

World Wide Web Edition

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What is the message in C.U.'s anti-drinking ads?

By DEVIN SMITH

Binge drinking has been a way of life for some Cornellians since the advent of the barstool. Defined as an "uncontrollable, excessive episode that makes the drinker unable to function normally," binge drinking lands students in emergency rooms, causes rowdiness and noise, promotes vomiting on College Ave., and more seriously, contributes to date rape, assaults, and injuries.

In an effort to curb binge drinking, "colleges including Cornell have spent millions of dollars on scare tactics -- posters showing students covered with vomit, displays of cars wrecked by drunken drivers -- yet student drinking rates have remained unchanged," according to a front page article in yesterday's New York Times.

Due to the impotence of those scare tactics, Cornell recently altered its game plan, earmarking a chunk of money for a new anti-alcohol campaign called "social norms" marketing. The new strategy basically says that nobody wants to be the ugly duckling and inculcates the mentality: "everybody else isn't doing it, so you shouldn't either."

But the outcomes of this namby-pamby marketing scheme are questionable. Although no studies support the effectiveness of the social norms model, common sense argues that the administration may be endorsing, if not promoting, moderate alcohol consumption among non-drinkers by "Gapifying" the student body.

By nagging every student to conform to a uniform drinking ritual, just at the Gap convinced everybody that khakis were the standard, Cornell is convincing students that alcohol consumption, albeit moderate, is the norm.

Peer pressure isn't the only devil whispering in students' ears anymore; the University is telling students to have a couple drinks as well. Cornell's mantra, "Most students (62 percent) have zero to three drinks when they party," seems to perpetuate the stereotype that many Cornellians -- regardless of age -- drink. And even if you're a non-drinker, the ads seem to urge you to conform to the "zero to three" standard. The inherent message is: "You don't fit in if you don't drink."

At first glance this message doesn't even convince students that the ideal of abstinence is realistic. The mind automatically interprets the slogan to imply that 62 percent of Cornellians drink at least moderately. For some reason the fact that Cornellians don't have a single drink when out partying doesn't seem like a viable option. And what about the other 38 percent? It appears that they must drink more, a lot more.

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But Cornell is not the root of the problem. It's just in a bad position to cope with the aftermath. Drinking, especially binge drinking, will always be a mainstay of college life. As Hobart College Sociology Professor, H. Wesley Perkins, sarcastically quipped, "how often do students sit around on a Saturday morning and say, 'she was so sober last night?'"

Furthermore, Harvard researcher Henry Wechler says that the percentage of students who binge drink has held at 44 percent since 1993, disputing the effectiveness of Cornell's new social norms campaign.

Anybody who has strolled through Collegetown after midnight on a Saturday knows that the bars aren't going out of business anytime soon. And alcohol's prevalence definitely is not going to dissipate because the University hangs up a few posters and distributes frisbees that say "zero to three."

Statistics can help to debunk the myth of binge drinking, but statistics are not going to affect the status quo. Many Cornell students are still going to drink when they go out, and they're going to drink a lot.

Anyone who thought this ad campaign was going to be effective must've been binge drinking when they created the ads. If it's so ineffectual, why bother with all this nonsense then?

Because Cornell doesn't enjoy taking flack from organizations like The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention (after all, it may lower our U.S. News and World Report ranking). And in the event of a tragic alcohol related accident, like David Wasdyke falling into the gorge with a .25 blood alcohol content in November 1998, Cornell's new marketing model helps it deflect legal liability.

If Cornell was serious about combating binge drinking and its attendant dangers, the university would, at the very least, not give the impression that alcohol consumption ("zero to three") is standard, uniform, and expected.

More ambitious programs include sponsoring low-cost activities to serve as alternatives to the bars, mandatory alcohol training, mentoring programs for habitual abusers, free taxi service for intoxicated students, and notifying parents of underage drinking violations.

But anything would be better than "zero to three."

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