Resident Assistants’ Perceptions of Alcohol Use: Consequences for Students Living On Campus

Student Researchers: Allison Quinn ❤️ Emily Skurla ❤️ Maria White ❤️ Andrea Bauer BSN, RN, MSN Candidate
Faculty Researcher: Cheryl Ann Lapp RN, MPH, PhD ❤️ College of Nursing & Health Sciences ❤️ UW-Eau Claire

Purpose
- To explore challenges in the role of resident assistants (RAs) in situations where students are influenced by alcohol.
- To explore the implications of alcohol use in UW-Eau Claire residences as observed and described by Resident Assistants.

Rationale
- It is widely recognized that alcohol plays a significant role in college culture, especially in Wisconsin. This study examines the effects of alcohol use for students as observed by RAs on the UW-Eau Claire campus.

Description & Methodology
- There are 2500 students in 11 residence halls and 2 hotels for temporarily housing students.
- Qualitative study design interviewing 31 RAs from 10 residence halls and 1 hotel.
- Inclusion Criteria: All RAs had experienced their role for at least 2 academic semesters.

Data Analysis
- Interviews audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.
- Team explored themes observed regarding alcohol use and its consequences for students on campus.
- Periodic team meetings for confirmability of data.
- Information saturation reached within 25 interviews.

Theoretical Model
- Lalonde's Health Field Concept
  - Open Systems model
  - Focuses on human biology, environment, lifestyle, and health care organizations which all contribute to overall health.
  - Comprehensive model that demonstrates that any health problem can be traced to one or a combination of the four elements.

Nursing Theory
- Penner's Health Promotion Model
  - Defines health as a positive dynamic state, not merely the absence of disease.
  - Focuses on individual characteristics, behavior-specific cognitions and affect, and behavioral outcomes.
  - Each person has unique personal characteristics and experiences that affect subsequent actions.
  - Focuses on health promotion rather than health protection or disease prevention.

Culture of Drinking at UWEC
Cultural Expectations
- Assumed norm that students drink in college
- “That’s what you do when you go to college .. you drink”

Major Events
- Focus around the consumption of alcohol
- “Culture of college Homecoming is a big drunk fest”

Alcoholism
- Possibility of alcoholism generally overlooked by students and the University community.
- “You’re not an alcoholic until you leave college”

RA Preparedness
Training Inadequate
- “I feel like alcohol training is pretty useless”
- “I don’t feel like I really got trained to talk with those individuals about alcohol abuse.”

Training for the spring semester leaves new RAs feeling lost and confused regarding alcohol.

Personal Experience
- RAs without personal drinking experience lacked basic knowledge.
- “Lots of things I have been taught on how to deal with alcohol .. have come from experience of my staff and hall director.”
- “Only thing that makes me relate to those girls is my background.”

Conclusions & Recommendations
Information from Literature Review
- Wisconsin has the highest prevalence of alcohol use in the U.S.
- Wisconsin has the second highest college student binge drinking rate and the highest underage drinking rate in the U.S.
- 51% of UW students engage in binge drinking.
- In 2007, 47% of WI high school students reported current alcohol use.
- High school binge drinking is a predictor of binge drinking in college.
- 31% of college students met criteria for diagnosis of alcohol abuse and 6% met criteria for alcohol dependence.
- 25% of college students report academic consequences related to alcohol use.

Strengths of UWEC
- Communication between staff and Hall Director.
- RAs are a positive role model for their residents.

Areas for Improvement/Recommendations
- Modifications of RA training.
- Include more alcohol information in mid-year training.
- Relevant alcohol scenarios in “Behind Closed Doors”.
- Basic information about alcohol and its effects.
- Stricter sanctions for repeat offenders.
- Revision of “Choices” class.
- Improved availability and accessibility of resources for students and RAs.
- Increased awareness of alcoholism and long term effects of alcohol use.
- Lack of social events that do not involve alcohol.
- Prevention and awareness of sexual assault.
- Decrease perceptions of heavy alcohol use as social norm.
- Greater communication between residence halls about alcohol incidents.
- Promote responsible and safe drinking.

University Response
- Fines
  - Not severe enough to keep students from drinking again.
  - “Feels like they’re babying students and coddling them.”
- “Chooses” Class
  - Ineffective because students treat it as a joke and don’t learn from it.
  - There’s a severe jump in sanctions between first offense and getting kicked out of dorms.
- Campus police
  - Opinions vary about helpfulness.
- Hall directors
  - Seen as greatest support for RAs when situations arise.

Complexity of RA Role
- Duties
  - Job is extremely time consuming.
  - “It’s not really like a time commitment. It’s more of what time you can’t commit.”
  - Patrol building and protect welfare and safety of residents.
  - RAs expected to perform janitorial duties, such as cleaning up bodily fluids.

- Friend vs. Enforcer
  - “I think the most difficult part is finding a balance between being their friend and being an authority figure in their lives.”

- Resource for residents
  - Often viewed as favorite/most fulfilling part of RA role.
  - “I like the fact that people will come to me to ask questions and I can help them out.”

- Leader
  - RAs want to be a good role model for their residents.

Acknowledgements
The research team would like to thank the Office of Research and Special Programs (ORSP) for funding this project. We would also like to thank Director of Housing Chuck Major, Assistant Director of Housing Deb Neeman, and the RA participants. We would like to acknowledge the help of Gene Leisz for his technological and design assistance.