

Student drinking falls in spotlight

BY GEOFFREY DOWNEY
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University of New Brunswick students will be part of a nationwide study to analyse drinking habits.

The Canadian Centre for Social Norms Research at the Toronto-based Student Life Education Company is heading the research.

Dr. Wesley Perkins is in charge of interpreting the results of the surveys.

He said "norm" research focuses on discovering what the normal or standard behaviour is. In the case of university drinking, Perkins said, most students have a drastic misconception of what average constitutes.

"Students frequently think that the majority of their peers engage in high-risk drinking and the majority of their peers are very permissive in their attitudes, which is not the case in any student population in any college or university," said the professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York.

"The majority drink moderately or they don't drink at all. Even if there's a problem behaviour, that's significant or large, it's not the majority."

The relatively new method is a departure from what Perkins called "the health terrorism" approach. Trying to scare students into doing what is healthy hasn't worked, he said.

Student Life executive director Fran Wdowczyk said by presenting survey results with the real alcohol consumption figures, they hope to dispel myths surrounding drinking.

"We tend to be full of a world of misperceptions then we make our decisions based on those misperceptions. So for students and alcohol, we want to say not everybody goes out and drinks every night of frosh week," Wdowczyk said.

"Everyone always thinks that everybody is having more to drink, having more fun, doing drugs or

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more drugs than they are."

Perkins said he believes they'll find students who "grossly misperceive" what the norm is.

A lack of data from Canadian schools led to the study.

Student Life has been involved with alcohol awareness for 17 years, she said, but relied on stats from American schools or old data from Canada.

As many as 2,000 students per school will be given a survey in October, Wdowczyk said, then Perkins will examine the results.

Each school will then be responsible for creating its own education campaign. After that, students will be surveyed again.

UNB was chosen because it has the right mix of urban, rural, residential and commuter students, as well as its past participation in alcohol awareness programs.

Nine schools in total are participating, including St. Mary's University, Simon Fraser, the University of Alberta and the Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in Toronto.

Perkins said the norms approach has worked at several schools in the United States.

According to the Canadian centre, high-risk drinking has fallen by 28 per cent over five years at the University of Arizona, 40 per cent over four years at Hobart and William and by 18 per cent over two years at the University of Missouri.

Other benefits include a drop in liquor law arrests, fewer incidences of unprotected sex, fewer cases of drinking and driving and academic problems such as late papers and missed classes, he said.