

Wednesday July 03, 2002

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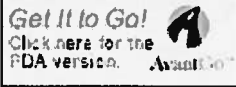


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## Wanted: a more positive approach to preventing binge-drinking

### UW should follow example of Montana Social Norms Project

by N. Zeke Campfield, staff writer  
May 09, 2002

In the fall of 2002, Innocent Zeke moved into a new dorm room on Langdon Street and enrolled in new classes at his new big school, UW-Madison. Innocent Zeke was by no means a drinker and had never smoked a cigarette in his life. In fact, Innocent Zeke had never even been to a bar.

Coming straight to Madison from Missoula, Mont., Innocent Zeke was in for a surprise.

After only a few months of working nightly at a newspaper—not to mention daily at class—Innocent Zeke was slowly turned on to the idea of booze. No, he did not immediately become a boozehound. But hey, he was in Madison, right? How could he not drink? Everyone at UW drinks.

So eventually, Innocent Zeke obtained a false identification card and became me--good ol' "N. Zeke," aka "Gregory Minnick." And now I cannot seem to keep the liquor away from myself.

But now that I am back in Montana, I find myself drinking alone. Alas, Montana is not nearly as prone to binge-drinking as I have become accustomed to. There are fewer bars, fewer students and there is no State Street and Casa B's.

But more importantly, we know here that not everyone drinks.

In fact, we are told this almost every day by the Montana Social Norms Project, based out of Montana State University in Bozeman. This social-norms project follows the examples of similar campaigns on campuses across the country, most of which follow the lead of sociology professor Wes Perkins, PhD., at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York.

Perkins has given presentations and speeches to numerous campuses across the country outlining what he thinks is the best strategy for curbing excessive campus drinking and putting an end to the troublesome drinking-related problems that confound schools such as UW.

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And surprise, surprise--Perkins and his supporters are recording tremendous success.

The point of the campaign is very simple. All too often, students come to university campuses in the same boots as Innocent Zeke. They see that drinking is not merely an activity--it is a culture.

Even the UW administration perpetuates the assumption that the school owns a "drinking culture" with scare tactic campaigns such as the ones the ALRC, UW and Chancellor Wiley are currently attempting to put in place. Right now, UW reasons that the only real way to curb students' "massive drinking problem" is to limit drink specials, enforce the drinking age more strongly and create lame entertainment venues to provide alternatives to drinking.

According to Perkins and Jeff W. Linkenbach, director of the Montana Social Norms Project here in Montana, the UW administration is building an "us versus them" atmosphere on campus, while doing very little to actually solve the problem.

"We don't have to wage war against the students," Linkenbach told me yesterday. "The students want the same thing that the administration wants."

What they want is responsible drinking without additional problems like fighting, sexual assaults, injuries and death.

Linkenbach said his project is successfully curbing tobacco use among Montana young adults, as well as drunk driving and binge-drinking, merely by outlining the realities of alcohol and tobacco use.

Instead of using the scare tactics UW and the city of Madison are using, the Montana Social Norms Project highlights exactly how many students do not use tobacco or drink excessively.

For example, "Four out of five Montana young adults do not drink and drive," as opposed to "Twenty percent of Montana's young adults on the road right now are probably off their rockers!"

And this slight change of wording is making a world of difference. Instead of force-feeding Montana's young adults a constant barrage of "all kids today are drinking and driving" filled with pessimism and exaggeration, they are giving things a slightly more positive spin, making students feel more comfortable and normal about refraining from drinking and driving.

An example Linkenbach offered is that although 63 percent of college-aged people in Montana are in favor of reducing the legal blood-alcohol level limit from .10 to .08; the same percentage of people think that type of support does not exist.

And if popular thought is that there is no support for lowering the limit, the limit will never be lowered because most people do not want to speak out on behalf of what they see as the minority opinion.

A social-norms campaign as close as UW-Oshkosh found similar results. Though countless efforts to reduce college smoking were

unsuccessful, a simple redirection of funds found 96 percent of Oshkosh students who smoked wanted to quit before they graduated. With that kind of numbers published, quitting smoking became a lot more popular.

The University of Arizona is relentless in its approach, even recently installing computer screen savers in their computer labs displaying "factoids" about actual drug and alcohol use on the campus.

"The strategy is telling students the truth about their norms," Perkins told UA administrators. "Let's let the truth have a positive benefit."

Since beginning the switch from scare tactics to social norms in 1995, UA's Daily Wildcat reported in January that risky drinking behaviors have decreased by 29 percent.

Why Isn't this approach being considered in UW's comprehensive drinking strategies? It is demonstrating effectiveness at other schools and would definitely bring the change UW is looking for, while at the same time not putting students on the defensive.

Chancellor Wiley and the ALRC are on the wrong track. Lining up against students and exaggerating the problem is only making it worse. And even worse is that now students not only have misconceptions about how many students drink on campus, but they feel the administration is working against them rather than with them.

Instead, UW should turn to the standards being set by countless students across the nation and adopt a social norms campaign. If that were case, there is a good chance Innocent Zeke would never have been corrupted by "N. Zeke," and, like it is here in Missoula, drive-in movies, and not late-night cow-tipping, would again become the ultimate Friday night experience.

*N. Zeke Campfield (antientropical@hotmail.com) is currently on a bitter hiatus in Missoula, Mont. He will be returning to UW next semester as the Badger Herald Opinion Editor. ■*

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