

Rest Assured, There are Effective Strategies for Reducing High-Risk Alcohol Use in the Greek Community

The [recent research paper](#) “Alcohol Interventions for Greek Letter Organizations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, 1987 to 2014,” published in *Health Psychology*¹, has led to several news stories with sensationalized headlines that do not fully consider the limitations of the study.

The researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 15 studies that covered a nearly 30-year span and included a wide range of intervention modalities. The authors concluded that alcohol interventions are only somewhat successful at reducing alcohol use by fraternity and sorority members, and that there was little evidence showing that interventions improved outcomes over control groups.

The full story is more complex—and less discouraging—than most media have reported. *Campus and fraternity/sorority organization prevention specialists can rest assured that effective prevention of high-risk behavior in fraternities and sororities is, in fact, possible.*

There are several aspects of this research investigation that should lead us to interpret its results with caution. In fact, the authors themselves identified several limitations. One that stands out as particularly eye-catching is that, on average, each study included in the meta-analysis met only about 6 of the 14 (46%) criteria the authors used to assess the quality of the research methodology. This means that several of the studies did not have a rigorous, well-executed research design.

Another key point is that the meta-analysis encompassed a wide array of interventions that varied in terms of approach, target group, and length (ranging from 1 minute to 480 minutes). In fact, meta-analysis is best used to combine the results of studies that have examined the same type of intervention, not a hodgepodge of studies as was examined here. This means that any particular approach that has strong, positive results would get lost amidst the larger number of studies with poor results. It is also widely acknowledged that individual interventions work best when implemented as part of a more comprehensive, environmental management approach.

In their 2007 update of evidence-based approaches, Larimer and Cronce reported that several studies have found no differences in the response of Greek and non-Greek students to effective interventions designed for the general student population. In other words, members of Greek-letter organizations were similarly responsive to these interventions despite being at higher-risk and consuming more alcohol than other college students.² Moreover, based on published research and case studies, it is documented that certain prevention programs, like small group social norms, are actually more effective with sorority/fraternity members than other student populations.³

Comparing the interventions presented in the meta-analysis to everything that is known from the current research literature on reducing high-risk alcohol use, it's no surprise that this meta-analysis demonstrated nearly null findings. For example, among the 15 studies included, at least two interventions relied on a self-help model which consisted of "administering a self-help manual emphasizing alcohol education" and "self-monitoring of drinking behavior." This approach is ineffective for reducing alcohol use among college students, let alone members of fraternities and sororities. Prevention work has come a long way since the “Just Say No” era when some of the interventions included in this research study were conducted.

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In reviewing this study, it is important to not lose sight of the important components of the research literature the authors unpack. One of the most notable advances in alcohol prevention science was the introduction of the social norms approach in the 1990's, followed quickly by the introduction of the small group social norms approach which provides students with normative feedback on alcohol use, attitudes, and behaviors in a small group setting. This intervention strategy, grounded in social norms theory, corrects students' perceptions of the alcohol-related attitudes and behaviors of their peers in order to motivate them to reduce their drinking. When the small group social norms approach is applied to students who are part of the Greek community, research studies have found significant reductions in both normative misperceptions and drinking rates.⁴

The authors address the role that misperceived social norms play in contributing to misuse of alcohol among members of the Greek system, yet, less than half of the studies included in the meta-analysis (38%) corrected misperceived norms by providing normative feedback. The authors raise the important influence that alcohol-related expectancies have on the Greek community, yet 19% of the interventions included in the meta-analysis included challenging expectancies. Finally, the authors point out the importance of taking a targeted approach with the Greek community, yet only 10% of the interventions provided materials that were tailored toward their audience.

Data from other educational approaches like *AlcoholEdu for College™* have demonstrated statistically significant decreases in risky drinking behaviors and alcohol-related negative consequences from survey reports of first-year students affiliated with a fraternity or sorority organization. Statistically significant increases in protective drinking behaviors (e.g., alternating water, pacing drinks, etc.) have also been observed. In similar research on the impact of online prevention programs, decreases in actual drinking rates were not always observed among incoming first-year Greek students. However, that finding has to be understood in the context of what happens when first-year students arrive on campus. It is typical to find increased drinking after students enter college, especially if they join certain campus organizations. This is important to be aware of when building a program and setting expectations for its impact: *while a single intervention may not result in a decline in student drinking, a successful intervention may reduce the amount that students' drinking increases.*

While the published research and EverFi's own data demonstrate elevated levels of high-risk behavior among fraternity and sorority members compared to their peers, these data also reveal that a majority of Greek-affiliated students hold positive and healthy attitudes regarding substance abuse. Both prevention best practice and research suggest that sororities and fraternities should focus on how they can leverage the positive attitudes held by a majority of their members so that solutions can arise from within the group itself. Making this shift in focus requires looking more closely at the dynamics within the Greek community that sustain the misperception that the unhealthy minority represents most members, despite evidence and behavior that confirms the opposite to be true.

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¹ Scott-Sheldon, L. A., Carey, K. B., Kaiser, T. S., Knight, J. M., & Carey, M. P. (2016). Alcohol interventions for greek letter organizations: a systematic review and meta-analysis, 1987 to 2014. *Health Psychology*.

² Larimer, M.E. & Cronce, J.M. (2007). Identification, prevention, and treatment revisited: Individual-focused college drinking prevention strategies 1999–2006. *Addictive Behaviors*, 32, 2439–2468.

³ LaBrie, J. W., Hummer, J. F., Neighbors, C., & Pedersen, E. R. (2008). Live interactive group-specific normative feedback reduces misperceptions and drinking in college students: A randomized cluster trial. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 22(1), 141.

Anderson, D.S. & Milgram, G.G. (2001). Targeted Audiences. In *Sourcebook Promising Practices: Campus Alcohol Strategies*. Peeler, C., Far, J., Miller, J., & Brigham, T. (2001). An analysis of the effects of a program to reduce heavy drinking among college students. *Journal of Alcohol & Drug Education*, 45(2), 39-54.

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