



UW-River Falls Student Alcohol Consumption Opinions Focus Group Report

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Students working for the Survey Research Center were instrumental in the completion of this study. The following SRC staff members contributed time and effort in moderating and assisting with the focus groups: Adrienne Adolphson, Bethany Barnett, Corrie Ford, Ashley Frye, Danielle Rogers, Kristi Sirinek, and Lindsey Thompson. Their hard work and dedication are gratefully acknowledged.

Study Findings: Key Themes

- The environment on campus is accepting of student alcohol consumption. Indeed, there is almost an expectation that students will/should drink alcohol.
- Most focus group participants in both the drinking or nondrinking groups described their drinking pattern as “not very often”.
- The primary motivation for consuming alcohol is for social reasons.
- Students, based on the students in these focus groups, seem to be thoughtful about choosing to drink. They generally take into consideration how other obligations and commitments may be affected if they decide to drink.
- Most participants choose not to drink because they do not want to experience the negative physical consequences associated with excess consumption..
- Overall opinion is that alcohol consumption has not had an affect on their college career.
- Many of the participants were aware of a responsible drinking campaign(s).
- Participants offered many suggestions for responsible drinking campaigns including publishing personal stories, post card reminders, catchy phrases and more information in the Student Voice.
- The responsible drinking poster campaign seems to have had little affect/influence. Focus group participants suggested simplifying the posters to make them more effective.
- The common opinion regarding alcohol consumption at UWRF and the role of the University in promoting responsible drinking is that it does not matter what the University does, students will drink.

Introduction

During spring semester 2005, Student Health Services asked the Survey Research Center (SRC) to conduct focus groups to explore the views of students about alcohol consumption and the impact of responsible drinking campaigns.

Description of the Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted during April 2005. All focus group participants were University of Wisconsin – River Falls students and were separated into groups based on drinking patterns. Two focus groups consisted of six students that consume alcohol one or more times per month, two other focus groups consisted of six students who never drank or had one or fewer drinks each month, for a combined total of 12 focus group participants. The focus groups were conducted April, 25, 26, 27, and 28 in meeting rooms of the Hagestad Student Center. All but one (4/28) focus group was recorded.

In all cases, the focus groups were conducted by students working for the SRC. We felt that, because alcohol consumption can be a somewhat sensitive topic, it was important that the interviewers be peers rather than faculty or staff. The SRC students were trained in focus group techniques, listened to focus groups done by the Director and Associate Director in 2004 for the Student Health Services, and did mock focus groups to prepare for this assignment.

Study Findings: Overview of Responses per Question and Comments

In the comments portion of each focus group question, notations are made to indicate from which focus group the comment came and which participant said it. Focus groups A and B consisted of the students who consume alcohol (Alcohol Consumers = AC), focus groups C and D consisted of students who never drank or had one or fewer drinks each month (Non Drinkers = ND).

April 25: Focus Group A, persons AC1 and AC2

April 26: Focus Group B, persons AC3, AC4, AC5, and AC6

April 27: Focus Group C, persons ND1, ND2, ND3, ND4, and ND5

April 28: Focus Group D, person ND6

Q1. How would you describe the environment on campus as it relates to alcohol consumption?

Overview of responses. The environment on campus is accepting with respect to alcohol consumption. Culturally, students feel that alcohol consumption is almost expected of them. Students find it easy to gain access and consume alcohol if they choose to do so. Some halls and activities lend themselves more toward alcohol consumption than others.

Comments:

AC3: Depends on what hall you are in (some approve of drinking more than others)

AC6: It's a big way to get to know people; you find the older person to get information on where the parties are

AC5: Being in sports is a good way to find parties

AC4: Fines are less off-campus than on-campus

AC1: My friends don't drink and there is more talk than action. People talk about getting drunk but they don't always do it.

AC2: It seems like there are a lot of drinkers but only because they are loud and speak out.

AC1: "There is no middle ground." If there is a middle ground we don't hear about it.

ND3: There is definitely a lot of alcohol use on campus

ND4: Alcohol is easily avoidable, it's a personal choice

ND2: There was less peer pressure than I thought there would be at first

ND4: Freshman and sophomore year people who didn't drink in high school tend to go a little "alcohol crazy"

All C: It's a social thing

ND6: Public Safety tries to control drinking but fails

ND6: UWRF is a party school and people expect drinking

Q2: How would you describe your own alcohol consumption patterns?

Overview of responses: Not surprisingly participants in the “drinking” groups reported that they consume alcohol and those participating in the “non-drinking” groups reported drinking very little. Regardless of the group, most participants profess to drink “not very often”. Only two students said they “Go out on mission..” or “drink a lot...”.

Comments:

AC1: Started drinking freshman year but now only drinks whenever her roommate has stuff.

AC2: “I drink but I’ve never been drunk.”

AC4: I drink once every 3-6 months. I don’t consume a lot. After about 3 Smirnoff’s I’m pretty out of it.

AC6: Drink mostly on Friday, Saturday, Sunday; “Go out on a mission, gotta work off the week”

AC5: I drink 2-3 times a month. Not often. (About a pint of Captain)

AC3: “I drink a lot, lots of alcohol consumed”. If a shots are considered one drink, then it’s 10 plus (for one outing)

ND4: I don’t have time at school to drink

ND5: I choose not to drink because of sports. It affects my performance.

ND4: Vacation and when I’m home I drink more

ND1: I choose to not drink, except for weddings and special occasions

ND3: I will have a glass of wine with dinner once and a while. “I love wine”

ND2: I just started drinking this year, not very often

ND6: Responsible – school comes first and can always walk to parties in River Falls (unlike at other schools)

Q3: If you consume alcohol, what is your motivation for doing so?

Overview of responses: The focus group participants mentioned several motivations for consuming alcohol. Most reported social reasons as their motivation for consuming alcohol. One person said it tasted good and makes them relax. Another chose to drink when they were “stressed out”. The students in the “non-drinking” groups added that they don’t consume alcohol to get drunk or consume only once in a while. While none of the participants in the “drinking” groups put forth that type of qualifier.

Comments:

AC1: It tastes good and makes me relax.

AC2: Its how to be social, we have “good times”.

Both AC1 and AC2: “Not beer, it’s gross.”

AC3: Social atmosphere; bar or house party; “It’s what you do. I guess it feels like it’s what you’re supposed to do.”

AC5: I call friends up and go out in the woods, and have a big bonfire- **off-campus (home)**

AC6: Only time to see friends on week-ends at parties; “Not much else to do”

AC4: When you’re stressed out

All AC: Social

ND4: For someone’s birthday we will make daiquiris, we drink them for the taste; we don’t get tipsy or drunk.

ND5: Something fun to do once and a while

ND6: Social - to have a good time and hang out with friends

Q4: If you don't consume alcohol, what is your motivation for abstaining?

Overview of responses: The responses to this question included physical as well as emotional reasons for abstaining. The comments also reflected the thoughtfulness in their decision to drink or not. A couple students had a family history they didn't want to repeat. A couple others referenced their upbringing and that they didn't want to disappoint their parents. Several mentioned abstaining if they had an obligation (such as a test or big event) because they didn't want their performance affected by alcohol consumption. Two others cited repeating negative experiences they have had in the past. Even more didn't want to experience the physical consequences of excess alcohol consumption.

Comments:

AC2: "I come from a family of alcoholics and I don't want to be one." "Plus the cost is unbelievable. It is cheaper to buy a milk shake than a mud slide."

AC1: "If a big event like a test is coming up I assume that alcohol would affect my performance, plus it takes away from study time."

AC2: "It's (alcohol) really hard to get."

AC1: "Its (alcohol) not good for you and I know that."

AC4: I don't drink if I'm driving. Sometimes it's more entertaining to watch others and still have fun.

AC3: Don't if I have a test the next day

AC6: If I have to work late, I just take care of friends, and am their "Designated.Driver".

AC5: "Dad drinks so I don't", I saw someone come to Physics drunk once, and it was really funny

All C: It wouldn't be hard to not drink

ND3: I have no desire to wake up with a pounding headache

ND1: Exactly, I don't want to be puking and have a headache the next day

ND3: For health reasons, I physically cant

ND1: I have heard stories from girls who black out and can't remember things, it's scary. Bad things can happen.

ND3: It's just the way I was brought up (to not drink)

ND4: It's a part of my culture; I don't want to disappoint my parents.

ND5: From previous experiences, I have learned that I do stupid things when I am drunk, so I don't want to make a fool of myself again.

ND3: I can still be social while being sober; my friends love it when I am the Designated Driver.

ND2: Drinking just isn't worth all the consequences to me

ND6: N/A

Q5: How has alcohol consumption affected your college career?

Overview of responses: Comments from both the drinking and non-drinking groups were almost unanimous in their opinion that drinking has not had an affect on their college career. The non-drinking group cited negative affects they have observed in others but not personally experienced. In contrast, participants from the drinking groups made no reference to others' behaviors. Responses to this question also demonstrated thoughtfulness around deciding when it was OK to consume alcohol. Most indicated they wouldn't consume if it would interfere with their studies. A couple said that they had learned from their experiences after receiving low grades.

Comments:

AC1: "My social life is a little more exciting (because of alcohol consumption), though not much."

AC2: "There has been no adverse affects. No affects at all."

AC1: "There are no adverse affects, SO FAR."

AC4: No affect unless have to study and someone has a hangover and I have to take care of them

AC6: When I need to get stuff done I don't let drinking interfere

AC5: It really hasn't, I don't usually drink during the week

AC3: It's affected a few quiz scores this year, other than that not so much

ND1 – ND5: The lack of alcohol has been to my advantage

ND1: Friends can't move on in college career because of too much partying freshman and sophomore year.

ND2: My friends drink most days of the week, but they do their homework before they drink, and still keep their grades up.

ND3: A lot of people regret drinking freshman and sophomore year. They don't understand the importance of the first two years.

ND4: You have to have your priorities straight or learn to deal with the consequences.

ND5: I have friends who can't have fun without alcohol. Sometimes I just want to do something without drinking, and they can't.

ND3: I like closing down the bars completely sober.

ND6: First semester had lower grades but have gotten back on track, learned from mistakes

ND6: Need to pick friends with same habits, can't hang out as much with friends who party a lot

Q6: Would you describe any responsible drinking campaigns on campus of which you are aware?

Overview of responses: Students cited a variety of responsible drinking campaigns. Several mentioned the poster campaigns specifically.

Comments:

AC2: Got a birthday card on her 21st birthday and inside there was a coupon to the movie theatre.

AC1: “There were signs in the math class. It was something about the % of students that drink.”

AC2: Got an e-mail with a computer program. You enter your weight, height, gender and that of 4 friends. Then you click on the drinks and find out how fast you become too intoxicated to drive. “Fun seeing my friends drunk before me. And it was a fun way to see how many drinks I can handle without really testing it.”

AC6: Health Fair had snap-on bracelets. ‘Snap into the fact that UW-RF students drink responsibly’ “They were sweet. I thought they were cute!”

AC3: Posters with statistics about how many drinks students have per outing

AC4: Don’t know of any programs

AC5: One with a car accident

ND5: The pizza posters

ND2: Ads in the Student Voice of all the things you can buy with money from drinking.

ND1: Ads in the Student Voice of the statistics of people that don’t drink. I like those because then I think “oh good, I’m not the only one”

ND4: The shoe poster

ND6: Posters in dorms, especially pizza poster

Q7: If you have seen this poster, what do you think its major message is and how did it affect/influence you?

Overview of responses: The comments about the posters were mixed. What affects one student may not have an effect on another. Those that noticed the posters and read the facts seemed enlightened by them. All in all, it seems the posters had little influence on students.

Comments:

Both AC! And AC2: We've "seen it, but never actually looked at it."

AC2: There is too much writing.

AC1: "Wow, I didn't know that southern comfort has the same calories as pizza."

AC3: I got bored for class so I read the pizza poster. No one thinks about calories when drinking

AC6: Don't want to think about it (calories); the posters don't faze me, the pictures/images have nothing to do with drinking. "Don't take time to read it. I didn't know what this (pizza) was for. Dominoes sales or something"

AC5: "What a big pile of shoes or pizza has to do with drinking I have no idea"

AC4: I didn't know the posters related to drinking. "I thought they were about diets"

ND5: I was grossed out by the pizza poster

ND4: The 64% on the shoes poster scares me, that means that 40% of people are driving drunk

ND2: I did a double take on the pizza poster, its gross

ND3: I think people walk to the bars more here, at home more people drive drunk

ND5: The fact about the Oreo blizzard scared me, because I love Oreo blizzards!

ND6: Good images, gets people's attention

ND6: Likes word frame with statistics

ND6: Curious about source of the statistics

ND6: Pizza poster was effective – "disturbing"

ND6: Public safety stops walkers too – may discourage people from walking (choose to drive instead)

Q8: What suggestions do you have to increase the effectiveness of responsible drinking campaigns?

Overview of responses: Participants offered many suggestions to increase the effectiveness of responsible drinking campaigns. Many centered on simplifying the posters. Suggesting they be “short, sweet, and very large”. Other general suggestions included using personal stories, post card reminders, catchy phrases, and the Student Voice.

Comments:

AC2: The posters need to be simpler and not have so much to read.

AC1: The posters are way too busy.

AC2: “Damn, the thing about the calories was shocking.”

AC1: The campaigns need more shocking facts. “Not death, that is overdramatic”

AC2: “College students think about death but it’s not constantly on our mind. You need facts that college students deal with like G.P.A., test taking and damage to your body.”

AC5: “Mock drunk driving test”. I was in a drunk driving skit in high school. Stories about people dying. (I knew people in high school that died from drinking and driving-that helped)

AC4: “More real-life scenarios”, Real people statistics

AC6: “Use stories of people from River Falls, make it hit home”

AC3: Use a catchy phrase. Use sex, sex sells-get people to stop and read the posters (like the smoking campaign)

ND3: I think you should put them on the UWRF Student’s webpage, everyone uses it, and they will see them all the time.

ND1: Keep the pictures real, like the pizza one, ones that are not lifelike don’t hit home

ND2: You need to make people think about it. Make the writing bigger, you can’t read it, and less clutter.

ND5: Make it clear cut

ND4: People don’t have time to stop and read posters when they are walking down the hall

ND2: “Short, sweet, and very large”

All AC: More stats that can be read very fast

ND6: Print personal or “horror” stories in Student Voice about negative experiences of students on campus

ND6: More posters in visible locations

ND6: Post card reminders about responsible drinking at Homecoming, etc

ND6: Focus on making people be more careful, not abstaining from drinking completely

Q9: Do you have any final thoughts regarding alcohol consumption at UWRF and the role of the University in promoting responsible drinking?

Overview of responses: The common opinion is no matter what the University would do to promote responsible drinking, it won't be effective. The thinking is "students will be students". Drinking is something they believe is a personal choice. "If people want to drink, no one is going to stop it". A couple of students expressed concern about Public Safety's approach/effectiveness.

Comments:

AC1: My German teacher talks about it, but it's not effective.

AC2: It is good to get things out there but it won't be effective.

AC1: "Not much to do, but drink and go home."

AC2: "College students will be college students."

AC5: "They're (the university) not gonna stop it. It's gonna happen" It might help to improve the posters-use more real-life situations

AC4: Big fines on campus are going to make people go elsewhere (to drink). Possibly get in an accident drinking and driving. Those who just turned 21 are going to want to experience being legal

AC6: "If people want to drink no one is going to stop it

AC3: "It doesn't matter if an adult says no. They're gonna drink."

ND4: You can promote all you want, but it is a personal choice everyone has to make.

ND3: We all grew up hearing that alcohol is bad; you are reinforcing what they already know

ND2: Stats may help; maybe it won't change them, but make them think more

ND1: Freshman and sophomore year is so important, people don't understand that

ND2: I have friends who are obsessive about their weight, but drink all the time. They just don't get it

ND6: The school tries to eliminate drinking, which only makes it worse

ND6: Public Safety over does it, is too harsh and is more of a problem – makes people want to do it more, there is a rush in not getting caught

ND6: Effectiveness of Public Safety is a "huge concern" on campus

ND6: Focus should be more on responsible drinking

Additional Comments/Observations:

- AC1 and AC2 were friends and tended to agree on all issues.
- AC6 was looking for information about unknown parties going on (locations)
- AC3 and AC6 drink often, while AC4 and AC5 drink less frequently
- Focus Group B the participants seemed to agree about most comments concerning drinking
- Focus Group D only one person participated in this session. It was conducted as a one on one interview and not recorded