

Running head: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review on the Effectiveness of Alcohol Sanctions

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Literature Review on the Effectiveness of Alcohol Sanctions

Despite the best efforts of higher education institutions, alcohol policies and sanctions fall short of deterring high-risk behaviors when it comes to alcohol consumption (Wechsler et al., 2002). Furthermore, many alcohol sanctions (including educational sessions, reflection papers, and fines) have been proven ineffective or inconclusive at changing high-risk behavior. In fact, from a student perspective, institutions mostly use sanctions that are classified as ineffective and a waste of time (Gehring, Lowery, and Palmer, 2012). Many attempts have been made to create innovative programs (Carey and DeMartini, 2007; Carey et al., 2009; Freeman, 2001; LaBrie et al., 2007; LaBrie et al., 2011b; Marlatt and Parks, 2005; Oswalt et al., 2007; Thombs et al., 2007) and they include promising best practices. Unfortunately, many of the studies also show conflicting results. Four themes emerged from the literature about alcohol sanctions: motivational interviewing, behavior change, social norming, and the role of student development.

Motivational Interviewing

Lewis and Thombs (2005) found that fear of consequences have little effect on alcohol behavior until after one is already sanctioned. Additionally, Gehring, Lowery, and Palmer (2012) found that an educational component alone does not deter negative behavior. To create a more holistic sanction that not only focuses on the fear of consequences and educational sessions, Motivational Interviewing (MI) has been integrated into many alcohol interventions.

Miller and Rollnick (2013) define motivational interviewing as “a constructive way through the challenges that often arise when a helper ventures into someone else’s

motivation to change...MI is about arranging conversations so that people talk themselves into change, based on their own values” (pg. 4). Carey et al. (2009) and Carey et al. (2010) used brief motivational interventions (BMI), which uses MI techniques and displayed promising behavior change results at the one-month follow-up. Another program developed by Marlatt and Parks (2005) uses a combination of MI and reflective journaling to provide an experiential learning process for those who are sanctioned. LaBrie et al. (2007) and LaBrie et al. (2011b) incorporated MI in a group setting and found individuals who felt they were in a safe space were able to have a dialog about various issues, including reasons for drinking, social roles, and negative consequences of drinking.

Although there are many promising implications from these programs about the use of MI techniques, different studies report differing results. Carey et al. (2009), Carey et al. (2010), LaBrie et al. (2007), LaBrie et al. (2011b), and Murphy et al. (2012) found immediate behavior change after a MI intervention; however, longitudinal behavior change and knowledge retention is still conflicted. A few studies found that behavior change persisted at a twelve-month follow-up but the majority found that student reverted to their previous high-risk drinking habits.

Behavior Change

The main goal of alcohol sanctions is to change behavior or reduce harm when it comes to alcohol consumption choices. Carey et al. (2009) found in a study comparing and contrasting in-person versus computer interventions that there was significant behavior change at the one-month follow-up. Similar to other studies, at the twelve-month follow-up, all groups regressed to their previous high-risk drinking behaviors. In

an innovative sanction program, Freeman (2001) found that behavior change is most effective when the program uses peer educators as well as professionals to co-facilitate the intervention, but the study failed to collect longitudinal data. Synthesizing motivational interviewing with behavior change, Murphy et al. (2012) designed a program to focus on delayed outcomes and goals instead of the instant “benefits” of alcohol use. For example, the researchers gave participants prompts such as “I consider how things might be in the future and try to influence those things with my day to day behavior” (Murphy et al., 2012, pg. 879) to determine their individual consideration of future consequences. The results varied across all of the studies and gave implications that certain interventions are suited for specific populations.

Similar to Murphy et al. (2012), there have been numerous studies that focused on or discovered different reactions from different populations of students. Although unintended, Gehring, Lowery, and Palmer (2012) found that the incident, infraction, and consequences had a greater effect on women than men. Carey et al., (2010) looked at mandated alcohol interventions using gender and family history as context for behavior change. Although it was found that family history had little indication of reaction to the intervention, there was ample evidence pointing towards effectiveness of a sanction based on gender. LaBrie et al. (2007) and LaBrie et al. (2011b) designed two separate group motivational interventions: one specifically for men and another specifically for women. The results indicate that interventions targeted at specific populations increases behavior change and provides evidence that more research needs to be done on interventions focused on other identities besides gender.

From a social justice and equity lens, this is problematic. As LaBrie (2007) found, the conduct process might be underserving men by not having specific interventions targeting that population. Since males make up the majority of the sanctioned population, there needs to be a closer look on how to effectively approach men. Skidmore et al. (2012) take an in depth look at how race and ethnicity affects high-risk drinking in college. Results indicate that students of color drink at a lower rate than their White counterparts and therefore, suffer less of the consequences and problems related to heavy drinking. In a study of Latina/o students and their perceptions of alcohol norms showed that students are only affected by perceived norms of peers they identified with (LaBrie et al., 2011a; LaBrie et al., 2007). The outcome asserted that students who identified with a community of color would not mimic the perceived norms of a predominantly White campus. More research needs to be done at institutional types where the demographics are drastically different, such as Historically Black Colleges, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Asian American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (Skidmore et al., 2012).

There is a clear difference between behavior change from high-risk drinking to a lower-risk drinking and behavior change to drink more cautiously in order not to get caught again. Gehring, Lowery, and Palmer (2012) found that close to 80% of their participants said that disciplinary sanctions have made them more cautious drinkers and only 40% responded that sanctions deter behavior that violates institutional policy. Cooper (2007) looks at alcohol violations through a moral development lens to try and figure out why students violate policies. The study confirmed that those who violate policies make decisions based on a lower level of moral thinking and the findings are also

consistent with the correlation of years of education and level of moral thinking. Aligning with moral development stages, Gehring, Lowery, and Palmer (2012) found that over 25% of students surveyed did not feel responsible for the violation the institution found them responsible for.

Social Norming

Social norming has been a widely disputed technique to change high-risk alcohol behaviors. The basic premise of social norming theory is to provide actual data about alcohol consumption on campus. By doing so, it corrects the perception of students who usually overestimate alcohol consumption among their peers and thus, starts to change behavior (Berkley-Patton et al., 2003; Crawford and Novak, 2010; Lewis and Thombs, 2005; Stamper et al., 2004; Thombs et al., 2007). Large social norming campaigns have been created in partnership with community stakeholders and showed promising results of positive behavior change (Linowski and DiFulvio, 2012), but it should be noted that population level climate change happens very slowly.

Many studies have used personalized normative feedback (PNF), a more tailored approach to social norming. In a comparison study by Lewis et al. (2007), it was found that personalized feedback in addition to a general social norming component helped with behavior change. In contrast, Henslee and Correia (2009) found that their course-based personalized feedback intervention changed perceived norms but did not change behavior. Similarly, Crawford and Novak (2010) found that the changing perceived norms of campus drinking does little to change drinking behaviors of an individual. Rather, behavior change comes when an individual holds accurate perceptions of the habits of their close peers and hold personal values of safe drinking. Lewis and Thombs

(2005) also found that changing peer perceived norms have a greater impact on drinking habits than “typical student” statistics. Finally, an innovative program provided personalized BAC feedback nightly to individuals in a residence hall (Thombs et al., 2007). The study concluded that there was no significant difference in behavior change between the feedback residence hall and the control residence hall. This could have been due to the amount of participants each night (both drinkers and non-drinkers), the misperception of BAC, or the context of gender roles and drinking.

Role of Student Development

Most of the literature deals with the psychological techniques of changing alcohol behaviors: motivational interviewing, personalized feedback, and social norming. As a student development department, the question surfaces: what are the roles of student affairs professionals in the alcohol sanctioning process? Four main functional areas tend to deal with the judicial process: student conduct, residential life, counseling services, and health promotions. Freeman (2001) cautions against using counselors in the sanction process because it might deter use of the counseling center as a whole. Instead, the research indicates that a health promotion office should take the role when leading educational sessions as sanctions.

Conversely, Birky (2005) argues that there is great value in training college counselors to lead interventions for heavy alcohol users. The research came from a critical clinical perspective arguing in favor of treatment programs. However, Birky realizes that many of the students in treatment or intervention programs are not mandated for treatment but rather went through a conduct process. At the end of the chapter, Birky

(2005) remains conflicted in the role of the counseling center in alcohol interventions on campus but advocates for their professional training.

Since student development professionals are responsible for the positive development of college students outside of academics, Cooper (2007) makes a strong argument for moral development within the conduct and intervention process. A conduct system must realize that students who knowingly violate policies are in a lower stage of moral development. The conduct process should not only be a disciplinary process but also function as a holistic development opportunity to challenge students to think with a higher level of morality (Cooper, 2007).

Best Practices

There are many best practices in the collegiate conduct system and alcohol risk-reduction campaigns. Many universities use a program called BASICS. However, Seattle University uses a program CHOICES (Marlatt and Parks, 2005) that combines many of the psychological techniques above. The class was created for first time violators and the director of Wellness and Health Promotion facilitates the sessions (personal communication, Hamachek, April 2013).

A second best practice utilized at a large public institution was a coalition between the college and the community. The coalition was charged with creating an action plan to implement an ongoing, long-term alcohol reduction program on campus. Linowski and DiFulvio (2012) found that both campus and community level changes four years into the program. The coalition used a myriad of strategies including social norming, policy changes, and heavy enforcement of those policies.

Another small liberal arts college in upstate New York developed a component of their social norming campaign that utilized digital signage in high traffic areas around campus (Van Lone, 2013). Unlike paper signage, digital media allows the content to stay current and reflect student body polls. Furthermore, they included quizzes that students can complete and turn them in to be entered in a raffle. Approximately 150 students turn in quizzes per week and the results indicate that the digital signage have reduced high-risk alcohol behaviors (Van Lone, 2013).

Finally, a strategy used to lower high-risk drinking is to reduce high-risk drinking in relationship to athletic games (Reducing high-risk drinking, 2012). To achieve this, institutions have not only educated the student body about alcohol policy, but they have provided alcohol-free alternative social events before games.

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