

Alcohol Use and Consequences Among UCLA Students: An Update on Current Research and Harm Reduction

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March, 2008

In recent years, the media has drawn widespread attention to the “epidemic” of alcohol use on college campuses, painting a picture of widespread harmful use of alcohol among students. However, these claims are often based on minimal, if any, data or individual findings removed from their larger contexts.

This brief provides an overview of the harm reduction philosophy that guides the work conducted by Student Development Health Education and pulls together data from several different surveys of UCLA students to provide a more accurate picture of the state of alcohol use on the UCLA campus.

Overview of Harm Reduction

The intense media focus on the overall prevalence of use can divert attention away from more relevant and useful measures of alcohol related harm and risk behaviors. A consideration of risk behaviors is a more useful focus for research and programming intended to reduce harm to self and others as a result of alcohol use. This focus, known as harm reduction, aims to reduce harm associated with alcohol (and other substance) use. **Harm reduction:**

- Accepts, for better or worse, that legal and illegal alcohol use is part of our campus and chooses to work to minimize its harmful effects rather than simply condemn or ignore them;
- Understands alcohol use as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, and acknowledges that some ways of drinking alcohol are clearly safer than others;
- Recognizes that the realities of student life, peer pressure, developmental and other issues affect both students’ vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with alcohol-related harms, and that successful interventions and policies will consider these multiple influences and focus on improving the quality of individual and community life and well-being;
- Seeks to strengthen the capacity of students who use alcohol to reduce various harms associated with alcohol use;
- Establishes the quality of individual and community life and well-being—and not necessarily the cessation of all alcohol use—as the criteria for successful interventions and policies.

Data Sources

This brief compares data from four surveys of UCLA students conducted between 1999 and 2006 by the Student Development Health Education unit (see Table 1). The findings from this

analysis were also compared to data collected on UCLA students through the Student Alcohol Survey in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006¹ for additional data triangulation.

Table 1: Data Sources

Survey	Year of Study	Sample Size (UG)	Notes
Ashe Center Survey	Spring 1999	(N=640)	Overall very representative of campus population; sample slightly overrepresents female and underrepresents Black/African American respondents.
Ashe Center Student Survey	Spring 2002	(N=3613)	Overall very representative of campus population; sample slightly overrepresents female, White, Asian and underrepresents Black/African American respondents.
Student Development Student Survey	Winter 2006	(N=1581)	Overall very representative of campus population; sample slightly overrepresents female, and Asian and underrepresents Black/African American respondents.
Alcohol Edu Evaluation Survey	Fall 2006	(N=1301)	Significantly overrepresents first year students. Also slightly overrepresents Asian respondents.

Alcohol Use

While the data do support the contention that the majority of students have consumed alcohol in the past year, they also reveal that a minority of students report heavy use. In addition, rates of use reported by UCLA students fall well below the prevalence rates reported for the US college population overall. Table 2 presents a comparison of data from the 1999, 2002 and 2006 UCLA surveys to the 1999, 2002 and 2005 Core Alcohol and Drug Survey on two common measures: 1) past year alcohol use and 2) heavy drinking².

Rates of use have remained very consistent over time, both at UCLA and nationally. The slight drop in the figure for “any use in the past year” for the 2006 UCLA survey likely represents an artifact of the change in the time of year the survey was administered (winter versus spring quarter) rather than an actual decrease in overall rates of drinking. In addition, the 30% heavy drinking figure in the 2005 national data is possibly due to a large decrease in the sample of

¹ The Student Alcohol Survey was conducted annually as part of the NIAAA sponsored “Safer California Colleges and Universities” study. Overall sample sizes for each year were relatively small compared to those from other surveys, so the data from these surveys were not included in this brief. However, the findings from each of these surveys are consistent with the findings reported here.

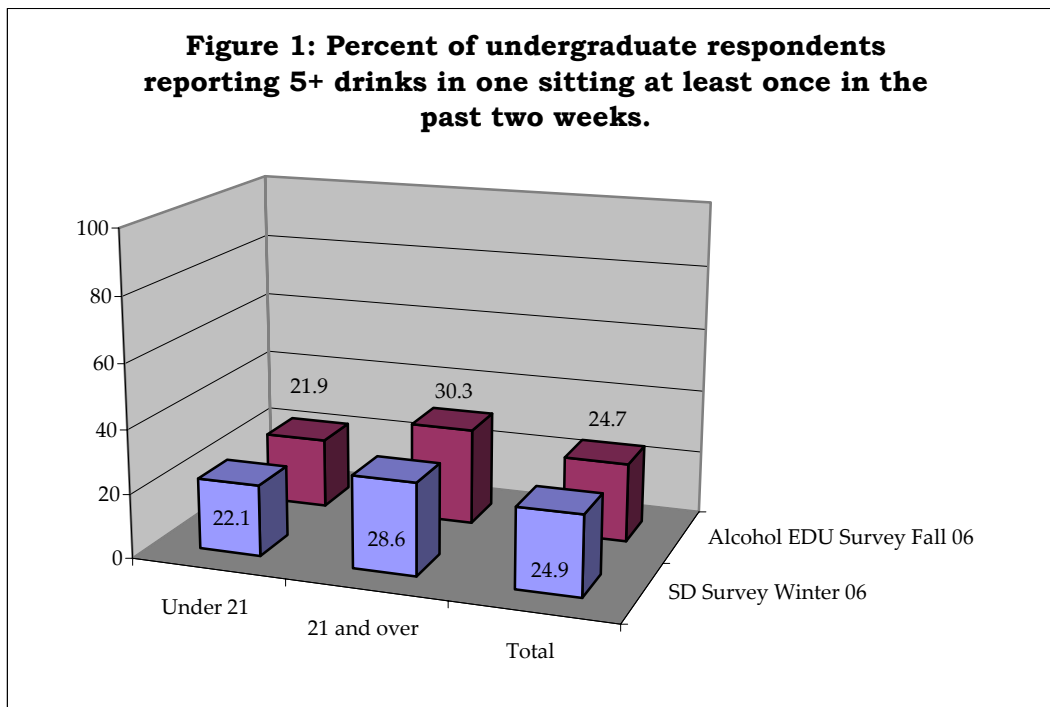
² The terms “heavy drinking” or “heavy episodic drinking” will be used interchangeably throughout to refer to students who report consuming five or more drinks in one sitting at least once in the past two weeks.

institutions included in the CORE in recent years (the number dropped from 179 institutions in 1999 to 53 in 2005, which could affect representativeness). Looking at another source of national data for 2006, the Monitoring the Future study (which includes a nationally representative weighted sample; weighted N=1280) the rate for heavy drinking was 40% in the college population.

Table 2: Undergraduate Alcohol Use at UCLA Compared to National Average

Sample	Year of Study	Sample Size	Any Use in the Past Year	5+ Past 2 Weeks
UCLA (Ashe Survey)	1999	(N=635)	76.0%	21.4%
National (Core Survey)	1999	(N=65,033)	85.1%	46.8%
UCLA (Ashe Survey)	2002	(N=3613)	71.7%	21.9%
National (Core Survey)	2002	(N=54,367)	85.2%	47.7%
UCLA (SD Survey)	2006	(N=1581)	65.2%	24.9%
National (Core Survey)	2005	(N=33,379)	84.5%	30.0%

As the data in Table 2 reveal, less than a quarter of the UCLA undergraduate student population participates in heavy drinking. If we look more closely at the drinking patterns of students based on age, we find that students ages 21 and under are less likely to participate in heavy drinking than their older peers (see Figure 1).



In thinking about how to reduce harm related to drinking, one factor that has been shown to influence drinking behavior is students' perceptions of how much their peers are drinking. If students perceive the "social norm" to be a higher rate of consumption, they are more likely to

consume themselves. As the data in Table 3 demonstrate, UCLA undergraduate students consistently overestimate the drinking of their peers. For example, in 2006 among the students who drink alcohol, the *actual* mean number of drinks consumed on an average drinking occasion was 3.7, yet the *perceived* norm for number of drinks consumed was 5.2. The data suggest that most students have the perception that their peers' drinking behaviors mirror the patterns of the subgroup of heavy episodic drinkers rather than the population at large.

Table 3: Mean Scores of Undergraduate Students' Reports of Their Own and Others' Consumption Patterns

			Number of Drinks UCLA Students Actually Have When they Party	Number of Drinks Students <i>Think</i> Most UCLA Students Usually Have When they Party
Moderate Drinkers	1999	(N=343)	2.5	4.8
	2002	(N=1798)	2.3	4.1
	2006	(N = 628)	2.7	4.9
Heavy Episodic Drinkers	1999	(N=136)	5.0	5.0
	2002	(N=793)	4.5	4.8
	2006	(N = 389)	5.3	5.7
Total	1999	(N=479)	3.2	4.9
	2002	(N=2591)	3.0	4.3
	2006	(N = 1017)	3.7	5.2

Consequences of Drinking

A harm reduction approach focuses primarily on reducing the possibility of harm as a result of drinking, thus it is important to get a clear understanding of the prevalence of alcohol related consequences among the UCLA student population. As demonstrated in Table 4, the number of students reporting negative consequences is low. None of the negative consequences was reported by more than 20% of survey respondents, and most were well below ten percent. As with the statistics on rates of use, the rates of consequences have remained relatively stable over many years, with some slight decreases in the 2006 survey³. Two areas in which the rates of consequences suggest a possible need for intervention are those of riding with a driver under the influence and blacking out as a result of drinking.

Looking at a subset of consequences for which there are comparisons in the national data available from CORE, UCLA students generally report lower rates of negative consequences (see Table 5). In particular, rates of academic consequences and blacking out are much lower in

³ These decreases in rates of consequences could be due to the earlier administration of the survey in 2006.

the UCLA population which is likely a direct result of UCLA students' lower rates of heavy episodic drinking.

Table 4: Percent of Undergraduate Students Reporting Various Consequences of Drinking Last Year

	Ashe Survey (1999)	Ashe Survey (2002)	SD Survey (2006)
Social			
Felt more like part of a group	48.0%	47.8%	43.7%
Were more fun to be with	52.0%	52.1%	43.6%
Enjoyed a social gathering more	60.0%	64.9%	56.6%
Bonded with your friends	57.0%	63.4%	54.1%
Academic			
Went to class with a hangover	19.0%	20.0%	19.3%
Did poorly on an assignment or exam	11.0%	12.5%	9.0%
Earned a lower grade in a class	9.0%	10.6%	8.0%
Drinking and Driving			
Drove when you were under the influence	18.0%	15.1%	8.4%
Rode with a driver who was under the influ	25.0%	24.0%	18.0%
Sexual and Health			
Had sex or sexual behavior you later regretted	12.0%	12.6%	9.7%
Did not use a condom or other protection	6.0%	6.2%	4.0%
Pressured someone into sex or sexual behavior	2.0%	2.9%	3.0%
Were pressured into sex or sexual behavior	6.0%	6.4%	7.2%
Required medical treatment	2.3%	3.7%	1.9%
Blacked out (had memory loss)	18.0%	14.6%	18.2%
Violence, Injuries, and Legal			
Damaged property	8.0%	4.8%	4.5%
Got hurt or injured	11.0%	10.4%	10.7%
Were cited or arrested for an alcohol violation	2.2%	2.0%	2.1%
Got into a physical fight	4.0%	3.2%	3.8%
Hurt or injured someone	3.0%	2.7%	2.8%
Were sexually assaulted or raped	0.6%	2.2%	

Table 5: Comparison of Rates of Consequences of Drinking Between UCLA and National Data

In the past year...	UCLA (SD Survey 06)	National (Core 05)
Did poorly on an assignment or exam	9.0%	21.8%
Missed a class	15.1%	30.7%
Pressured someone into sex or sexual behavior	3.0%	3.0%
Were pressured into sex or sexual behavior	7.2%	10.3%
Blacked out (had memory loss)	18.2%	34.3%
Got hurt or injured	10.7%	15.5%

Table 6 shows that heavy episodic drinkers were much more likely to report harm as a result of their drinking. Heavy episodic drinkers reported negative consequences at a rate of at least twice as much as moderate drinkers/abstainers. The heavy episodic drinkers also report positive consequences at a much higher rate, which suggests that heavy episodic drinkers may feel that they need to drink in order to be accepted or to have a good time, and thus are more likely to be influenced to drink by environmental or social variables.

The 2006 Alcohol Edu Evaluation survey asked an expanded set of consequence questions, for the first time considering the consequences of others' drinking. Generally these data show low rates for injury and health related consequences, but higher occurrences in quality of life aspects (see Table 7). Interestingly, the students who participate in heavy episodic drinking are also more likely to experience negative consequences from others' drinking than those who drink moderately or abstain from drinking. For example, compared to abstainers and moderate drinkers, UCLA undergraduate students who participate in heavy episodic drinking are almost twice as likely to have their property damaged or to have to "baby-sit" or take care of another student who drank too much. These data suggest that heavy episodic drinkers may be more likely to surround themselves with other heavy drinking students, creating sub-cultures in which heavy drinking is reinforced.

Conclusion

Overall, the rates of harm due to drinking are generally low among UCLA undergraduates. While there are some differences in the rates of harm for students who choose to drink more heavily, most are protecting themselves from harm by choosing to abstain or drink moderately. Harm reduction strategies should target the multiple determinants of harm, such as motivations for use, environmental and social influences, and perceived norms regarding use.

Table 6: Comparison of Percent of Students Reporting Consequences by Drinking Level (SD Survey 2006)

	Abstainers and Moderate Drinkers	Heavy Episodic Drinkers
Social		
Felt more like part of a group	32.1%	78.8%
Were more fun to be with	31.5%	80.2%
Enjoyed a social gathering more	43.4%	96.4%
Bonded with your friends	41.6%	91.8%
Academic		
Went to class with a hangover	7.8%	54.1%
Did poorly on an assignment or exam	4.6%	22.4%
Earned a lower grade in a class	4.0%	19.8%
Missed a class	5.5%	44.1%
Drinking and Driving		
Drove when you were under the influence	4.1%	21.4%
Rode with a driver who was under the influence	11.0%	39.0%
Sexual and Health		
Had sex or sexual behavior you later regretted	5.1%	23.4%
Did not use a condom or other protection	1.7%	10.8%
Pressured someone into sex or sexual behavior	1.5%	7.7%
Were pressured into sex or sexual behavior	4.5%	15.2%
Required medical treatment	0.9%	4.9%
Blacked out (had memory loss)	7.9%	48.8%
Violence, Injuries, and Legal		
Damaged property	1.7%	12.9%
Got hurt or injured	4.2%	30.3%
Were cited or arrested for an alcohol violation	1.3%	4.4%
Got into a physical fight	1.5%	10.6%
Hurt or injured someone	1.1%	8.0%

Table 7: Percent of Undergraduate Students Reporting Various Consequences From Others' Drinking (Alcohol EDU Survey Fall 06)

	Abstainers and Moderate Drinkers (N = 974)	Heavy Episodic Drinkers (N = 326)	Total (N = 1300)
Violence and Injury			
You got Hurt or Injured	3.3	10.7	5.0
You Had a Serious Argument or Quarrel	5.3	16.3	8.0
You Were Insulted or Humiliated	11.2	17.4	12.7
You Had Your Property Damaged	4.6	8.7	5.6
You Rode with a Driver who was Under the Influence	9.0	23.7	12.6
Sexual and Health			
You Were Pressured into Unwanted Sex or Sexual Behavior	2.0	8.4	3.6
You Required Medical Treatment	0.6	1.9	0.9
You Experienced an Unwanted Sexual Advance	8.8	19.8	11.6
Quality of Life			
You had to "Baby-Sit" or Take Care of Another Student Who Drank Too Much	28.4	52.0	34.2
You Found Vomit in the Halls or Bathroom of Your Residence	14.7	21.8	16.5
You Had Your Sleep or Study Interrupted	33.9	39.4	35.3