‘Official’ peer pressure yields mixed results

'Social-norm marketing' aims to curb drinking

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A number of college leaders this week reported success in curbing heavy drinking on college campuses by providing undergraduates with information showing that most students don’t overindulge.

But a prominent researcher’s findings suggest just the opposite. He says student drinking has not declined, and in some cases has increased, on university campuses that use the technique, called “social-norms marketing.”

The approach is based on the idea that students feel pressured to drink more if others around them drink a lot. In recent years, more college administrators and health educators have launched campaigns informing students — based on anonymous surveys and other research — that their classmates consume moderate amounts of alcohol rather than excessive amounts. Nearly three-quarters of college students drink moderately, infrequently or not at all, according to the National Social Norms Resource Center in DeKalb, Ill.

Proponents say the approach makes a difference. Research released this week at a national conference in Boston on the social-norms model found that colleges that take a social-norms approach achieved an average 20% reduction in high-risk drinking in two years.

But research conducted as part of the Harvard School of Public Health’s College Alcohol Study found that the social-norms strategy failed to decrease incidents of excessive college drinking, even at schools where students encountered the highest number of social-norms messages.

And especially at larger schools, students are more likely to be influenced by their circle of friends than by “the drinking habits of a mythical average student,” researchers found.

“It’s a method that’s long on promise but short on proof,” says Henry Wechsler, head researcher of the Harvard report, released Wednesday and published in the July issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol. "The final answer on exactly how important the social-norms issue is isn’t in yet."