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# Campus-Community Solutions to Collegiate High-Risk Drinking

Linda Major and Tom Workman

## Abstract

*NU Directions at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is one of ten “A Matter of Degree” sites funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and administered by the American Medical Association. The program focuses on the use of campus-community coalitions and a comprehensive approach to create change. In this article, the authors discuss the challenges, benefits, and lessons learned in creating a partnership between the campus and the community in order to reduce high-risk drinking.*

For January in Nebraska, the night’s weather was exceptionally mild as the seven teams of students, university staff and community members headed for their cars, clipboards in hand, ready to take on their area of the city to conduct compliance checks at the 120 off-sale establishments throughout Lincoln. The effort would accomplish several objectives in the strategic plan of the campus-community coalition known as NU Directions. First, it would create a baseline of data that could measure the success of later initiatives. Second, it would educate the students about the importance of identification in controlling underage drinking by their peers. Finally, the compliance check would provide information that could help the retail community gain a true sense of their success in creating management policies that kept alcohol out of the hands of minors. The night in January serves as a great example of campus-community coalition work at its best.

Conducting a compliance check in the city is just one of many tasks needed to tackle the problem of “high-risk” drinking among college students. In 1997, the University of Nebraska was identified as one of many campuses across the nation with an abundance of “binge” drinkers (Wechsler et al., 1998). The Harvard School of Public Health’s 1997 College Alcohol Study (CAS) found that 32.4 percent of the NU students surveyed reported frequent binge drinking, or consuming five or more drinks in one sitting (four or more for women) at least three times in a two-week period. Sixty-five percent of NU students reported drinking to get drunk, and 39 percent of the students reported that they had gotten drunk three or more times in the past month (Wechsler et al., 1998).

The campus had been working diligently on the issue of high-risk drinking for a number of years. NU had experienced many problems due to alcohol use. In 1997, there were 133 citizen complaints about parties at off-campus residences within one mile of campus. Several NU students had suffered serious injuries as a result of high-risk drinking, and a large number of students reported experiencing negative effects as a result of the drinking of others. More resources were needed to make an impact on the culture of drinking that had become a part of the NU experience.

The CAS served as a key resource to justify the inclusion of NU into the “A Matter of Degree” program administered by the American Medical Association and funded through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. James Griesen, Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs at NU,

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along with Lincoln Chief of Police Tom Casady, gathered with a small group of community leaders, faculty, students, and staff to apply for the grant. Along with nine other universities, NU was given \$700,000 to create a campus-community partnership over a five-year period. The coalition was charged with the mission to utilize environmental management approaches in order to reduce high-risk drinking by NU students. NU Directions was born. Within the first year, a strategic plan of thirteen goals and sixty objectives was created, and the work to implement the plan began.

Working from a campus-community collaborative perspective means both shared responsibility as well as shared resources. The result, for us, has yielded much learning, and has been overwhelmingly positive. In this article, we identify several of the benefits and challenges we have found in creating effective “town-gown” relationships, focusing on a comprehensive approach for change, and the lessons we have learned along the way. Though the experiences came from the work in Lincoln, it is our belief that they represent a model that can find success in any city-campus setting.

### *A Matter of Understanding*

Perhaps the first and most important lesson we have drawn is the need for all those involved and affected by collegiate high-risk drinking to understand the complexity of the problem rather than to gravitate toward a single set of solutions. There are actually three arenas of understanding that make coalitions effective prevention units. The first is the need for an understanding of the different perspectives represented by the coalition. Many universities suffer from a somewhat tense and uncooperative “town/gown” relationship with their home city. The community often resents the “spill over” of campus drinking problems such as littering, loud parties, and public urination that deplete precious city resources and negatively impact the quality of life for permanent residents. From a community perspective, the problem seems to be generated by the university. The university, on the other hand, is often frustrated by the community’s inability to control a surrounding retail environment that promotes excessive drinking and generates income from a problem the administration is working hard to solve. First-year students with excessive drinking habits formed in high school frustrate both sides. And students who have been fed a lifetime of expectations about college drinking resent what seems to be a selective return to prohibition.

At the heart of the issue is the need to understand the role that the environment plays in producing a set of meaningful practices and rituals around drinking for the college student. Birthday bar crawls, for example, become dangerous rituals when bars offer free drinks for those who turn twenty-one, or professors joke about bar crawling in class. The first task for any coalition is to have a clear understanding of the model with which they can create change. Described by William DeJong (1998) as “primary prevention,” the environmental model of intervention “utilizes changes in the physical, social, economic, and legal environment accomplished through a combination of institutional, community, and public policy change.” Mosher, Jernigan and Denniston (1999) give this analogy: “Alcohol problems are like a minefield that requires navigation by individuals and removal by caring communities.” Environmental management places responsibility on everyone on campus and in the community, and requires collaboration for change.

The second arena of understanding is to seek and embrace the evolving thinking and research within the field, and being flexible enough to examine new perspectives when they are made known. Approaching high-risk drinking from an environmental approach is a departure from the more traditional education or individual treatment models. The environmental management approach assumes a broad sense of responsibility for any social problem. We believe that it also requires the partnership of all aspects of the environment in order to produce change.

The third essential arena of understanding is the specific environment. Every city and campus represents a different set of political, economic, social, and cultural challenges. One of the more interesting observations about being one of the ten “A Matter of Degree” sites across the nation

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are the differences of each site, and the need to localize efforts, incorporating the best practices from each site but adapting them to fit the local scene. Coalition members were selected based on their deep well of knowledge about the City of Lincoln and the University of Nebraska. They know whom to call, what history exists, how to approach certain individuals and institutions, and where to go for certain resources. All the theory in the world will do little if it cannot be applied in the local setting. Doing so requires discussion with local experts who help translate ideas and make them work in their specific context.

Creating a campus-community coalition enables all sides to understand the multiple aspects of the specific drinking environment and allows an open dialogue between parties to identify ways in which policies and practices from either side of the street may perpetuate the problem. Together, members of the campus and community coalition can gain valuable insight from each other alongside the available research. At the University of Nebraska, we have been fortunate to have both the Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs and the Chief of Police for the City of Lincoln serve as co-chairs, providing a rare partnership between education, policy, enforcement, and student affairs. Combined with coalition members from every other piece of the environment, the result is the creation of a wider set of initiatives than any individual perspective could have created on its own. The first year of the NU Directions project was spent bringing together workgroups that integrated coalition and ad hoc members from both the campus and the community. City Council members sat across from students; Student Affairs staff members sat next to parents; and researchers sat next to retailers to share knowledge, ideas, and perspectives in order to create a strategic plan that would represent both broad-based analysis and mutual support.

Not all discussions were easy or went smoothly. Real differences in opinion and experience were aired and at times debated. Throughout these discussions, we tried to utilize the resources that exist at any academic institution, bringing in researchers who studied the behaviors of young adults, the drinking culture, alcohol education and prevention strategies, as well as those who had practical experience as retailers or university staff. We listened to what the experts had to say. We found compromises and searched for new ways to connect differing perspectives. We realized that there might always be areas where we will not reach consensus, and that disagreements on some points did not mean we could not work together.

Most important, however, we focused on the goal rather than the road, and found that, despite our different perspectives and experiences, we all had in mind the same ideal. Local alcohol retailers wanted the same thing that law enforcement officers wanted. Students, administrators and parents found they all wanted a university that was safe and fun, where alcohol had a place but where secondhand effects of excessive drinking such as assault and destruction of property were eliminated. This “ideal” is represented in consensus-based vision and mission statements that appear on all program materials.

By taking the time to understand each other’s perspectives as well as the current research, the entire coalition became a well-educated team that created a multifaceted plan for change. The result was a strategic plan created by over seventy people, and a working coalition of forty who were committed to help carry out the plan over the next four years. Each objective of the plan had a distinct baseline and goal number that allowed our project evaluator (hired and supervised by the Harvard School of Public Health to provide an accurate assessment of outcome) to measure the success of each initiative. For example, one objective is stated as “Decrease (by twenty-five percent) the percentage of students who report obtaining alcohol using false identification, from twelve percent to nine percent.” Using future CAS data, we can measure the success of our initiatives in the area of false identification use and determine whether our methods accomplished the objective.

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## *A Matter of Interest*

Creating a broad-based coalition with representatives from a wide number of perspectives also allowed members to focus on their individual interests, experience, and areas of expertise. Environmental management is part of a larger comprehensive strategy where education, social norming, and environmental change work together to address high-risk drinking from a number of directions. One of the important lessons learned at NU was the need to clearly define the roles of coalition members and to utilize their unique areas of expertise and interest in self-selected workgroups. Four initial groups of coalition members were formed during the development of the strategic plan:

1) **A Social Environment** workgroup combining students, student affairs staff, area retailers, and others worked to better understand the social needs of students who were relying on high-risk drinking as the center of all social or recreational activity, and to create new, enticing low-risk alternatives that would meet social needs in safer ways. Several initiatives that were incorporated into the strategic plan came from this workgroup. Two new events, the “Back to School Bash” and “The End,” bookend the first and last weekend of the academic year—both key times where high-risk drinking rates were at peak levels. The “Back to School Bash” involves a midnight pancake breakfast on the plaza of the Student Union surrounded by music and a variety of college-oriented games (the velcro wall, padded sumo wrestling, etc.). The event is well attended and creates an alternative to late night apartment or Greek parties. The event has now been incorporated into an expanded “Big Red Welcome,” which traditionally centered on a Sunday convocation and street fair. The new expanded version includes activities from 9:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., and includes Bash activities plus many others.

During the week of finals in the spring semester, NU Directions sponsors “The End,” involving a night at the campus Union to study and a night at the Recreation Center to let loose and work out stress by climbing the wall, playing volleyball, or enjoying any number of the Recreation Center activities. Free midnight movies are offered at a cinema near campus, providing a cheaper entertainment option than a night in the local bars.

The midnight movie program has been expanded to a monthly event, and though it may take time for its popularity to grow, there seems to be a strong interest from students in being able to see a film at midnight on a Friday night. It would be foolish of us to think that the students most entrenched in high-risk drinking would leave the bars or parties to attend a movie, but our research found that a much larger percentage of students were moderate drinkers who resorted to drinking for something to do. The events enabled moderate drinkers to have their own stories for Monday’s classes, and to have choices for how to spend their free time.

The creation of events, however, is only one aspect of creating a safe social environment, and once again, the use of a coalition meant that we could incorporate the community in our efforts to create an environment for students that did not center on excessive consumption. In the fall of 1999, we introduced NUtodo.com, a website that searched a database of Lincoln restaurants, theaters, nightclubs, recreation centers, sports arenas, and special events. A student can search the website in a number of ways, looking for activities that fit a specific budget or distance from campus or activities by date. A section of the website gives students options for entertainment at home, and another, introduced in the fall of 2000, will enable social chairs and anyone planning a party to select from vendors who offer catering, space rental, entertainment, and even party favors such as t-shirts, glasses, and other novelties.

Every vendor listed in the database must sign a “Responsible Hospitality Agreement” in which they promise to guard against sales of alcohol to minors, to provide staff trained in responsible hospitality practices, and to avoid promotions that encourage high-risk consumption. Having retailers on the coalition has helped to kick-start the involvement of local businesses, and a part-

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time staff member now works with both campus organizations and local businesses to create special packages for groups.

2) **A Neighborhood Relations** workgroup involved the needs and issues of the many neighborhoods throughout the city, particularly those who are located near the campus or have multiple rental units to students. Consisting of coalition members who are community planners, neighborhood association presidents, and off-campus students, the workgroup developed objectives that utilize service learning as a way to create ownership of the neighborhoods by the students who live there, to provide resources and information for both landlords and tenants, and to develop strategies to reduce the destruction and nuisance of wild parties.

The Lincoln Police Department began a “selective enforcement” program funded by the coalition, where undercover officers would enter parties after a neighbor complaint and cite whatever violations were found, from underage drinking to sales of alcohol without a permit. Within a year, the selective enforcement team found it difficult to find parties in the most problematic neighborhoods that had before yielded multiple complaints and citations. The message about the neighborhood’s tolerance for destructive partying was heard.

3) **A Policy and Enforcement** workgroup, consisting of coalition members from campus/city/county enforcement, campus judicial affairs staff, students and others, focused their efforts on state, local, and campus policies and practices that would create a low-risk environment and provide fair and equitable treatment of students and vendors. A student from the University of Nebraska Law College conducted extensive research on policies, laws, and cases that related to false identification and local governing authority to regulate alcohol—while students and staff, in cooperation with law enforcement, created an educational program entitled “Risky Business” to help student groups realize the consequences of high-risk consumption. The coalition invited the Lincoln City Council to join them on a “bar walk” on a Friday night, enabling those who make city ordinances to see first-hand both the positive practices and the areas of need in the blocks where college bars dominate the street.

This workgroup then created a unified set of goals, objectives and methods for law enforcement officers and policy makers, helping the coalition avoid territorial disputes and creating a unified message to students who violate policies and laws. In July, the coalition sponsored a statewide symposium on state and local policies and practices through its newly formed Legislative workgroup in order to examine policies and practices that supported low-risk behavior.

4) **An Education and Information** workgroup enhanced the existing education efforts of the university with a wider scope of approaches and audiences. They produced a definition of high-risk drinking for the campus and community, and set objectives for the education of parents, alumni, students, and the media about the risks of excessive consumption, alcohol dependency, and misperceptions about alcohol use at NU by current and incoming students.

Misperceptions of drinking rates have proven to be a significant issue, perpetuated by the media’s use of “binge drinking” rates and dramatic footage of college drinking. The high-profile deaths of students from Louisiana State and MIT, combined with the statistics from the Harvard School of Public Health’s College Alcohol Survey, created an explosion of media attention on the subject. If graduating high school seniors did not already think that college was the place where students over consumed alcohol, they certainly would from the news stories about drinking.

A number of college campuses are finding that “an exclusive emphasis on abuse and problem behavior may unintentionally serve to perpetuate problem alcohol and other drug use” (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 119). Normative campaigns work to employ messages that “not everyone” is engaged in binge drinking. Evidence from studies suggests that, when student misperceptions of the frequency and intensity of peer drinking are corrected, drinking rates across the population decrease (Berkowitz, 1997; Haines, 1996; Johannessen, Collins, Mills-Novoa, and Glider, 1999).

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At Nebraska, we found in our 1999 campus Omnibus study that seventy-four percent of students drank five or fewer drinks on average when they partied. Though that number placed them in Harvard's "binge" category, we were pleased to see that the majority of students stopped at five rather than consuming ten, twelve or more drinks. The University Health Center's Community Health Education office, which houses NU's alcohol prevention specialist, initiated the first social norms campaign through the student group "Project CARE" (Creating an Alcohol Responsible Environment). This fall, Project CARE's poster and button campaign is part of a year-long effort by the coalition to communicate the norm, changing the perception of students that everyone at Nebraska drinks heavily and often.

Finally, the education and information workgroup has sought to find creative ways to adapt the Alcohol Skills Training Program (originally developed at the University of Washington) for large groups, organizations, and segments of the population who typically display high-risk behavior. Early evaluation results of the Alcohol Skills Training Program have demonstrated a positive impact on drinking rates for individuals and new fraternity and sorority members.

By working in smaller groups that focused on the skills, connections and interests of individual coalition members, the coalition as a whole was able to attend to the work of environmental change without becoming overwhelmed with the many details. Every quarter, the entire coalition reconvenes to report activities, to celebrate successes, and to forge new partnerships as needs arise. Consistent communication enables members to learn about other projects beyond their workgroup affiliations.

### ***A Matter of Celebration***

Working to change an environment that has been formed from decades of inattention, tradition, and economic incentives takes time. It is easy for coalition members to feel overwhelmed, become discouraged, and lose interest. An important lesson learned is to recognize and celebrate small, significant successes to show both coalition members and detractors that change is possible.

One of the first opportunities to capture success came during the initial year of the coalition when a local retailer sought a special license for a "bottle club," an establishment where members keep their own stock on hand, and because alcohol is not being sold can operate beyond the state law limiting alcohol service to 1:15 a.m. Because the number of alcohol outlets surrounding the campus is well over the national average, the idea of adding another venue, especially one that imitates the more difficult setting of private drinking, appeared to be a giant step backward for the community. Through consensus and a unified position, the coalition was able to persuade city officials to oppose the bottle club by approving an ordinance banning the practice.

Though the defeat of the bottle club brought us only inches closer to the many goals and objectives we had set, the success for the coalition was a morale booster for everyone involved. The media coverage gave NU Directions a public profile as an organization that could really accomplish things. The key, however, was that we celebrated the success, and all other successes, by acknowledging the hard work of coalition members, thanking those who extended their time, talent, and work, and framing each small step as another sign that we were ultimately on the right track. We now publish a quarterly newsletter to celebrate the activities, events, and successes of the coalition. Though its mailing list is over 500, the primary audience for the newsletter is the coalition itself, where members can read about the work of others and everyone can be reminded that each small step moves us all to our goal.

Several months after that January night compliance check, NU Directions hosted a community forum on false identification. The forum brought together representatives from law enforcement, the grocery industry, the food and beverage industry, and city and state officials to discuss the

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issues and begin the process of collaboratively solving the problem of underage access to alcohol (and other identification problems) in Lincoln. Our small coalition was able to arm a much larger collaboration, create new partnerships, and, we hope, find new solutions. Armed with real information, all sides could raise issues and new ideas, from technology that would counter the limited skills and motivation of a transient retail workforce to the need for tougher fines, better licenses, and better laws limiting access to false ID manufacturers.

Many attending the afternoon forum commented that they appreciated hearing other perspectives and having their own needs and frustrations heard. "Issues like false I.D. typically produce a lot of finger pointing between law enforcement, state agencies, and business owners," commented Beverly Neth, Director of the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles, one of the speakers in the forum. "It is exciting to see the community working together to find solutions." Everyone left realizing that those solutions would have to come from multiple efforts, and that everyone had a responsibility for changing the environment.

Developing understanding among coalition members, utilizing the unique interests and areas of expertise of the coalition in order to develop clear roles for each member, and celebrating the large and small successes as the work gets done are just three of the many lessons we have learned at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Perhaps the greatest example of the power of a coalition can be found in an e-mail that came to our office in May. Trying to institutionalize the need for alternative social activities, we had worked hard to become an active part of the planning team for the "Big Red Welcome" event run through New Student Enrollment. The one-day event was a popular tradition at Nebraska, and our hope was that we could expand the event to incorporate the "Back to School Bash" and other activities in order to create late-night options to "back to school" high-risk parties. After several months of committee meetings, we had developed a full weekend of activities that involved athletics, recreation, Greek Affairs, the Residence Halls, the Union, Student Involvement, and a number of students. A new tradition was being born, one that would provide an exciting first experience for incoming students and one that could slowly change the drinking culture at the university.

After sharing by e-mail the minutes of a meeting we were unable to attend, the committee member finished the message by saying, "I can't believe it. I'm on a committee that's actually going to accomplish something™" Certainly, the model of coalition building we have been able to develop through "A Matter of Degree" seems to be accomplishing something not just in Lincoln but at every site in the country, and the results, we hope, will help change the collegiate drinking environment for good.

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Tom Workman currently serves as the communications coordinator for "NU Directions," a \$700,000.00 initiative at the University of Nebraska (NU) designed to reduce high risk drinking among college students. As a cultural researcher, he has focused his study on the collegiate drinking culture, and most recently had a study of fraternity drinking stories published in the *Journal of Health Communication*.

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