

Student Suggestions to Reduce Heavy Episodic Drinking

CCSA conducted focus groups on five Canadian post-secondary campuses (110 participants), screening students for heavy episodic drinking to participate. We asked students for their ideas on how to address heavy episodic drinking. Their recommendations for students, campuses and communities are featured in the report, *Heavy Episodic Drinking among Post-secondary Students: Influencing Factors and Implications*, and are provided below. This resource is for groups working to understand student perspectives on this important issue.

Suggestions for Students

Students recommended a number of protective behavioural strategies for students including:

- Planning, such as bringing a set amount of money to a bar or club or a set amount of alcohol for pre-drinking occasions,
- Asking friends to monitor or stop their drinking after a specified amount, and
- Alternating alcohol with non-alcoholic drinks during drinking occasions.

Students identified peer pressure in various forms as one of the reasons they often drank more than they wanted, but they did not have many ideas on how to manage this pressure. Some suggestions included:

- Drinking non-alcoholic drinks that could mask as alcohol, and
- Asking friends not to give them more drinks.

Suggestions for Campuses

- Most students suggested receiving education and prevention messages from peers as more appealing and relatable, but also acknowledged the need for accurate information from respected adults.
- Some students highlighted the effectiveness of educating using personal stories of alcohol harms from other students, while others felt that it amounted to fear-mongering and might turn fellow students off.
- Most students emphasized the desire to normalize drinking (e.g., drinking in moderation) rather than condemn it.
- The majority of students highlighted approaches they did not feel were effective, including bans on alcohol, as they can tempt students to rebel and drink more in private where they could be at greater risk.

- Students suggested the need to offer alternatives to activities and locations focused on drinking, such as opening up other venues to socialize late at night that are desirable and interesting to students.

Suggestions for Communities

Some students begin drinking when they are younger and lack information about what factors contribute to alcohol harms (bodyweight, sex, pace of drinking, etc.). Learning about harms after entering their post-secondary institution is too late. Many students highlighted the need to educate adolescents long before they enter post-secondary studies so that they are adequately prepared. Such education could take place in the community.

What Can You Do?

If you work with students in post-secondary settings, you can use this qualitative data to inform and reinforce your work on campuses.

- Provide students with effective messages to reduce the harms of heavy episodic drinking by testing various methods for effectiveness. Students are not receiving, not remembering or disregarding existing information on reducing harm. Use evidence-based research through resources such as the [PEP-AH Framework](#).
- Involve students in the development of techniques to reduce harms associated with excessive drinking.
- Provide students tools and methods to help them deal with peer pressure and turn down alcohol when they do not want to consume it, whether it be pressure that comes from direct challenges (e.g., drinking games) or social pressure (e.g., friends buying rounds of drinks).
- Help students properly recognize and effectively evaluate the real impact of their own negative experiences with alcohol. Encourage secondary schools to address alcohol consumption before students enter post-secondary education.
- Consider using research techniques appropriate to your institution and student drinking patterns, such as focus groups, questionnaires and other forms of engagement, to understand student perspectives on drinking and reducing heavy episodic drinking.
- Develop methods that help students who do not want to drink excessively to identify like-minded friends sooner, particularly in their first year. In contrast, some students might enjoy or want to drink to excess and might benefit from being part of social groups that discourage this tendency.
- There are somewhat effective interventions to reduce pre-drinking behaviours (Burger, LaSalvia, Hendricks, Mehdipour, & Neudeck, 2011), but no studies that demonstrate effectiveness in reducing pre-drinking (Ahmed, Hustad, LaSalle, & Borsari, 2014; Borsari, Merrill, Yurasek, Miller, & Carey, 2016). Given the serious risks associated with pre-drinking, more studies on how to address this drinking behaviour are required.
- Respected peers, such as residence assistants and advisors or older students, can be effective sources for delivering messaging since young adults often take their cues from their peers (Borsari et al, 2007; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Determine what information peers should deliver and what information respected older adults should deliver.

Role models also require appropriate training as peers might not feel they have the knowledge to properly educate students. They also require vetting as this study discovered that some peers who provided safe drinking education were known to engage in excessive drinking.

Where Can You Learn More?

CCSA works with campuses to reduce harms from alcohol through the Postsecondary Education Partnership – Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH). Find the full report and more information about alcohol and youth on the CCSA [PEP-AH webpage](#). You can also find the full report and more information about PEP-AH at pepah.ca and on the [Resources page](#). See all current PEP-AH members from across Canada on the [Members page](#).

References

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