

Connecticut Post

Article created: 01/19/2006 04:33:45 AM

State colleges working to curb alcohol abuse

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WEST HARTFORD — Much as fifth-graders do when they complete a DARE program in school, college presidents from across the state will gather at the University of Hartford Friday to sign a pledge.

The gesture — complete with a proclamation signed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell and followed up by a panel discussion — will advance a statewide initiative to reduce high-risk alcohol use on their campuses.

Many campuses have been at the task for years, some with mixed results.

The latest data reported to the federal government shows little abatement of liquor law violations at colleges.

Fairfield University, for instance, reported 752 disciplinary actions or referrals involving alcohol in 2004, up from 651 in 2003. Sacred Heart University reported 455 liquor violations in 2004, compared to 474 in 2003. Liquor violations at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, meanwhile, nearly doubled, from 185 in 2003 to 346 in 2004.

Still, local supporters of the Statewide Healthy Campus Initiative say this new venture will help them get new ideas, pool statistical data and access new funding sources.

"By having a campus consortium, evidence-based strategies that are working can be shared and expanded," said Jeanne Di Muzio, director of wellness and prevention at Fairfield University, an initiative member.

Fairfield numbers may be up, Di Muzio added, because of a new university policy allowing students to report friends who pass out from too much alcohol to the health center — rather than let them sleep it off — without getting the friend in trouble.

The state initiative is part of a federal grant administered by the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Last spring, the group came up with an action plan to reduce alcohol and other drug use.

Aliza Makuch, campus coordinator for the Governor's Prevention Partnership, the group's facilitator, said colleges need to know some strategies are more effective than others.

"A surprising number of campuses still do one-time speakers and think that's a prevention strategy, when it has no long-term effect on student drinking behavior," she said.

Di Muzio said attending meetings introduced her to an online alcohol education program she hadn't heard of before. "Others have it and found great success with it," she said.

She has added that to an arsenal that includes support groups, in-class learning and programs for new students. "Now we are working on a social-norms campaign," said Di Muzio.

It's a program, Sacred Heart University in Fairfield — another participant in the initiative — already uses.

Janice Kessler, Sacred Heart's coordinator of alcohol and other drug services, said social "norming" helps correct the misperceptions students have that most everyone their age drinks to excess. In reality, 75 percent of college students are non-drinkers or drink only moderately.

"If you perceive that your peers go out four nights a week, you will likely go out four nights a week. When students understand that most students actually frown upon their peers who drink excessively, hopefully, they will & not feel the pressure to drink excessively," Kessler said.

In addition to reducing binge drinking, the strategy can help curb aggressive behavior and keep students from dropping out of college.

Aside from sharing ideas, Kessler said Friday's program will get many college presidents on board. "We can only go so far without administration backing us up," she said.

Even colleges with no campuses are taking part.

"We don't have dormitories. That doesn't mean students don't get together to socialize and study," said John Fisher, president of St. Vincent's College in Bridgeport.

Fisher said information he gathers from the group will be shared with the student body and mentioned in classes.

Di Muzio, from Fairfield, hopes pooling ideas will encourage consistent practices among college campuses. She wants students to see the same rules in place whichever campus they are on.

"Across the country, 1,700 kids lose their life annually because of alcohol. Every single thing that we can do as college institutions to be part of a prevention model rather than reaction model, is a good thing," Di Muzio said.

Judd Everhart, a Rell spokesman, said the governor agrees. "As a parent, Gov. Rell is well aware of the risks, temptations and peer pressure on campus, especially for college freshmen. One of the goals of this initiative is a better support network for these students," he said.