Drinking Trends at WSU: Simply the Facts

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Honors Thesis

PASS WITH DISTINCTION
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As faculty advisor for **Matt Phelps**

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

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*Elizabeth*  
Faculty Advisor  
2/13/02  
Date
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WSU Drinking Strategy</td>
<td>1-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Norms Theory</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies on Social Norms Theory</td>
<td>9-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simply the Facts</td>
<td>12-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>21-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>23-24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Figures and Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure #</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figures 1-3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Universities around the United States have been faced with a common enemy for decades. Alcohol. The College and University communities have been actively seeking answers, but like most problems, no single solution has presented itself. Washington State University, in its own attempts to curb student drinking problems, began supporting a project in 1991. Titled, “The Small Group Model Norms-challenging Intervention, it has undergone considerable growth over the past ten years and is now a campus wide project.

In 1988 and 1989, Jeanne Far, Ph.D., and John Miller, M.S., M.Ed., developed the Small Group Model Norms-challenging Intervention (SGM). (Far & Miller, 2000). The project was based largely on social norms theory, which will be discussed later and in greater depth.

Basically, social norms theory states that most college students significantly overestimate the behavior norms of their peers with regard to alcohol use. Because of this, students then adjust their behavior to mirror their inaccurate beliefs and student drinking behavior increases (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin & Presley, 1999). The WSU programs, “Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment”, aim at presenting students with accurate student drinking norms, which in turn will lower their own expectations and behaviors to conform more closely to that of their peers (Far & Miller, 2000).
As previously stated, the project developed by John Miller and Jeanne Far was first piloted in the 1991-1992 school year with funding from the WSU Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program. The project was replicated in 1995-96, this time funded by WSU Health and Wellness Services-Wellness Programs. In 1998 WSU was recognized by the Department of Education, which provided a two-year grant to implement Project Culture Change (PCC). In August of 2000 the Department of Education (DOE) again awarded WSU a Model Program Grant to continue PCC for another year. Finally, in September of 2000, the DOE funded ‘Project Empowerment,’ recognizing WSU as one of six universities in the country for innovative project concepts (Miller, Personal interview, January 31, 2002).

The Small Group Model intervention, developed at WSU, is the first of its kind. The project targets high alcohol-consuming sub-groups within the university community. More specifically, the SGM has targeted fraternities, sororities, student athletes, and students living in resident halls. Trained student leaders (such as team captains or fraternity/sorority presidents) facilitate small group interventions using previously gathered norms data. Using overheads or other visual aids, the leaders explain to students the theory behind social norms and what the actual WSU norms are, according to the gathered data. Follow-up surveys are used to gauge the program’s effectiveness in correcting misperceptions and reducing alcohol consumption (Far & Miller, 2000).

Recently, the project is growing to include aspects outside the Small Group Model intervention. In the last two years the project has been introduced into WSU classrooms with the help of professors and teachers. John Miller states that, with the infusion of alcohol abuse and social norms theory into the classroom curriculum, teachers
and professors are given the ability to directly improve the campus culture (Miller, Personal interview, January 31, 2002). In the fall of 2002, the WSU administration is getting in the act by putting together a social marketing campaign, which is focusing on social norms theory.

Despite the growing program, the main goal remains the same. "To correct misperceptions of student alcohol use norms among students in classrooms, student athletes, students living in fraternities, sororities, residence halls and students affiliated with other membership or reference groups" (Far & Miller, 2000). The resulting outcomes include the decrease in rates of students alcohol use, the decrease in overall frequency of student alcohol use, the increase in accurate perceptions of alcohol use, and the reduction of harmful health, social and academic effects related to alcohol abuse (Far & Miller, 2000).

With the goals and desired outcomes clearly stated, the question arises: Is the WSU Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment resulting in the desired outcomes?

Evaluating alcohol use among college students is a difficult task. There is no single reliable way to determine the drinking climate on WSU’s campus, or any campus for that matter. Historically, self-reported data from surveys has been the standard measure of such matters, and it continues to this day. The WSU projects are no different in their means of gathering data.

Each year that WSU has engaged in an alcohol reduction program, data has been gathered through self-reported surveys. Some, such as a campus wide survey, were randomly mailed to WSU students. Others, such as group specific surveys, were given to
all members of the specific group that took part in the Small Group Model Norms-challenging Intervention. Through the use of these surveys, the project was able to record data and assess the overall effectiveness of the program.

Figure 1 shows the relation between the average number of drinks (per occasion) students perceive their WSU peers to have with the actual average number of drinks students consume. From the graph it is apparent that the gap between perceived and actual drinks consumed has shrunk since the first year it was reported in 1995. It is also apparent that both categories have decreased since 1995. From this survey data it is fairly obvious that the social norms project as WSU is succeeding.

Figure 2 is similar to the first graph in that it compares perceived and actual drinking statistics. Instead of numbers of drinks, it compares drinking frequency by number of times a student has consumed alcohol each month. Again, the gap between perceived and actual frequency has closed, but in this chart the reported actual (self) frequency of drinking has increased each year since 1995.

The final graph, Figure 3, is taken from the campus-wide data collected in 1991, 1995, 1999 and 2000. The data compares quantity and frequency of drinking. From the graph, one can see that the percentage of students who consume five or more drinks on one occasion has fallen every year. Comparatively, the category of students who have four or less drinks has risen each year.

From these three graphs, it is possible for one to conclude that Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment has at least partially reached the goal set forth.

However, this is not the entire story. The following pages present a range of other sources and information that further relate to this study. The hope is that, under greater
scrutiny, the results of Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment are better understood and thus the goals can be assessed with greater accuracy.
Social Norms Theory

To understand how Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment work, a better understanding of social norms theory is needed. Both WSU programs and many other alcohol reduction programs across the US are using social norms as the main root from which their programs spread.

General theoretical models explaining social behavior and emphasizing the power of peer behavior as a modeling influence (Bandura, 1977) have been around for decades. H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D. and Alan D. Berkowitz, Ph.D. both began research on the idea that peer influences may actually result from perceptions of peer attitudes and behaviors rather than from actual peer behavior (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Since the mid-1980’s, research in this area has grown tremendously.

In their initial study, Perkins and Berkowitz found that student’s personal attitudes were strongly associated with drinking behavior. This result was concluded to be fairly obvious, but more interestingly, another relatively strong predictor of individual drinking behavior was the degree of consistency/discrepancy between perceptions and attitudes (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). The study concluded, “this finding may have important implications for alcohol program intervention strategies because, despite the stronger relation of attitudes to behavior, perceptions may be easier to change than individual attitudes which are relatively enduring” (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986).

It is important to note that the main findings of their study indicate that drinking behavior is reduced when perceptions of community standards and personal attitudes were inconsistent (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). For example, if student’s attitudes about
drinking matched the social norm, then their drinking behavior would not change. If, however, a student’s attitude about drinking exceeded the community norms, then they would be influenced to reduce their drinking behavior to more closely match the social norm. The opposite would also hold true, where if a student’s drinking were below the norm, then their drinking attitude may increase to match the social norm.
Studies on Social Norms Theory

Since the Perkins/Berkowitz study, social norms based intervention studies relating to alcohol have increased dramatically. Because a vast number and wide range of social norm studies exist, it would be impossible to cover all of them in a single paper. However, the following are selected examples that help cover the overall picture.

If student’s perceptions of peer drinking behavior influences individual drinking behavior, then what groups of peers affect individual behavior the most? A study conducted at the University of Washington in 1990 attempted to answer that question. The results indicate that personal drinking habits are most related to close friends’ drinking habits. The study also indicated that perceptions of friend’s alcohol attitudes far outweighed any general campus norms. “Perceptions of more general population drinking patterns have the weakest association with one’s own drinking” (Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991). Based on this data, campus social norms may not play such a large roll in affecting student drinking habits as previously thought.

Despite the findings of the previous study, research in mid-1990s found that campus alcohol norms clearly have the largest effect on personal alcohol abuse (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). The study acknowledged other social groups, such as a Greek system or a close network of friends, did have a significant contribution to personal alcohol decisions, but the influence was not nearly as powerful as campus norms.

This conflicting data calls in to question the credibility of social norms theory when presented in the context of a University or College campus. The difference between a social group (such as close friends) and the entire campus is huge. In order for
a social norms theory program to work effectively, it is necessary to know whether
campus norms have a significant effect on personal drinking behavior. (To give credit to
the WSU program, the Small Group Model Norms-challenging Intervention does attempt
to target small circles of friends, such as fraternity chapters and sports teams.)

Not surprisingly, other contradicting data is available relating to social norms
programs. One study attempted to determine if social norms intervention had an effect
on first year college students. Studies have shown that drinking rates increase
significantly during the transition from high school through the college freshman year
(Baer, Kivlahan & Marlatt, 1995). Thus, a student’s first year of college presents a
crucial opportunity for preventive interventions.

The study used two groups of students, one that went through a social norms
intervention program, and one that did not. Follow-up surveys were collected at the end
of the school year. The study results indicated that the social norm intervention had no
apparent impact on overall reduction of alcohol consumption or reducing alcohol-use risk

On the flip side once again, a social norms program conducted at Northern Illinois
University (NIU) has been relatively successful according to research data. In 1988, NIU
began a campus-wide social norms marketing campaign. According to the study results,
in 1995 NIU had reduced the binge drinking rates 35% since the programs introduction
(Haines, 1997). Perceived drinking rates, as well as alcohol-related injuries declined over
the same period. The UNI project used self-reported data from surveys to acquire the
numbers used for the statistics.
It is apparent from research inconsistencies that social norms theory intervention is not a completely reliable tool in reducing drinking. In some cases, the data supports social norms-based programs. Reports asserting the clear connection between students alcohol behavior and the perceived campus norms, as well as statistical drops in binge drinking both favor the use of social norms programs at all college and university campuses. On the other hand, studies have shown exactly the opposite results, hinting that social norms intervention may just be an over-hyped alcohol fix-all with no real tangible results.

It should also be noted that results from every study mentioned thus far have relied on data obtained from self-reported surveys. Generally, self-reported data has been found accurate to a certain degree, but it cannot replicate the accuracy of laboratory controlled experiments. The format of surveys and the questions presented, among other things, may also subtract from the accuracy of the results (Midanik, 1988).

Fortunately, other measures do exist. As stated earlier, the goal of this thesis is to provide alternative data from which more reliable conclusions can be drawn. It is senseless to rely entirely on one single form of data when other sources exist, especially if the alternative data contradicts or lays doubt upon the initial findings. Without uncovering all possible sources of data, the truth may remain hidden behind false assumptions.

The following are sources of data that may offer a better understanding of the overall effectiveness of the WSU social norms program.
Simply the Facts

Numbers don’t lie, or so the saying goes. The data and numbers gathered in this thesis have not been spun to serve any one agenda. Obviously, numbers can be presented in a deceiving manner, but the following data and conclusions stay as close to the raw numbers as possible. Almost all the numbers were retrieved from public records, which are available to any interested citizen.

The first source of data comes from the Washington State Liquor Control Board (WSLCB). The Liquor Control Board regulates every liquor store in the state of Washington. Because of the strict regulation, the WSLCB keeps detailed sales numbers from every liquor store. The data presented is from the Pullman liquor store and Washington State totals. The sales numbers are from the fiscal year 1990 to 2000. The population numbers used to calculate sales per person were found on the Washington State web site under the Office of Financial Management Forecasting Division (Office of Financial Management, 2002). The population for the entire state were used to calculate for the WA total category, and the population for the city of Pullman was used to calculate for the Pullman category.
From the available data, it is clear that liquor store sales (per person) have increased fairly steadily since 1990. In terms of actual numbers, the city of Pullman increased from $37.00 per person in 1990 to $61.45 per person in 2000. The entire state of Washington increased sales from $55.96 per person to $68.30 per person.

The increase of sales per person (in Pullman) jumped 66% in those ten years, compared to only 22% for the entire state of Washington. This is a significant increase when compared to the overall state rate. The reason for such a significant jump can be seen looking at the actual numbers (figure 5). Pullman increased total liquor store sales about 77%, while the state only increased total sales 45%. Compare this with the population increase (7% growth for Pullman, and 19% growth for WA), and it is easy to see why the city of Pullman has such a large increase in the sales per person category.
### Figure 5

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sales ($)</th>
<th>% change to $</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Sales/person</th>
<th>% change $/p</th>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>$868,666.94</td>
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<td>23,478</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>$912,050.96</td>
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<td>23,090</td>
<td>$39.50</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>$945,727.54</td>
<td>3.69%</td>
<td>23,190</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>$1,019,700.23</td>
<td>7.82%</td>
<td>23,480</td>
<td>$43.43</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>$992,602.77</td>
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<td>23,770</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>$1,099,879.55</td>
<td>10.81%</td>
<td>24,360</td>
<td>$45.15</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>$1,150,708.52</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
<td>24,650</td>
<td>$46.68</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>$1,278,650.79</td>
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<td>25,070</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>6.81%</td>
<td>25,630</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>$1,545,424.00</td>
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<td>25,150</td>
<td>$61.45</td>
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<td>66.08%</td>
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<td><strong>Washington State</strong></td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>$272,315,429.36</td>
<td>4,866,663</td>
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<td>$55.96</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>$289,906,309.38</td>
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<td>5,000,371</td>
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<td>1992</td>
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<td>1996</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>$325,352,062.71</td>
<td>6.22%</td>
<td>5,606,800</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>$348,364,712.72</td>
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<td>5,685,300</td>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>5,757,400</td>
<td>$63.89</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>$396,355,855.00</td>
<td>7.75%</td>
<td>5,803,400</td>
<td>$68.30</td>
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<td><strong>% Change</strong></td>
<td>45.55%</td>
<td>19.25%</td>
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It is safe to say that with such a dramatic increase in liquor store sales, liquor consumption has also risen since 1990. Because Pullman is a fairly isolated community, it would be reasonable to assume that most of the liquor purchased at the Pullman Liquor Store would remain in the community. Given this, the consumption of liquor has risen in Pullman since 1990. Thus, it can be seen from this evidence that the WSU social norms programs have not had a significant effect in curbing liquor consumption among WSU students.

Of course, liquor is only one type of alcohol which students drink. According to figure 6, in the state of Washington, liquor only makes up 5% of the alcohol consumed (Washington State Liquor Control Board, 2000).
Malt beverages, such as beer, make up 83% of the total volume consumed in Washington State. It is safe to say that the Pullman community would show similar trends. Unfortunately, Malt beverages are not regulated to the extent that hard liquor is in Washington. No records or data are available to the public concerning the sale of beer or wine in specific communities. State wide totals are available, but that has no significance when Pullman is the only area of interest. Private stores, such as Safeway are not required to give the WSLCB specific sales data concerning alcoholic beverages.

Since malt beverages and wine contribute to 95% of Washington's alcohol consumption, it is necessary to provide data to compliment the liquor sales research, despite the lack of public records.

Fortunately, Todd Kurle, the manager of Frontier Distributing was helpful in providing some data. Frontier Distributing provides the Pullman community with the majority of its malt beverage supply in the form of kegs and cases of bottled beer. Kurle was unable to provide hard numbers due to business reasons, but it is clear that Frontier Distributing has experienced a slow but steady growth in sales over the past 10 years. More specifically, Kurle estimates a “1%-2% growth (in sales) over the past five or six years” (Kurle, Personal interview, January 29, 2002).

Because no actual numbers are available, it is difficult to use this data to positively answer questions about the WSU social norms program, but at the same time it helps to complement the liquor data, which deals with factual numbers.

From Frontier Distributing data, it is apparent that beer sales are not experiencing a growth similar to liquor sales. In light of this, Project Culture Change and Project
Empowerment may be responsible for curbing beer sales around the Pullman community. However, according to Kurle, growth has been steady and fairly unchanging since 1990. The WSU social norms programs were first implemented in 1991, and it wasn't until 1995 that they truly began to have an effect (according to WSU collected data, see Figures 1-3). If the programs were truly reducing student’s alcohol consumption, then it should be expected that beer sales decrease, or at least flatten out during the years that the program showed positive results.

Police department activity statistics are the final data tool used to measure the effectiveness of Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment. As far back as 1997, the Pullman Police department has kept a database of reported police incidents. Each year the incident reports are organized into a list of categories. A sample of categories includes arson, malicious mischief, noise complaints and robberies. Several categories are relevant to drinking activities at WSU. Alcohol detoxification, alcohol offense, DUI alcohol or drugs, and intoxicated person have been selected as categories to investigate.
Looking at figure 7, it is obvious that alcohol offense incidents have increased since 1997. The actual numbers increase from 303 incidents in 1997 to 501 incidents in 2001. The positive news is that DUI incidents have remained relatively flat over the five-year period. In terms of percent increase, alcohol offense incidents have increased 65% since 1997. The total number of police incidents has increased only 16% (8399 to 9781).

The data here show that alcohol problems involving the police have increased fairly dramatically since 1997. Incidents involving alcohol detoxification and intoxicated persons has also increased over the five-year period, as shown in figure 8. The number of intoxicated persons has shown a downward trend since 1998, which could possibly be attributed to lower binge drinking rates. However, alcohol detoxification numbers have steadily increased since 1997, which contradicts the previous statement.

It must be argued that police data such as this is not entirely reliable because incident numbers can be affected by outside forces. The number of police officers on the street may greatly affect the number of incidents reported each year. Despite this
problem, this data from police incidents does not support the claim that WSU’s social norms projects are accomplishing the goals set forth. Police incidents relating to alcohol abuse have increased significantly over the past five years.

After looking at the data presented, several things become clear. First, it is impossible to draw direct connections between the data and the social norms programs at WSU. There are too many factors involved, for example, to directly connect the rising liquor sales to a failed social norms program. It is entirely possible that something entirely different may be responsible for the rising liquor sales, such as better advertising or longer store hours. Unrelated factors such as specific “party patrols” may also be responsible for the increased police incidents relating to alcohol.

Second, while casual connections cannot be made conclusively to disprove the effectiveness of Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment, it is even more unlikely that the programs effectiveness could be supported with the data. The evidence is overwhelmingly against such logic. Liquor sales have increased dramatically, beer sales, while not actual hard numbers, are shown to be slowly, but steadily increasing. Even police incidents relating to alcohol have increased almost universally. It is safe to say that from the evidence gathered, nothing could significantly support the effectiveness of WSU’s social norms programs.

This does not mean the social norms programs are a failure. Both programs may indeed be accomplishing some of the goals presented. It is entirely possible that binge drinking at the WSU campus has decreased since 1995 (Figure 1). Hard numbers, such as liquor sales, can neither prove nor disprove that claim. Binge drinking statistics are only possible with self-reported data.
Assuming that Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment have lowered binge drinking rates and closed the gap between perceived and actual drinking norms, then it should be investigated whether this actually is reducing the overall problem of student drinking.
Conclusion

The Harvard School of Public Health conducted a national College Alcohol Study (CAS) in 1993, 1997 and again in 1999. Over the six years encompassing the study, it found a significant overall increase among frequent binge drinkers. Interestingly enough, the study noticed a decrease among dormitory residents that was offset by an increase among students living off campus (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo & Lee, 2000).

It is possible that WSU followed a similar trend. Project Culture Change and Project Empowerment are designed to focus on small living groups, like Greek houses and dormitories. This is where the national study found a decrease in binge drinking rates, and the data from the two WSU studies find similar results. However, the social norms programs at WSU fail to target the ‘off campus’ community.

Taking into account the increased alcohol sales and alcohol related police incident reports, it seems that a portion of the students at WSU are still drinking a considerable amount of alcohol (if not greater than before). While social norms programs may be influencing a small group of students, there still remains a large portion unaffected by the programs. With the data presented in this paper, it appears that the drinking ‘problems’ have not been erased, but simply relocated.

The drinking environment surrounding Pullman must also be addressed. There must be one reason, if not many, why the liquor sales and alcohol police incidents have increased dramatically. It is impossible to ignore WSU’s long tradition of alcohol incidents, from riots to balcony accidents. The environment surrounding WSU is very drinking friendly.
A recent study involving 734 colleges and universities found that schools are more likely to have less alcohol problems if the administration (of the school) uses supply-side restrictions, such as alcohol free dorms, alcohol free tail-gate parties, and bans on alcohol related advertising in the school newspaper (Wechsler, Kelley, Weitzman, Giovanni & Seibring, 2000). The results seem intuitive, but in actuality, many schools tend to shy away from such strict regulations, especially large public schools like WSU. Schools, such as the University of Rhode Island, that do implement strict no-alcohol policies have seen a sharp fall in alcohol related incidents (Thompson, 1998).

WSU does not restrict alcohol from pre-game tailgate parties and in fact the university supports on-campus beer gardens before home football games. The school newspaper is almost always contains advertising for local bars, which WSU allows (The Daily Evergreen, 2002). These are just a few examples of the prevalent drinking environment surrounding WSU.

Social norms programs may indeed limit abusive drinking among targeted subgroups, but they may only be acting as a Band-Aid solution. The drinking culture at WSU is indeed a result of the environment from which it germinates. Alcohol sales and police incidents are simply means of measuring the local drinking environment, and it appears that WSU is not succeeding in reducing those numbers. Changing the environment will involve much larger Band-Aid than social norms programs can provide.
References


