

Perkins explains theories of social norming

By Amanda Vera
Staff Writer

Dr. H. Wesley Perkins, a professor at Hobart and William Smith College in New York, said he believes that by clearing up misconceptions regarding alcohol and drug habits, problems of alcohol abuse on college campuses and in high schools and junior high schools will decrease. Perkins shared his studies on the subject during his presentation on Thursday, Nov. 9 in Leffler Chapel and Performance Center.

According to Perkins, there are many drug and alcohol preventive strategies available to students, but none of them are helping to reduce these problems. His theory is that perceptions drive student behavior. If students believe that everyone else is drinking or doing drugs, they will feel as if they have to do the same in order to fit in.

Because their peers are participating in this kind of behavior,

they may think it is normal or expected, Perkins said. This is what he defines as the "reign of error." Students are not aware of the truth. Perkins said that by gathering statistics that will reveal to students the reality of the situation, the actual percentage of drug and alcohol abusers will decrease. This process is called "social norming."

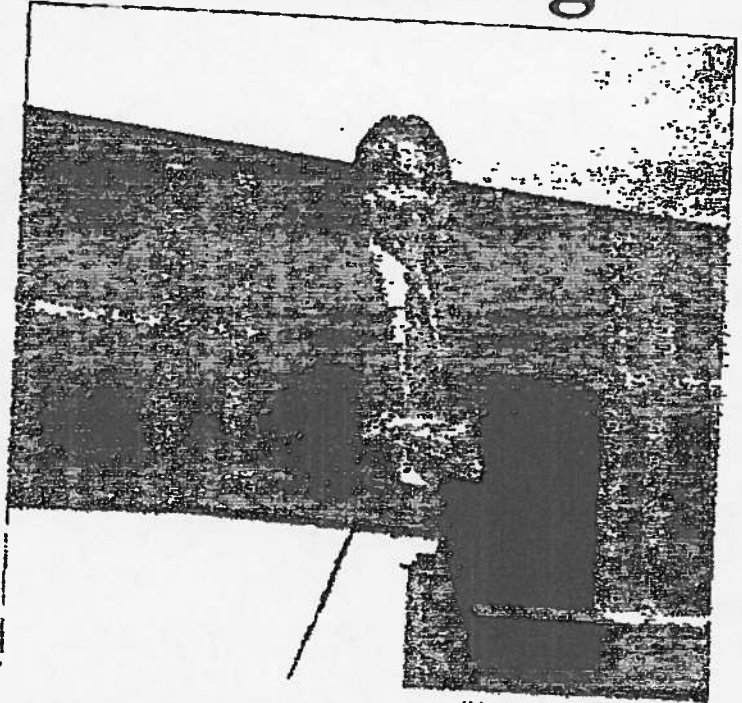
Campuses that have supported the social norming philosophy have seen as much as a 25 percent decrease in binge drinking rates, Perkins said. If students are provided with accurate statistics, misconceptions may be eliminated. Students already underestimate the responsibility of their peers. If students knew the reality of the situation, there would be a positive outcome, he said.

Misconceptions regarding alcohol and drugs not only exist on college campuses, but in junior high and high school as well, according to Perkins. If students are not exposed to the facts, they will continue to believe that the ma-

jority of their peers are using drugs or alcohol at a higher rate, therefore they will feel the need to do the same in order to keep up.

Perkins, who has taught at Hobart and William Smith College for more than 20 years, has received many awards because of his work. In 1993 he was awarded Hobart and William Smith's faculty prize and in 1997 he received the same prize for outstanding work in reducing alcohol abuse among students. Among other achievements, Perkins is the project director of the Alcohol Education Project. The project allows research to be conducted and provides educational resources that can be used to help decrease drug and alcohol abuse across the nation.

With his expertise in social psychology and substance abuse, the work of Perkins has been published in many professional journals and he has also served as a consultant to drug abuse agencies. Additionally, his accomplish-



Kristen Alderman/The Etownian

Perkins said students' false perceptions may drive behavior.

ments earned him the Outstanding Service Award in 1999 by the Network of Colleges and Universities Committed to the Elimination of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse.

One student who was in attendance, freshman Amy Rowe, agreed with Perkins's beliefs saying, "I think dispelling the myth would be helpful in decreasing pressure students might feel."

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Julia Smith

campus, both inside and outside the classroom. She was a member of the percussion ensemble, Habitat for Humanity, the Student Occupational Therapy Association (SOTA) and Circle K. Smith has also been a participant in the "Into the Streets"

dents in the OT department, who are a "closeknit group," also spoke with Sagor.

Additionally, some OT students also requested to speak with members of the clergy. As a result, a meeting

as well as OT faculty members, came out to speak with clergy members. Piscitelli said she saw different reactions from those who were in attendance.

"For the most part, probably

students to have a centralized place" to share stories about Smith, and "share being with each other." The crowd, which consisted of approximately 45 to 50 students, fac-

The crowd then sat in the dark, the only light in the room emanating from the large candle.

No matter how students decide to deal with Smith's message