Perceptions of Alcohol on University Campuses

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Abstract

Statistically, higher incidences of substance use have been seen on University campuses rather than the general population. (Gallucci et al., 2014, Kilpatrick, 2007). Prevention programs have been established on campuses across the United States to reach student populations and enable them with knowledge to make informed decisions regarding substance use. A successful method of intervention that has been used is peer services (Parkin & McKeganey, 2000). The principles behind peer services align with the social work core values. At the center of peer education is students can learn more from peers than the teacher/student dynamic (Topping, 2005). This mixed methods study informs the development of a peer education program related to alcohol use. The student researchers propose a sample size of 100 participants. These participants include individuals on University campuses ages 18 or older and are currently enrolled in classes. Researchers use the CHOICES pre-test to assess the participant’s knowledge about alcohol and the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT) to observe the participant’s use of alcohol. Demographic questions along with six pre-developed qualitative questions are also utilized to capture additional knowledge about alcohol use. The researchers tested four hypotheses and were able to decide whether they were going to accept or reject the hypothesis. After analyzing the data, the researchers were able to conclude that consumption of alcohol is greater in participants that classified themselves as seniors. The majority of participants claimed that they had not experienced injuries occurring during alcohol consumption. The researchers were able to see that 45% out of the 1100 answered questions by all participants were answered correctly, while 55% of the questions were answered incorrectly. Data analysis showed that 52% of the participants claim they receive knowledge concerning alcohol use from their peers, and 48% received their knowledge from other sources, such as their
parents or social media. This research aids in helping current and future Social Workers develop a new perspective on substance abuse on university campuses. The importance of prevention programming that includes, empowers, and supports students is expected to increase positive outcomes. The intentions of this research are to develop a better understanding on the topic of substance use on University campuses.

**Introduction**

Substance abuse and mental illness have existed throughout history. People have experienced intoxication for over 9000 years (Crocq, 2007). Additionally, efforts to address mental illness have been documented as far back as 7000 years ago (Porter, 2002). Substance abuse and mental illness are linked together, because most individuals affected by substance abuse also struggle with at least one other psychiatric disorder (Kessler et al., 1997). Also, individuals diagnosed with a severe mental illness are three times more likely than the general population to have a substance abuse disorder (Sharma & Bennett, 2015).

Substance abuse is a pivotal area of student wellness. Awareness and prevention programs have been established on campuses across the United States in order to effectively reach student populations, and equip them with data needed to make informed decisions regarding alcohol use and personal safety. College students frequently face substance use decisions. Gallucci et al. (2014) states, “for all substances, the percentage of students reporting ever use and current use of each substance was high among non-resident members compared to non-members and then further increased for resident members” (p. 240). College students are using more substances than the general population, and on-campus residents have particularly high rates of substance use. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching observed that, “by 1989, a survey of college and university presidents found that 67% rated
alcohol misuse to be a “moderate” or “major” problem on their campus” (as cited in DeJong & Langford, 2002, p. 140). Alcohol abuse is a statistically grave problem on college campuses.

The student researchers seek to assess the severity of alcohol use from all student classifications. After gathering the data from the surveys, the student researchers compile and analyze the data collected.

**Problem Statement & Objectives**

The problem concerning substance abuse among college students is the lack of knowledge concerning alcohol use on university campuses. The researchers created a problem statement to reflect this: “The lack of substance use knowledge among college students leads to substance abuse.” From this problem statement, the researchers developed the research question: “What are the perceptions of college students about alcohol on university campuses?” The researchers surveyed students on a college campus to assess the participants’ perceptions of alcohol use.

To ensure better understanding, the following objectives were created by the researchers. The objectives of the study are:

**Objective 1 (O1):** Analyze which age group consumes the most alcohol on college campuses.

O₂: Analyze how knowledgeable college students are about substance abuse and its effects.

O₃: Analyze where college students receive their knowledge about alcohol.

O₄: Research how often college students underperform their tasks due to alcohol use.

O₅: Analyze how substance use effects college students.
Through these five objectives, the researchers were able to define the four hypotheses they tested with the data collected from the 100 surveys.

**Hypotheses**

The student researchers developed multiple hypotheses related to knowledge that individuals learn from each other via imitation, observation and modeling.

- **H1**: Majority of freshmen participants will use substances, like alcohol, than any other classification.
- **H2**: Majority of participants that report high alcohol consumption predict substance abuse and injuries occur more frequently with high alcohol consumption.
- **H3**: Majority of the participants surveyed will have limited knowledge concerning alcohol consumption.
- **H4**: Majority of participants are more likely to receive knowledge concerning alcohol use from their peers.

Through research and participation of 100 college students, the student researchers examine the correlation of substance use and abuse on University campuses.

**Literature Review**

Substance abuse is a pivotal area for student’s wellness. Prevention programs have been established on campuses across the United States in order to effectively reach student populations and equip them with data needed to make informed decision regarding substance use. The purpose of the research is to acquire the perceptions of college students about alcohol on university campuses. The following literature reviews will support the objectives that the student group is attempting to pursue.
According to the World Health Organization (2015), “Substance abuse refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs” (para 1). The quotation above defines the term of substance abuse so that there is an understanding of what is being discussed. According to DeJong & Lanford, (2002), “by 1989, a survey of college and university presidents found that 67% rated alcohol misuse to be a “moderate” or “major” problem on their campus” (p.140). The study above helps acquire a perspective of a similar research that was conducted, compared to the research the student group is currently conducting. The study shows the level of the issue that is presented when it comes to substance abuse.

Students who are under the age of 21 consume more alcohol on a weekly basis than student who are 21 or older (Esteban & Schafer, 2005, p.23). The researchers are attempting to analyze the age group that consumes the most alcohol. The study above provides the researchers a perspective on which age group consumes the most alcohol. The limitation of the study above compared to the study that researchers are performing is the length of time and the number of participants that were part of the study above compared to the study that the researchers are performing. The following study examines how college students react or act when they are under the influence of a substance.

According to Miller, Hemenway & Wechsler. (2002), “In addition, students specially when it is associated with illegal behaviors, such as driving under the influence, destroying property, engaging in physical altercations, and possessing weapons” (as cited in Burck et al., 2008, p. 49). In the study above it is stated the different types of problems that can arise from substance abuse. The researchers are attempting to identify how substance abuse affects college students. The study above shows the different ways substance abuse affects college students when under the influence. The limitation of the study above in comparison to the study the
researchers are performing is that the study above is more detailed compared to the study by the researchers.

There is a definite correlation between substance abuse and college students on campus stemming from social media and internet. There are many studies which demonstrate the effects of substance abuse among users, especially college students.

One study, conducted by Lewis & Mobley (2010), desired to discover and examine risk factors in which may potentially cause a college student to show signs of substance abuse and dependence problems. The researchers also decided to “explore mechanisms that place students at risk for serious substance related issues” (p. 300). The results gathered by the researchers indicated substance abuse, especially alcohol, is based off a social norm theory created by college students in order to “escape social isolation”. A study from Berkowitz (2004), used the social norm theory to demonstrate how there is a high percentage of alcohol consumption among college students. Berkowitz (2004) states:

college students tend to perceive their peers as drinking more alcohol (or using more substances) than is actually the case. These misperceptions tend to create heightened anxiety that propels students to match their behavior to the false norm (in this case drinking or substance use) (As cited in Lewis & Mobley, 2010).

This article relates back to the researchers' choice to examine the Social Learning Theory as a possible theory as to what may cause a college student to engage in excessive alcohol use.

Segrist and Pettibone (2009) conducted research among college students to understand and discover the perceptions of binge and problematic drinking. The researchers also wanted to have a study that was relevant and up to date on, “investigating college students’ perceptions of
problem drinking” (Segrist & Pettibone, p. 37). The study conducted relates to how substance abuse, especially alcohol, is an issue, since many college students binge drink throughout their college career. Although colleges continually attempt to reduce problem drinking on campus, binge drinking rates have remained fairly constant (Crawford & Novak, 2007). One important limitation from the study was the college student’s perceptions on heavy drinking varies on the student’s age, so the data was not 100% accurate.

McBride, Barrett, Moore, & Schonfeld (2014) led a research that explored the outcomes between positive alcohol expectation, demographics, academic status, and expressly binge drinking among underage college students. Also, the researchers sought out to “…examine factors associated with underage binge drinking among college students with a particular focus on PAEs (Positive Alcohol Expectancies)” (McBride et al., p. 371). The outcome from the research gathered by the researchers showed PAEs and the correlation of alcohol use, especially among college students. The major factors related to binge drinking among college students shows a relationship among the vulnerable group of underage college students. This vulnerable group are males who are members of Greek organizations or who attend Greek events (McBride et al., 2014, p. 376). The main limitation observed by the researchers was the fact they relied too heavily on Core survey, such as the AEQ (Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire), which may have affected the results from their data (McBride et al., 2014, p. 377).

One study created by Eren and Keeton (2015) targeted the two-year colleges on the rate of alcohol and substance abuse. Eren and Keeton wanted to review existing literature which consisted of alcohol and substance abuse that dealt with two-year colleges. The researchers’ objective was to observe the deficiencies and differences of two and four-year college campuses, which are more likely to affect the rate of consumption as represented by previous research (Eren
In addition to reviewing previous articles, Eren & Keeton (2015) also observed:

Researchers…examine some demographic and cultural differences in the rates of alcohol and substance use. Looking at age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and natural-born versus international student status, researchers have attempted to assess whether there are significant differences in both rates of consumption and associative behaviors that can be correlated with the demographic variables and the mechanisms behind these differences (p. 1126).

The results from the study explained that “qualitative research is highly needed to provide context regarding students’ lived experiences” (Eren & Keeton, p. 1134). The researchers want future studies of substance abuse on college campuses not to ignore the differences and disparities between two and four-year college students. By following Eren & Keeton’s idea, studies explored by new researchers will force educators and practitioners to implement the best quality research-based programs to meet the demands of the student demographic (Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1134).

The limitations from the study were broken up by race/ethnicity, economic status, age, gender, and religion. Eren & Keeton (2015) mentioned in their study that two-year colleges mostly enrolled “18-24 years old...and is an entry point for minority students' postsecondary education” (Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1132).

Social scientists must account for the current cultural insensitivity and the lack of understanding demonstrated by researchers and begin advocating the implementation of substance abuse programs that acknowledge students’ differential access to health care and treatment programs (Eren & Keeton, p. 1132).
The economic status is a limitation since 84% of community college students work; one out of five community college students live in poverty; and unlike four-year college students, the majority of two-year students work part-time, and about 40% are considered full-time. From the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the results exhibited that part-time students are about 9% more likely to participate in binge drinking behavior than full-time students. However, stress from employment or poverty will potentially cause part-time students to engage in drinking and other substance abuse (Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1132).

The limitation on age is the most noticeable differences among two and four-year college students. The Association of Community Colleges (2014) states that about 67% of students attending a four-year college are under 25 years and the average age of college students attending a two-year college is 28 years old (as cited in Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1133). According to Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC), underage drinkers consume more alcohol per occasion than drinkers age 21 or older. Also, the adults between ages 18 and 25 years old are most likely to consume illegal drugs. Although, the consumption of alcohol drops immensely after the age of 25, there is a possible chance that those who are involved in heavy drinking may be at a greater risk for long-term addiction and the negative consequences (as cited in Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1132-1133).

Gender is a limitation in the study, but also marital status and parenthood, because all three of those factors play a role on an individual’s consumption of alcohol or substance abuse. Women have been reported in previous studies done by Grucza, Norberg, and Bierut (2009), as well as Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, and D’Arcy (2005) that they binge drink just as much as men. The reason women binge drink is because they want to appeal to the opposite sex, even though drinking heavily can cause women to more vulnerable to sexual assault. In regards to
marital status and parenthood, studies conducted by Jacobs & King, (2002), Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005), and Yess (1981) revealed that marriage and parenthood may have a positive impact on education results, due to the fact of maturity and responsibilities (as cited in Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1133).

Religion is the only limitation identified as not being a factor in heavy drinking and substance use. In a study researched by Koyama and Beli (2011), they explained that religion does affect the extent in which an international student engage in alcohol consumption compare to native born U.S. students. Koyama and Beli (2011) cited “many Asian and other international students come from social, cultural, and religious backgrounds that do not consider drinking as an acceptable custom” (p. 229). Eren & Keeton (2015) indicated the failures of researchers to include religion as a possible factor for binge drinking and needs to be in future studies (as cited in Eren & Keeton, 2015, p. 1133-1134).

**Learning Theories**

Social Learning Theory agrees with the behaviorist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning and was created in 1977 by Albert Bandura (Mcleod, 2011). Two main ideas stem from this theory- mediating processes occur between stimuli and responses and behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. Observational learning comes from observation of the various ways individuals behave around them. This form of learning was tested by Bandura in 1961 during the famous Bobo doll experiment. Many aspects in society affect an individual’s behavior, including their peer groups, parents and even individuals they see as iconic, such as movie stars. The individuals studied were observed to have behaviors that mimic those who surround them. Sexual orientation and age also have a role in this learning style as well.
Social Learning Theory informs the research by allowing the researchers to observe participants' understanding and personal choices concerning alcohol abuse on campus. Many students begin the transition to college under the stipulation that drinking to the point of intoxication is the norm, and the college environment can exacerbate this problem. With more students holding this belief, students surrounded by these individuals also are lead to believe the same idea which directly correlates to the social learning theory.

Ecological Systems, also known as the Human Ecology Theory, states that “human development is influenced by the different types of environmental systems” (Sincero). This theory was created by Urie Bronfenbrenner, in 1979, and helps us understand why individuals behave differently when they are surrounded by their family versus their peers in school or at the work place. Each environment an individual surrounds themselves in depicts their behavior and the decisions they make throughout their lifetime. One difference that is found in this theory, as opposed to others, is the fact that this theory can have an impact on the micro system as well as the mezzo and macro system. For example, this theory relates to how an individual reacts when impacted by different systems in society. A college student generally consumes less alcohol while surrounded by family members, as opposed to attending a college party with peers their age. The ecosystem and chronosystem are involved as well.

The Ecological Systems Theory plays a role in researching alcohol abuse on college campuses by conducting research that depicts the difference in alcohol consumption when students are surrounded by their peers versus their parents and close relatives. Research shows that alcohol consumption increases drastically when college students are on campus or at parties with their peers. While some parents may allow their sons and daughters to drink alcohol in their
presence, drinking to the point of intoxication is not as common as when they are with individuals their age or those enrolled in college courses.

Overall, both the Social Learning Theory as well as the Ecological Systems Theory play a role into the research findings when concerning with alcohol abuse on college campuses. College students are influenced by the individuals they surround themselves with and researchers hypothesize a direct correlation between peer influence and alcohol abuse.

**Methods & Research Design**

Researchers used a mixed methods design which contained both qualitative and quantitative research questions regarding the perceptions of alcohol on university campuses. The survey is completely anonymous, with no identifying information asked to be provided. The researchers used convenience sampling as their research method. Some of the researchers surveyed specific organizations, while the others went into the library to find random people to take the survey. Before the survey was administered, the researchers provided the participants with a consent form explaining what the researchers were studying and that the survey was anonymous and their personal information and answers would be kept confidential. The consent form also explains this research study is to increase the researcher's knowledge of alcohol use on university campuses and that at any point they wish to stop filling out the survey, they can without any consequences.

The survey was a total of 41 questions that included: 6 demographic questions, 6 pre-developed qualitative questions, 10 questions from the Alcohol Uses Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT), and 19 quantitative questions from the CHOICES pre-test. The 6 demographic questions of the study include the participants' age, sex, race/ethnicity, classification, and major and minor. These 6 questions are the only potentially identifying information asked throughout
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this survey. These responses will assist in identifying patterns within the research findings and classify them based on these specific groups. The qualitative questions were developed in order to obtain a better understanding of how people perceive alcohol, where they acquire their perceptions, and where they receive their information about alcohol. The rest of the survey consists of the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test or AUDIT and the CHOICES pre-test, both of which have been used widely for surveys similar as this one. The AUDIT portion was based on a Likert scale of 0-4 and the second half of the CHOICES pre-test was a Likert scale of A-E, which were strongly disagree to strongly agree. After the research was completed, the student researchers created a coding system to keep the findings organized.

Analysis and Results

There were a total of 100 participants surveyed. There were more female participants (54%; n=54) than male participants (46%; n=46). The number of participants that stated their majors were of a hard science (50%; n= 50) was equal to the amount of soft science participants (50%; n=50). The majority of individuals who participated in the research were of the Caucasian race (70%; n=70), while the other 30 participants stated they were Hispanic (14%; n=14), African American (12%; n=12), Asian (2%; n=2), and Biracial (2%; n=2). The group came up with four hypotheses to test and these are the results of each of them.

Hypothesis 1 was based off of AUDIT question #1, which was “how often do you have a drink containing alcohol?” This hypothesis was rejected due to the belief held by researchers, that freshman consume more alcohol than upper classmen. After data analysis, the researchers were able to conclude that consumption of alcohol is greater in participants that classified themselves as seniors. The analyzed data showed that 34% of freshmen participants claim to
have never consumed alcohol, while only 8% of seniors claim to have never partaken in alcohol consumption.

Hypothesis 2 was based off of AUDIT question #9, which is “have you or someone else been injured because of your drinking?” The data analysis showed that 76% of freshmen, 24% of sophomores, 14% of juniors, and 8% of seniors stated that they have not seen injuries occur due to drinking. After the data was analyzed the researchers were able to note that the majority of participants claimed that they had not experienced injuries occurring during alcohol consumption; therefore, the hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 3 was analyzed over the first eleven questions of the CHOICES pre-test. These questions covered the amount of knowledge participants had on alcohol and how it affected the human body. After data analysis, the researchers were able to see that 45% out of the 1100 answered questions by all participants were answered correctly, while 55% of the questions were answered incorrectly. Therefore, this hypothesis was accepted and showed that more than half of the participants were not knowledgeable concerning alcohol.

Hypothesis 4 was covered in qualitative questions 1 and 3. These questions were “where do you get your information about alcohol?” and “where do you get your perceptions about alcohol use on campus?”. The researchers had originally believed that college students acquire most of their knowledge concerning alcohol from their peers. Data analysis showed that 52% of the participants claim they receive knowledge concerning alcohol use from their peers, and 48% received their knowledge from other sources, such as their parents or social media. Because of this data, the researchers accepted this hypothesis.

There were many limitations that were seen while collecting and analyzing the data. In further research, the researchers will continue searching for the limitations prior to forming the
survey in order to avoid them at all cost. While some of the data collected did see limitations, the results revealed important and vital information in furthering the current research.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The researchers were able to identify the strengths and limitations of the survey while analyzing the data collected from the participants. The first strength was that the survey was thorough and informative. Through the questions asked on the survey, the researchers were able to find exactly what they were looking for in order to accept or deny their hypotheses created before the data was analyzed. An additional strength from the research was the anonymity for participants. Since the researchers provided the consent form with information saying that their answers would stay confidential, the participants were more likely to be honest in their answers of the questions. The final strength was that the researchers had a large sample to choose their 100 participants. In addition to the strengths the researches encountered limitations as well.

Before the researchers distributed the surveys to the participants, they analyzed the survey as a group to identify any questions that could arise from the participants. The researcher’s first limitation was encountered when researchers realized the structure of certain questions were misleading and would need clarification for participants. The researchers decided to keep the participants open-minded and not give them specific examples of the questions they needed clarification for. The participants were told to answer the questions based on how they interpreted them in order to keep the biases of the researchers limited. Another limitation researchers encountered was the amount of time it took for participants to take the survey, ranging from 10 to 15 minutes. Although, the researchers had a large sampling size, it was difficult finding people who would take the time to sit down and take the survey since it took about 10 minutes to finish. The researchers had at least five students refuse to take the survey.
because it took too long and at least one who could not finish the survey because they ran out of time before they had to go to class. Even though the survey was anonymous, the researchers were not positive that the answers given on the surveys were the honest truth. The researchers kept in mind that the answers given on the survey were not all honest answers because the participants thought they would still be able to identify who they were after the survey had been turned in.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations throughout the research process include: confidentiality, competence, and participants’ rights. The researchers explained the purpose of the survey to every participant and stated the responses from the surveys will be confidential. Also, the research team distributed a consent form to every participant which stated the researcher’s objectives and informed the willing participants about the survey.

Before the survey was distributed, the documents had to be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). “All research using human subjects -- even paper-pencil questionnaires and surveys to collect data inside Tarleton -- must be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB)” (“Research, n.d., para. 1). The IRB protects the researchers as well as the participants.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the core value of competence in the Code of Ethics, a social worker should “provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience” (NASW, 1996, par. 20). The researchers maintained ethical responsibilities by following the IRB’s guidelines and staying within their education limit.
Confidentiality played a major role in the honesty of the data collected when handing out surveys. The surveys consisted of personal information such as their major, sex, and classification, as well as their qualitative answers concerning alcohol perceptions among college students. The Code of Ethics states, “Social workers should not solicit private information from clients unless it is essential to providing services or conducting social work evaluation or research. Once private information is shared, standards of confidentiality apply” (NASW, 1996, par. 31). The principle was supported by the researchers because they did not share any of the participants’ information to anyone outside of the research group and their faculty advisor and community partner.

The researchers handed out consent forms to the participants who took the time to complete the researchers’ surveys. The rights of the participants who completed the survey correlates with confidentially because the researchers had to inform participants that their personal information and answers will remain anonymous.

Social workers should use clear and understandable language to inform clients of the purpose of the services, risks related to the services, limits to services because of the requirements of a third-party payer, relevant costs, reasonable alternatives, clients’ right to refuse or withdraw consent, and the time frame covered by the consent (NASW, 1996, par. 14).

A consent form was dispersed out to the participants to not only protect them, but gave them the information needed in order to complete the survey. Social workers must know and understand the ethical consideration of confidentiality, competence, and the participants’ rights while conducting research and in practice.
**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Alcohol consumption is perceived as the ‘norm’ and overgeneralized in the United States, especially among college students. From the data gathered by the researchers, the micro level perspective among college students, is that alcohol is often times not seen as dangerous or harmful, since it is considered normal and ‘everyone is doing it’. College students do not think about the consequences of their behaviors while consuming alcohol or binge drinking. During this time, college students focus on, “[h]ow people think within society opposed to their behavior” (Applied Soc., par. 5). Since people tend to only care or think about themselves and not how their decisions will affect anyone else, there are not many ways to inform a college student about the consequences of drinking alcohol or binge drinking until they have a tragedy happen in their family or within their peer group.

On a mezzo level, social workers can raise awareness and advocate within communities and on college campuses regarding excessive alcohol consumption on campuses. The group of researchers are working towards creating a peer-education program to implement on their college campus regarding substance use. Implementing this program on campus would allow students to open up to other trained students their age about the issues they are struggling with.

The macro level consists of a new policy regarding alcohol on college campuses across Texas and the United States. Social workers must advocate and generate new policies that continue to help those suffering from substance abuse. The data from a variety of colleges will start a change on campuses across the United States to end the high rates of alcohol consumption.
References


