

Final Proposal

Alcohol Misuse Among USC Freshmen

by

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Introduction

Drinking and the resulting consequences affect college students, their families, and their greater college communities. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), “virtually all college students experience the effects of college drinking – whether they drink or not. The problem with college drinking is not necessarily the drinking itself, but the negative consequences that result from excessive drinking” (2013). The numbers highlighting the consequences of drinking are astonishing. Each year, more than 1,800 students die from alcohol-related causes and an additional 600,000 students are injured while drunk (NIAAA, 2013). In addition, roughly 700,000 students are assaulted by another student who has been drinking and nearly 100,000 become victims of alcohol-related sexual assaults (NIAAA, 2013). About one in four college students “report having academic consequences because of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall” (NIAAA, 2013). According to the NIAAA, “19 percent of college students between the ages of 18 and 24 met the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence, but only 5 percent of these students sought treatment for alcohol problems” (2013). College students have higher binge-drinking rates than their non-college peers, and they are more likely to drink and drive. Each year, over 3,000,000 students drive under the influence of alcohol (NIAAA, 2013). The statistics discussed thus far only skim the surface of the available data regarding college student alcohol misuse. Today, incoming students are arriving at college with established drinking habits and with the expectation that drinking will be an integral part of their college experience.

Purpose of the Study

Within the problem of college student alcohol misuse, there is a specific problem among first-year college students. Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett (2007) cite in *Predictors of alcohol use during the first year of college: Implications for prevention* that an estimated 31% of 8 million college students in the US drink some time during their freshmen year of college. In addition, about 10-20 percent of these freshmen, with the majority being males, consume alcohol at a quantity two or more times the average drinking threshold. Because college freshmen tend to drink alcohol in large quantities, this poses immediate dangerous health effects which damages their academic performance, concentration level, and mortality. There also longer-term implications due to excessive drinking as a freshman. Drinking patterns often persevere through college and into young adulthood, as 43 percent of freshmen diagnosed with alcohol use disorder (AUD) continue to have AUD until age 25 (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007).

It is clear that alcohol mistreatment is a major issue among first-year college students. Previous research examining the implications of alcohol mistreatment within the context of higher education has generated both qualitative and quantitative data. This data has helped us to better understand the demographics and motivations behind alcohol mistreatment. The purpose of the present study is to examine the demographics and motivations behind alcohol mistreatment among first-year students at the University of Southern California (USC). We also hope to address the negative implications of alcohol mistreatment within higher education and provide recommendations for student affairs practitioners.

Literature Review

Drinking Trajectory

According to White, Kraus, & Swartzwelder (2006), binge drinking is a “dichotomous variable that allows researchers to sort students into categories based upon a specific threshold of consumption” (p.1006). Many college freshmen drink at levels far beyond the binge threshold (White, Kraus, & Swartzwelder, 2006). While the use of a binge drinking threshold has been very important in college drinking research, viewing binge drinking as a dichotomous variable removes information about how heavily students actually drink (White, Kraus, & Swartzwelder, 2006, p. 1006). Due to the variations in the quantity of alcohol mistreatment, it is important to further categorize the different types of drinking behaviors beyond simply categorizing students as a “binge-drinker” or not. In the article *Variation in the drinking trajectories of freshmen college students*, Greenbaum, Del Boca, Darkes, Wang, & Goldman (2005) further categorize students into six drinking trajectory classes: non-drinker, light-stable, light-stable plus high holiday, medium-increasing, high-decreasing, and heavy-stable. Having these categories helps to describe an overall pattern of drinking across an individual's first year in college, thus providing a more detailed picture of the variation among freshmen drinkers (Greenbaum et al., 2005). The researchers found that for all of the groups, except light-stable drinkers, alcohol use was not continuous throughout the academic year but instead was influenced by external variables, such as holidays (Greenbaum et al., 2005). Thus, even generally light drinkers may drink heavily on occasion (light-stable plus high holiday class). According to the researchers, “these spikes in drinking may help explain why students apparently overestimate the rate of heavy drinking among their peers” (Greenbaum et al., 2005, p. 236).

Alcohol Education

In *Effects of AlcoholEdu for College on Alcohol-Related Problems Among Freshmen: A Randomized Multicampus Trial*, Paschall (2011) cites that college freshmen that are required to

take an alcohol course, ranging from 2-3 units depending on the college campus, show a significant decrease in the amount of alcohol abuse as a result of the course. In addition, the study showed a decrease in the amount of psychological, social, and victimizations domains occurring through the academic year (Paschall, 2011). Lastly, Paschall's analysis cited that AlcoholEdu positively increase college completion rates and that it has short-term benefits by educating freshmen about its dangers (2011). Universities often combine environmental prevention strategies with the alcohol course, which makes the students informed of their personal health and their surrounding communities. In Joseph W. LaBrie's (2006) *Reducing Alcohol Risk in Adjudicated Male College Students: Further Validation of a Group Motivational Enhancement Intervention*, he cites how important it is to have an alcohol training course before students even begin college. It is pertinent that these discussions are occurring while students are still in high school so that they can reduce problematic drinking and prevent negative consequences associated with alcohol use (LaBrie, 2006). Since research indicates that alcohol-based courses influence the motivations and responses of students to drinking, it is important for the present study to determine if surveyed students participated in such a course. Thus, we can determine if they courses had an influence on student drinking behavior throughout their entire first year.

Research Questions

The previously discussed literature has directed our research questions. This study uses mixed-methods in that it is designed to answer both quantitative and qualitative questions. Our goal is to address quantitative questions that will demonstrate how USC freshmen drink in comparison to the binge drinking threshold, how these students fall into the six drinking trajectory classes (non-drinker, light-stable, light-stable plus high holiday, medium-increasing,

high-decreasing, and heavy-stable), and which student groups and organizations USC freshmen, heavy-stable binge drinkers are most likely to be involved in. We also hope to learn if the alcohol course taken by first year students at USC impacts student drinking behavior. Following our quantitative data collection we hope to collect qualitative data which will help us to understand why freshmen heavy-stable (primarily male) drinkers misuse alcohol, what influences non-drinkers to not drink, and how freshmen students perceive the campus culture of drinking at USC.

Research Design & Methods

The present study will target all traditional first-year students at USC by sending out a survey via email to all USC freshmen. *The questions that will appear on the online survey are included in Appendix A.* After we receive and analyze the quantitative data received through the survey, we will conduct one-on-one phone interviews for individuals in each of the six drinking trajectory classes. The interview participants will have pseudonyms to affirm that their identity remains anonymous. *The questions that will be asked during the interviews are included in Appendix B.* To summarize, this study will utilize an explanatory, mixed-methods approach because we will collect and analyze the quantitative data prior to collecting the qualitative data.

Sampling

The first part of our study will utilize convenience sampling as it is dependent upon the student's' willingness to volunteer to complete the online survey. On the online survey, participants will indicate whether or not they are willing to participate in a follow-up anonymous phone interview. Among the individuals that indicate that they are willing to participate, we will use stratified random sampling to select which individuals that we will interview. Once we determine how USC students fall into the six drinking trajectory categories, we can go into each

of those groups and randomly sample each group. The use of stratified random sampling is helpful when you have groups of very different sizes. For example, at USC there may be a lot more light-stable drinkers than there are heavy-stable drinkers. While we want to draw random samples from each group, we also want the data extracted to be proportionate to the general population. Thus, the goal of using this type of sampling is to ensure that there are equal numbers in each group. In our case we will identify and interview about 10-15 participants per group. During the individual interviews we will address the qualitative questions that discussed in the previous section, which place a focus on their attitudes and behaviors towards drinking. Extracting this data allows us to get more of a qualitative outlook on the study because then we will have identified what drives them to drink, what motivated them to drink, and how each individual views the overall campus drinking culture at USC.

Data Analysis

Statistical Analysis

We hope to be able to partner with USC Enrollment Services to examine the data collected from the beginning of the year evaluating USC's Alcohol 101 course. Once we examine any previously collected data, we will create our own survey specifically for freshmen to address our additional quantitative research questions (i.e. how often a student drinks and how much they drink). Then, we will use the Office of Research as a means of sending out a survey to all freshmen via their student email. The survey will help us identify where the students fall in the six drinking categories, the number of binge drinkers, and which student organizations they are involved in. We will then calculate the percentages of each category to gain a better understanding of the demographics for these freshmen, including their gender and extra-curricular involvement.

Qualitative Analysis

We will gather our qualitative data by utilizing the notes taken from our interviews with each of the freshmen, particularly identifying key points and words, as well as their thoughts and reactions. Following the interviews, we will code the responses from the participants so we can gather the key themes that overlap between each of our participants. These themes will help us better understand the causes of their alcohol misuse and allow us to understand their behavioral tendencies. Our future research study will focus on specific points such as how the participant's upbringing influenced their drinking habits, or how the campus culture may have potentially played a role in their drinking patterns.

Ethics and Limitations

There are potential limitations of this research study that are important to note. First, phone interviewing limits our ability to read any non-verbal cues of the participants. We also cannot control the environment in which the students are in when they are on the phone. This may lead to increased distractions. Second, since alcohol use can be considered an ethical issue, individuals may choose not to partake in the study, especially if they excessively misuse alcohol or engage in additional risky drinking behaviors. This has the potential to skew our overall data collection. Another possibility is that students may not disclose the student organizations that they are involved in or they may not give completely honest answers regarding their alcohol consumption. This could be as a result of a fear of breaking school policy or policies that specific student organization may hold. A confidentiality note in the beginning of the survey, stating that responses are entirely anonymous, could encourage people, but some individuals may choose not to participate simply because the study involves questions about alcohol. Finally, confidentiality could be a bigger concern in the individual interviews. It will be important to reiterate to the

participants that their identity is completely anonymous and that the interview is completely voluntary. None of the information they share will affect their status as a student at USC.

Recommendations & Conclusion

In conclusion, providing recommendations from research is critical in order to resolve the issue of alcohol misuse in college freshmen. In M. Lee Upcraft's (2000) *Today's First-Year Students and Alcohol*, Upcraft cites some of the recommendations that could be made for student affairs practitioners aiming to decrease the amount of alcohol abuse among freshmen. These include being strategic with input variables, environmental variables, interpersonal relationships, identity development, personal health, and academic performance. It is important for student affairs practitioners to incorporate institution policy and to align their practices with the mission of the institution. The environmental characteristics of the institution plays a heavy role in influencing the acts of its students, and the culture that is being fostered on-campus directly influences the actions of the students. As a result, it is particularly important that the students have self-care which would offer them emotional support, and it gives themselves a sense of independence and strengthen academic capabilities. By having self-care, the students are more mindful in regards to their choices, behaviors, and values; which directly impacts their decisions with alcoholic consumption.

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Appendix A: Online Quantitative Survey

Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. Which Student Groups, Organizations, Clubs, Sports, and/or School Teams (etc.) are you involved in at USC?
4. Are you in a fraternity or sorority?
5. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up anonymous phone interview regarding this survey?

AEQ-AB (Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire - Abbreviated) (Stein et al., n.d.)

Answer according to how much you agree or disagree with each question.

Disagree Strongly (1) - Disagree Somewhat (2) - Uncertain (3) - Agree Somewhat (4) - Agree Strongly (5)

1. Alcohol generally has powerful positive effects on people (makes a person feel good or happy; future seems brighter).
2. Alcohol can help or hurt how well a person gets along with others (makes people want to have fun together; makes people mean to others).
3. Alcohol helps people think better and helps coordination (people understand things better; can do things better).
4. Alcohol improves sex (more enjoyable; feel more romantic or sexual; makes it easier to have sex).
5. Alcohol hurts how people think and it hurts their coordination (run into things, act silly, have a hangover).

6. Alcohol makes a person feel stronger and more powerful (easier to fight, speak in front of others, stand up to others).

7. Alcohol helps a person relax, feel less tense, and can keep a person's mind off of mistakes at school or work.

Alcohol Use Questionnaire (n.d.)

1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?

Never
Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

2. How many standard drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when drinking?

1 or 2
3 or 4
5 or 6
7 to 9
10 or more

3. How often do you have six or more drinks on one occasion?

Never

Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

4. During the past year, how often have you found that you were not able to stop drinking once you had started?

Never
Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

5. During the past year, how often have you failed to do what was normally expected of you because of drinking?

Never
Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

6. During the past year, how often have you needed a drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session?

Never
Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

7. During the past year, have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because you had been drinking?

Never
Monthly/Only on special occasions or holidays
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
4 or more times a week

Appendix B: Qualitative Phone Interview:

1. Why do you use alcohol?
2. If you are a heavy-stable drinker, what motivates you to use alcohol in that way?
3. If you are a non-drinker, why do you choose not to drink? What influences you?
4. How do you perceive the campus drinking culture of drinking at USC?
5. What constitutes a “drink”?
6. How do you normally gain access to the alcohol?
7. Have you consumed alcohol before attending USC?
 - a. If not, what has made you choose to experiment with alcohol at USC?
 - b. If so, explain your prior experience with alcohol. Has your drinking behavior changed since coming to USC?