



# Alcohol Perceptions of College Faculty and Staff Members

## Pam Propson, DePauw University

Jen Binder, Katherine Janowski, Kati Lear, Katia Satterfield, Alicia Smallwood, and Lian Weinstein



### ABSTRACT

Researchers administered a survey to faculty/staff regarding perceptions of student drinking. Faculty/staff members demonstrated misconceptions (when compared to actual student reports) such as believing students party more often than they actually do. These overestimations may contribute to inflated alcohol perceptions, potentially reducing effectiveness of campus social norming campaigns.

### INTRODUCTION

Many students may engage in the stereotypical college party lifestyle because they perceive this as the norm and they desire acceptance. Research shows that students often overestimate others' alcohol usage, which may be the root of this extravagant behavior. The purpose of social norming campaigns is to inform students of actual alcohol usage patterns with the hope that correcting misperceptions will lead to less drinking (e.g., Turner, Perkins, & Bauerle, 2008).

Although there is abundant literature concerning student drinking habits at the university level (e.g., Wechsler & Nelson, 2008), there is relatively little information regarding faculty and staff members' attitudes and perceptions regarding student alcohol use. Kuntsche and Kuendig (2005) found that teachers could correctly estimate students' alcohol use under some conditions (i.e., in an environment of low alcohol outlet density). However, Baker and Broek's (1995) results indicated that college faculty underestimated the amount of alcohol students consume. In addition, they found that faculty believed that students' use of drugs and alcohol affected their academic performance, but had little interest in addressing drug abuse in the curriculum.

We surveyed faculty and staff members at a small liberal arts college to increase knowledge on this topic and supplement our student data collected for the campus social norming campaign. We anticipated that faculty and staff members would be inaccurate on many dimensions, but predictions derived from past research could lead to expectations of *underestimation* (e.g., Baker & Broek, 1995) or *overestimation*, paralleling findings with student perceptions (e.g., Haines & Spear, 1996).

*"Having seen results of these surveys in previous years has probably deflated concerns I might otherwise have had about student drinking."*

*"Today's students are mercenary drinkers. Many who do don't even know why, or don't have a reason."*

### METHOD

#### Participants:

248 faculty and staff (83 faculty, 151 staff, 12 dual faculty/staff)  
Gender: 155 females, 93 males  
Average employment length at university: 10 years

#### Materials:

Thirty-five item survey hosted by third-party website (SurveyMonkey.com) addressing:

- Faculty and staff members' own alcohol use and attitudes
- Their perceptions of student drinking and consequences of that behavior
- Their perceptions of students' attitudes towards drinking
- Knowledge of factors related to student consumption
- How often, if ever, they communicate with students about alcohol-related issues.
- Demographic information
- Open-ended comments section

#### Procedure

Researchers sent an email to faculty and staff at a small liberal arts university asking them to complete the survey. Respondents were entered into a lottery for prizes.

### RESULTS

We received 248 completed surveys, yielding an overall response rate of 32%. We computed descriptive statistics, and where appropriate, t-tests and Chi-Square analyses.

*"They are college students and they are going to drink, after they get out in real life and get responsibilities they will grow out of it--I hope."*

#### Faculty vs. staff:

- No significant differences between faculty and staff in personal drinking attitudes and behaviors.
- Staff members estimated significantly higher numbers of student drinks per occasion during the week ( $M = 2.55$ ) than did faculty members ( $M = 1.42$ ).
- Faculty had a significantly more liberal attitude about student drinking than did staff.

### RESULTS (cont.)

*"I happen to live next door to a fraternity, and my views on this subject are largely from what I see happening there."*

#### Accurate Perceptions:

- Males with Greek affiliation consume the most drinks
- Average number of drinks students consume per occasion (5-6 drinks)

*"I am teaching very small groups and it is hard to judge by them how often students drink as my students are mostly involved into (sic) sports or music or any other serious activity and obviously don't take alcohol."*

#### Inaccurate Perceptions:

- 45% overestimated the "liberalness" of student drinking attitudes
- Overestimated the mean number of times students "partied" per week (2.61 times estimate versus 1.86 times actual)
- 83% were unaware that varsity athletes drink more than non-athletes
- 44% incorrectly predicted that gender had no effect on amount of alcohol consumed.
- Less than half accurately predicted that white students consume more alcohol per occasion than those of other ethnicities.

*"It would help if more faculty would talk about it."*

#### Prevention/Instruction:

- 51% of faculty members never or rarely informally discuss alcohol use with students
- 78% never or rarely address alcohol issues in the curriculum
- Many expressed concern about the negative consequences of heavy drinking on students' academic performance and relationships.

### DISCUSSION

Our research reveals many faculty and staff misconceptions regarding student alcohol use. Many faculty/staff believe that providing students with more information on alcohol's effects would surely reduce their risky drinking, when in fact years of alcohol education efforts by college administrators have had little to no effect on student alcohol use (Haines & Spear, 1996). In addition, faculty and staff misperceive who is drinking; for example, not recognizing the risk factors, such as varsity athlete status, correlated with greater alcohol consumption. It seems clear that faculty and staff need to be better informed about the realities of student alcohol use and how they themselves could play a significant role in influencing norms. In gaining insight into the alcohol habits of students, they may be less likely to perpetuate exaggerated stereotypes of consumption behavior and help to advertise norms that reflect more moderate drinking behaviors.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the entire SOAR student group and the NCAA Choices Alcohol Education grant for contributions to this research.