey that is administered over the Internet. Each instrument has its own strengths and should be assessed individually by each campus with respect to the most appropriate questions for particular campus culture and concerns, budget, and format.

References

Wechsler, H., Lee, J. E., Kuo, M., Seibring, M. Nelson, T. F., & Lee, H. (2002). Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from four Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study Surveys. *Journal of American College Health, 50*(5), 203-217.

