

WestConn takes lead in anti-drug message

[By Eileen FitzGerald Staff Writer](#)

Article Last Updated: 03/25/2008 03:54:29 AM EDT

Half of full-time college students binge drink, abuse prescription medications, and/or use illegal drugs, and nearly a quarter of them meet the criteria for substance abuse addiction or dependence, according to a 2007 study.

College presidents across Connecticut who belong to the Connecticut Statewide Healthy Campus Initiative were urged to continue their efforts to fight this trend Monday by Joseph A. Califano, president and chairman of the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

During a gathering at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Califano reminded the leaders of 20 Connecticut colleges and universities of the grim statistics he first reported in 2007 in "Wasting the Best and the Brightest: Substance Abuse at America's Colleges and Universities."

Califano also served as President Jimmy Carter's secretary of health, education, and welfare.

Western Connecticut State University won a leadership award for its work in substance-abuse prevention work at the community level.

"The whole idea is that none of us can solve this problem in isolation. We have to share information and strategize and, hopefully, we can reduce the problem and maybe one day eliminate it," Walter Bernstein, vice president of WestConn, said Monday night.

"Our community outreach really includes the mayor's office, the Danbury Police Department, the public schools, agencies like Danbury Youth Services, and the local bars and restaurants."

Bernstein, who spoke at the event, said WestConn surveys of students show that fewer students binge drink than even three years ago. The university has increased its resources for substance abuse help, made a bigger effort to promote the help that's available, and warned students of the dangers of abuse with brochures and activities.

"There's a new awareness on campus about the danger of drug abuse and that there are consequences," Bernstein said.

Peter Rockholz, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, which is leading the campus efforts, said the biggest concern is binge drinking combined with separate, widespread prescription misuse.

"Seventeen-hundred students die each year on college campuses in the United States," he said.

Marijuana used to be the gateway drug, but now the first drugs are opiates that kids get from their parent's medicine cabinets, he said. "Overall the picture is not good."

A major shift in the last five years is that people misusing heroin and prescription opiates surpassed the number misusing alcohol in admissions to public-funded treatment facilities for the first time.

Still, he's optimistic that just as society made positive changes in HIV and smoking, the alcohol and drug abuse statistics can be turned around with a sustained effort.

"It requires families to step up and take care of their kids, to instill a clear message of disapproval of alcohol and drug abuse," he said.

WestConn president James Schmotter was proud of the recognition for the work led by Bernstein and Sharon Guck, the campus coordinator of alcohol and drug abuse programs.

Schmotter said Califano called the rampant binge drinking and prescription drug abuse a health crisis and security crisis just as great as shootings on college campuses by mentally ill students.

"We need all hands on deck," Schmotter said. "By the time some of our students get to the campus, they are already abusing. It's a tough nut to crack, but I think we're making real progress."

Contact Eileen FitzGerald

at eileenf@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3333.

Study reminds public of college drug abuse

Statistics on drug and alcohol abuse:

49 percent (3.8 million) of full-time college students binge drink and/or abuse prescription and illegal drugs.

1.8 million full-time college students (22.9 percent) meet the medical criteria for substance abuse and dependence, two and one half times the 8.5 percent of the general population who meet these same criteria.

Between 1993 and 2001 the proportion of students who binge drink frequently is up 16 percent, who drink on 10 or more occasions in a month is up 25 percent, who get drunk at least three times a month is up 26 percent, and who drink to get drunk is up 21 percent.

Between 1993 and 2005 the proportion of students abusing prescription drugs increased:

343 percent for opioids like Percocet, Vicodin and OxyContin;

93 percent for abuse of stimulants like Ritalin and Adderall;

450 percent for tranquilizers like Xanax and Valium;

225 percent for sedatives like Nembutal and Seconal.

Between 1993 and 2005, the proportion of students who:

Use marijuana daily more than doubled, to 310,000.

Use cocaine, heroin, and other illegal drugs (except marijuana), is up 52 percent, to 636,000.

Consequences:

1, 717 deaths from unintentional alcohol-related injuries in 2001, up six percent from 1998.

A 38 percent increase from 1993 to 2001 in the proportion of students injured as a result of their own drinking.

A 21 percent increase from 2001 to 2005 in the average number of alcohol-related arrests per campus. In 2005, alcohol-related arrests constituted 83 percent of campus arrests.

97,000 students were victims of alcohol-related rape or sexual assaults in 2001.

696,000 students were assaulted by a student who had been binge drinking in 2001.

Fraternity and sorority members are likelier than non-members to drink (88 vs. 67 percent), binge drink (64 vs. 37 percent), drink and drive (33 vs. 21 percent), use marijuana (21 vs. 16 percent) or cocaine (3 vs. 1.5 percent), smoke (26 vs. 21 percent).

Source: "Wasting the Best and the Brightest: Substance Abuse at America's Colleges and Universities," a 2007 report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.