

Policy Watch

This regular feature examines education, community, health, lifestyle, and related fields from policy perspectives. It is intended to acquaint alumni and friends with topics that may have implications for them in their professional lives. The topical areas will vary from issue to issue.

The following commentary from David Anderson, associate professor in the School of Recreation, Health, and Tourism and director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Health, examines drug and alcohol abuse among college students.

Making a Difference in Drug and Alcohol Use

By David Anderson

Associate Professor, School of Recreation, Health, and Tourism, and Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Health

Drug and alcohol abuse is a major concern of schools, colleges, communities, families, and individuals. For educational settings, whether high school, middle school, elementary school, or college, substance abuse prevention is a significant area of concern because it affects academic performance, student behavior, property damage, and more.

The specific concern is that, although many efforts are well-intended, they become misguided. That is, while school personnel, policymakers, parents, and others seek lowered substance abuse, little has actually been accomplished. This column seeks to redirect our thinking and efforts, and consequently, our impact. The context is with the school setting, regardless of grade level. However, the messages and themes extend beyond the school or college and include the family, community, worksite, local initiatives, and state and national settings.

While the details change modestly from year to year, the overall pattern is that drug and alcohol use among our nation's young people has changed very little over time. Despite a wide range of policies, procedures, awareness programs, and other initiatives, the data have remained fairly constant. This suggests that something is amiss with cur-

rent strategies, and new efforts need to be considered.

Our current substance abuse efforts appear to be based on numerous faulty assumptions. We assume that drug and alcohol abuse can be addressed with single approaches and one-time events. In fact, comprehensive and broad-based strategies are critical to address drug and alcohol abuse. What is important is to have a wide range of approaches. While individual events are important components, these are best served when done within the context of an overall plan. We must think broadly, plan for the long term, and include approaches that clearly fit within our overall plan.

We assume that it's wise to have one strategy for youth and all settings; we are better served when we adopt strategies typically found in for-profit marketing efforts, including messages and approaches that range from universal (for everyone) to selective (for sub-groups based on factors

such as demographics or interests) to indicated (for those demonstrating behavioral patterns of concern). We are well served with thoughtful strategies in each of these three arenas.

We assume that the "science-based approaches" required by funding agencies will help reduce substance abuse. In reality, while the intent of science-based approaches (i.e., focusing our limited funding to efforts beyond what "feels good") may have merit, the unintended consequence is often that innovative, hypothesis-driven, and research-based strategies can be eliminated from funding consideration because no pre-existing evidence exists that it will work. We would be well served to ensure that our strategies are grounded in sound thinking and not limited to what worked in some other setting or time.

We assume that "lack of proof of effect" is similar to "proof of lack of effect."



College of Education
and Human Development

In fact, lack of proof of effect is simply that—scientific approaches and rigorous analyses have not been conducted to document a strategy’s effectiveness. In a 2001 college-based report by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Task Force on College Drinking, the “3-in-1 Framework” incorporates a category tier that is labeled “ineffective” (rather than inconclusive). It is important to gather evidence of effectiveness and to be careful not to discard strategies for which data may not yet have been collected or for which results remain inconclusive.

We assume that substance abuse can be eradicated and that the “War on Drugs” can be won. In fact, we may be better served by changing the paradigm to one where we think of substance abuse as a series of issues that can be managed better. It would be appropriate to identify clearly what specific outcomes we would like to achieve—and for whom—so we can clearly monitor progress in a step-wise manner.

We assume that drug and alcohol issues can be best addressed by dealing directly with these issues. However, while some direct approaches are helpful, it’s vitally important to incorporate indirect approaches, such as a coach incorporating healthy living messages when working with student-athletes. In addition to having strategies that address substance abuse, it’s critical to prepare youth with coping skills, attractive alcohol- and drug-free events, and a range of skill-building activities.

We assume that policies and procedures, when enforced, will be sufficient for addressing drug and alcohol abuse. In fact, policies and procedures are only one part of a comprehensive approach. A recent report on underage drinking addressed strategies focused primarily on policy approaches. While policies and enforcement efforts are critical for inclusion in a comprehensive program,

it is vital that these approaches are complemented by a range of other strategies, including (but not limited to) proactive initiatives, awareness efforts, and support services.

We assume that by reducing the supply of and access to drugs and alcohol, youth won’t be using drugs or alcohol. But perhaps we should look at the field of economics—which stresses the important balance of supply and demand—as a model. Our current approaches are woefully lacking on the demand side. That is, we fail to address the reasons young people use and/or abuse drugs and/or alcohol. If we only address symptoms, the causes remain. Our strategies must address the root causes that underlie drug and alcohol use and abuse.

Reflecting upon this range of assumptions, it is clear that we must undertake a wide range of re-thinking if we are to have a chance of addressing drug and alcohol abuse among our nation’s youth and young adults. Based on decades of experience striving to address these issues, this column provides a brief overview of many of the faulty assumptions and foundations upon which many of our local, state, and national efforts are based. Do the suggestions within each assumption guarantee results? Absolutely not. Instead,

they provide a foundation for some new approaches that might have a better chance of making a difference. The collective wisdom of this author—and many colleagues throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation who address substance abuse—is that a comprehensive approach addressing the concerns of diverse audiences is critical to any potential effectiveness.

The foundations for an effective strategy require many changes, as identified above. Further, funding and resources must be sufficient to have a chance of making a difference. Addressing substance abuse is a complex undertaking, requiring planning, organization, orchestration, resources, persistence, monitoring, and review. And with this review, the results will hold promise in improving upon those of the past several decades. ♦

For a detailed description of the environmental strategy for substance abuse issues, see the web site of the U.S. Department of Education’s Higher Education Center on Alcohol, Other Drug, and Violence Prevention: www.edc.org/hec. For descriptions of the comprehensive prevention approach, see the *Sourcebook 2001*, prepared as part of the Promising Practices: Campus Alcohol Strategies project: www.promprac.gmu.edu.

This commentary originally appeared in the spring 2006 issue of the College of Education and Human Development Magazine.

www.gmu.edu

