



CENTER FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Alcohol and Responsibility: Which Way Forward? Discussion Report from forum held on April 21, 2008 during the Spring 2008 Community Issues Forum

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Introduction

Alcohol's role in our society is detrimental. Locally, most community members remember the tragic alcohol-related death of Samantha Spady in 2004. Additionally, 26% of CSU students claim to not remember where they had been or what they had done after a night of drinking. Nationally, nearly one in ten adults meets criteria for chronic alcohol abuse or alcohol addiction, and one in four Americans feels the pain caused by alcohol problems.

Along with alcohol being a prevalent issue nationally and locally, our group chose this topic because we anticipated a strong response from the audience. Considering most participants are graduating seniors who have likely experimented with alcohol, we were curious to hear about changes in attitude and use throughout college. Also, many of our group members have had personal experience with alcohol, whether it is our peers being expelled from the university or family members and friends that have suffered from alcohol abuse.

One last reason we chose this topic was because it had been done in a previous Capstone event. This was helpful for two reasons: first, it is possible to track results and create a more cohesive report, particularly if this topic continues; secondly, we had access to the previous event's report, which enabled us to decide what tactics and approaches to utilize. The previous Alcohol Forum had great success with the NIF video and guidebook, so we decided to also utilize them. Consequently, we made our handout using the three approaches from the NIF guidebook.

Overall, alcohol proved to be a beneficial topic that provoked a large audience response. Hopefully, our preliminary report will help aid in understanding what our community and university should do to address the many problems associated with alcohol.

Participants

Dominating the group were undoubtedly Caucasian college students. However, three non-students were also present. One member, a representative of Hartshorn Health Services, was a frequent speaker full of statistical information. Overall, we felt that there was a huge range of attitudes and opinions about alcohol, from those who believed that alcohol should be reserved until twenty-one to those that used fake identification to drink underage. Important voices that were not present include law enforcement officials, alcoholics or recovering alcoholics. Having these people present would have added a possible empathetic voice and another dimension to the conversation.

Participants, especially students, were interested in having more community members present and more updated information. Some felt that there needed to be definitions of alcoholism, binge drinking, moderate drinking and social drinking. Future alcohol forums should consider these definitions for placemats.

- 8 CSU students, 11 non-students
- 8 21-26 year-olds, 2 27-44 year-olds, 1 45-64 year-old
- 8 females, 8 males
- 4 live in zip code 80521, 2 in 80524, 2 in 80526, 1 in 80525, 1 in 80020, 1 did not specify
- All 11 identified as Caucasian
- 7 have a household income of less than \$20,000, 1 between \$40,000-59,000, 2 between \$60,000-74,000
- 7 heard about the event in class, 2 received invitations from students, 1 was invited by Dr. Carcasson
- For 7, this was their first public forum; the additional four had attended between 1 and 3
- Common important national issues mentioned include:
 - Health Care
 - Poverty
 - Iraq War
 - Substance and alcohol abuse
- Common important local issues mentioned include:
 - Housing (cost and general)
 - Transportation
 - Substance and alcohol abuse
 - Poverty

The Process

Initially, the moderators consisted of Katelyn Konecny, Ben Weikert, Meghan Smiley, Elise Clement and Brittany Russo. Meghan addressed the approximately fifty people that had decided to participate in the Alcohol Forum. She introduced the topic and segued into the NIF video. After viewing the video, the group was split into half, with Ben and Katelyn's group reconvening in the Oregon State room.

Upon reaching the room, we introduced ourselves and our volunteer, Keri Owens. Next, Katelyn introduced the topic more in-depth and localized the national issue by referencing the death of CSU student Samantha Spady. We overlooked the step of “personal stake” and failed to have the group introduce themselves. Ben then began moderating Approach One, Katelyn moderated Approach Two, there was a ten minute break where post-forum surveys were distributed, Ben then moderated Approach Three and then Katelyn went into Reflections. After Reflections, we explained the survey, the “dotmocracy,” thanked everyone for attending, and ended the forum.

Analysis/Summary of the Discussion

The forum had a slow beginning, and gradually, as people became more comfortable, more opinions were expressed. Surprisingly, there was not a great deal of tension among contrasting values on alcohol present. Most people seemed to agree that society has a problem with alcohol that needs to be dealt with, although there was some slight disagreement as to how best to rectify the situation. According to dot voting, the two statements with the highest overall amount of support were that: “Media needs to be addressed as well, not just [standard alcohol] education in our schools” and “there is already enough law enforcement to prevent alcohol abuse in Fort Collins.”

Approach one, stronger laws against alcohol, and approach three, more education and social programs to dispel the belief that alcohol is cool, received the majority of support. Approach two, treating alcohol as a health epidemic, received little support overall. The fact that our group had a representative from the CSU Hartshorn Health Center gave the forum a valuable resource that could inform the group on alcohol issues specifically on the CSU campus. Additionally, we had a human development major who was able to give scientific information as to how alcohol affects cognitive development in youth.

Some common themes that were present were that most individuals believe alcohol responsibility rests with the individual, not society. Also, nearly everyone believed that irresponsible drinking is a problem, and that one of the best ways to combat this is to direct more information about the danger of alcohol to young children while in school.

Concerning next steps, most people thought that individuals should pressure local media; for instance, pressure should be put on local Channel 11 to run public service announcements that dispel the belief that alcohol is cool, and instead inform viewers of the potential dangers of alcohol. As far as moving forward, this discussion did not seem to offer participants a clear-cut method to enact change, and therefore did not foster many suggestions from members.

Post-Forum Survey Results

There were certainly some common themes that were present during the forum. In response to common ground, most individuals believed that alcohol responsibility rests with the individual, not necessarily society. Almost everyone believed that irresponsible drinking is problematic, and that some type of change need occur. A third common theme is that more education is needed directed to children on the dangers of alcohol. This education should start early in elementary school and continue well throughout high school; currently DARE ends in the sixth grade. A theme brought up repeatedly was the question, “what constitutes a true alcoholic?” Participants as to where the line that constitutes someone who abuses alcohol turns into an alcoholic. Many college students said that they participate in binge drinking; more than five drinks in a sitting, but did not consider themselves to be alcoholics. For them they were just participating in the traditional college rite of passage. Individuals stated that it would have been useful to have the voice of an alcoholic present as well.

There seemed to be a split down the middle as to whether or not Fort Collins needs stricter laws on alcohol. On the one hand, many people argued that stricter laws would act as a deterrent and keep people from abusing alcohol. Others believed that the laws are currently too strict, and that Fort Collins already has an overabundance of police which put a drain on taxpayers. The largest issue of disagreement was over the use of tax dollars to fund safe rides home for those who have been drinking. On the one hand, many argued that Transfort needs to extend its hours of service. Currently the Transfort buses discontinue service at 6:00, certainly not late enough to provide rides for those traveling home from the bars. Advocates of using public money to fund transportation for those who have been drinking argued that doing so would make the city safer for all by reducing the amount of individuals who drive drunk. Critics of using tax money for safe transportation for those who have been drinking argued that it was unfair for them to have to pay for those who make a conscious decision to become inebriated. They argued that their money would be better spent funding more education or improving the quality of roads.

Several suggestions for next year’s capstone event included expanding the alcohol topic to cover other drugs. Some people stated that they felt limited by the alcohol topic, when drug use of other kind is also a local problem.

The following were the statements on the post-forum survey that asked participants to rate their level of agreement. The following scale was used: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Not Sure/Depends (NS), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Number of responses to each level of agreement for each statement is listed below:

1. Fort Collins should hold people responsible for the harm they cause when they drink.
SA = 3; A = 13; NS = 2; D= 0; SD = 0
2. We should treat alcohol abuse as a health problem rather than a crime.
SA= 3; A= 5 ; NS= 5; D= 5; SD= 0

3. Society must stop accepting and even glamorizing irresponsible drinking.
SA= 5; A= 7; NS= 3; D= 0; SD= 0
4. Fort Collins should use tax dollars to increase transportation for bar and restaurant patrons.
SA= 10; A= 3; NS= 1; D= 2; SD= 0
5. Education about the dangers of alcohol must start in the popular media.
SA= 5; A= 6; NS= 1; D= 1; SD= 0
6. We need to make and enforce stronger laws to control alcohol abuse.
SA= 1; A= 0; NS= 4; D= 6; SD= 4
7. Laws against drunk driving are too lax.
SA= 1; A= 3; NS= 0; D= 9; SD= 2
8. There are too few alcohol treatment programs for people who need them.
SA= 2; A= 4; NS= 4; D= 5; SD= 0
9. Poudre Valley Health System should subsidize educational and rehabilitation programs with personal funds and tax dollars.
SA= 2; A= 8; NS= 3; D= 1; SD= 1
10. Many people are unclear as to when drinking becomes risky.
SA= 4; A= 6; NS= 2; D= 2; SD= 0
11. Unless prisons provide treatment programs, jailed alcoholics are likely to commit more crimes when they are released.
SA= 3; A= 6; NS= 3; D= 1; SD= 1
12. Existing alcohol control laws often lack adequate information.
SA= 3; A= 5; NS= 3; D= 3; SD= 1
13. CSU should require an in-class alcohol educational seminar for incoming freshman.
SA= 7; A= 6; NS= 1; D= 2; SD= 0

The largest consensus among these statements is:

1. Most people agree that Fort Collins should hold people responsible for the harm they cause when they drink.
2. Most people disagree that laws against drunk driving are too lax.
3. Most people agree that Poudre Valley Health System should subsidize educational and rehabilitation programs with personal funds and tax dollars.

Public Notes from Forum (including dot results)

Appreciations- Approach 1:

1. Appreciate more DUI checkpoints and stricter preventative methods
2. Recognize alcohol is illegal to minors
3. Media campaigns helpful and effective (5 dots)
4. Health benefits- brain is not done developing, stricter laws help prevent brain damage
5. Promotes brain and healthy development.
6. Laws are set up for our safety.
 - a. Drinking is our responsibility, but laws won't make a difference (2)
7. Stricter laws can make a difference, cite Purdue U example
8. Cops in Shops-knowing the possibility of arrest would dissuade minors from using fake-id's
9. Good thought behind the laws

Concerns- Approach 1:

1. Lowering the drinking age would make it [drinking] less attractive, increasing laws would not have this effect (3)
1. This approach does not acknowledge local culture, big vs. small cities
2. Felony convictions for using fake id's are excessive
3. Cops in Shops [are a] bad idea, liquor stores should be the ones responsible for checking id's (1)
4. Drinking while walking and biking can still get individual in trouble. We already have enough enforcement. RamRide is effective. (10)
5. Many of these ideas are already in place
6. Changing the laws means more enforcement needed. Rather than increase laws, we need more alternatives to driving home after drinking, i.e. expand bus service
7. Approach does not ask the question: why does society feel it is acceptable to break certain alcohol laws? (5)
8. Lowering the blood alcohol level that is legal to drive means society has to provide other methods for individuals to get home
9. Does not guarantee youth will follow laws, media and rebellion could persuade individuals to not follow laws. *

Appreciations- Approach 2:

1. Classes do work for alcoholism, but need incentive to attend. The person attending classes has to want change for change to truly occur (2)
2. Do like the idea of alcohol screening, but not if it is forced by government (3)
 - a. Don't want invasion of privacy
3. Funding for alcohol prevention and research is needed and helpful (3)

4. Need for education vs. enforcement that feels like an empty threat, (dorm life...)
5. Even if laws get stricter, individuals who want to drink will still find loopholes
 - a. Need education, prevention and treatment to find one's own personal stake to take personal steps to help (3)
6. Believe alcoholism is learned lifestyle, can be prevented with education or medical intervention
7. Find reason why people drink, not just how much (2)
8. Encourage alcoholism on health insurance, prevention aspects

Concerns- Approach 2:

1. Classes [only] work for those who want change (2 dots)
2. Forced screenings are a violation of privacy
3. People can fib on their alcohol dependency
4. Alcoholism is at least partially preventable, too much emphasis on alcoholism as a disease (4)
5. Some people believe alcoholism is a disease; binge drinking [is] more abuse than disease
6. Data [is] too numbers driven
7. Data too skewed
8. Funding? Do we have the money?
9. Colorado is last in national funding given towards preventative measures (3)

Appreciations- Approach 3:

1. More education to society for shift (1 dot)
2. Stats get attention
 - a. But how long does shock last to make effective? (1)
3. Consistent education positive/effect
 - a. Consistent, steady education positive (practicality?)
4. Where do we get ideas for parties? Media.
 - a. Media [has a] huge effect (now [it is] negative, but could have huge positive effect is utilized)
5. Home, media, education- all work together (4)
6. Local media- we can influence what's on TV
7. Don't need alcohol to be entertained (3)
8. Most important (effective) approach*
 - a. Older, approach more effective/prevalent
9. If people know realistic effects, it will be more effective (2)
10. Educations most important to prevent [sic] (high school +)
 - a. Education and moderation- preach moderation! (1)
11. Recognizes social norms encourage problem (1)
 - a. Alcohol and sex
12. Shows numbers and stats- eye opener
 - a. Scare tactics (if prevalent) work

13. Approach recognizes society and media have [sic] huge influence on young people entering age/capability to drink (glamorous life, beautiful people etc)

Concerns- Approach 3:

1. Is it practical/affordable to have consistent alcohol education?
2. [What should be the] focus of alcohol education?
 - a. [Exposure] media education first in college
3. D.A.R.E is [taught] too young
4. Education in college is too late
 - a. People have [already] made decisions
5. Are [sic] a ton of middle-high school alcohol education [programs] already
 - a. Does not account cultural norms (1)
6. Media needs to be addressed as well, not just [standard alcohol] education (10) (this could potentially be an appreciation in my opinion)
7. Sometimes education oversimplifies; [the] same things [is] not right for every one.

Reflections:

1. Learned about Fort Collins Police [that was disturbing]
 - a. Following kids to dorms [in Ram Ride cars], etc. [Makes me wonder] what's happening in my community? (I recall this was a comment from a middle-aged woman from Loveland) (1)
2. Appreciate meeting/place to openly discuss issue and see other ideas (1)
3. Open environment, no tension in room
4. Community input, mix of community and college students
5. Shows [that] not all students are "alcoholics"
6. Allows individuals to see change at beginning of meeting OR how you used to approach alcohol
7. Laughed, but appreciate going over Ground Rules
 - a. Listening to others!
8. Appreciated breakdown- not overwhelmed with information (1)