

# Substance **ABUSE** on Campus

What Trustees Should Know



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI  
Institute for Effective Governance

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Launched in 1995, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the country to support liberal arts education, high academic standards, the free exchange of ideas on campus, and high-quality education at an affordable price.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance, founded in 2003 by college and university trustees for trustees, is devoted to enhancing boards' effectiveness and helping trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities fully and effectively. IEG offers a range of services tailored to the specific needs of individual boards, and focuses on academic quality, academic freedom, and accountability.

# Substance **ABUSE** on Campus

## What Trustees Should Know

Please take a moment to reflect on the bright futures that end in alcohol or drug-related illness, injury or deaths at colleges and universities. Over the last decade, they have numbered in the thousands. College drinking and the use of illegal drugs are issues of extreme urgency. And you, as a trustee, have the power—and the fiduciary duty—to make the campus safer.

The transition from high school to college is a time of vulnerability for many students. For most, it is their first time away from home for an extended period, and they are thrust into an environment where everyday interactions are almost entirely with their peers. Throw alcohol and drugs into the mix and you can have a lethal combination.


Alcohol has always been an element of the social scene at universities, but lately its use has risen sharply, along with marijuana and other illegal substances. These forms of substance abuse have led to an increase in automobile crashes. Alcohol and substance abuse are also strongly correlated with increased violence, criminal behavior, and mental health disturbance.

Student drinking culture is spinning out of control—and the potential consequences, for

## Consider these alarming facts:

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- In 2005 there were 1,825 alcohol-related deaths among students between the ages of 18-24, up from 1,440 in 1998.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2001, an estimated 38,000 students reported being in auto accidents while driving under the influence of marijuana. The majority of licensed teen drivers (68 percent) who use drugs regularly report they “drug and drive.”<sup>2</sup>
- An estimated 696,000 students each year are assaulted by another student who has been drinking. Over 97,000 students each year are victims of alcohol-related sexual abuse or rape.<sup>3</sup>
- More than 40 percent of college students report having engaged in binge drinking within the last two weeks.<sup>4</sup>
- Federal data shows that for a number of delinquent or criminal behaviors including violence, the percent of youths engaging in the behavior rose with increasing frequency of marijuana use in the previous year.<sup>5</sup>
- From 1993 to 2005 the proportion of students who abused prescription painkillers rose 343 percent to nearly 240,000 students, and tranquilizers, 450 percent to nearly 170,000 students.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2005, almost 50 percent of college students—3.8 million—reported binge drinking, abusing controlled prescription drugs, or using illicit drugs in the past month.<sup>7</sup>



both students and schools, are enormous. A “party school” label compromises an institution’s academic mission and its reputation. Lawsuits arising from alcohol-related incidents, especially those involving students below the legal drinking age, are costly and often become public scandals. Schools are increasingly being held liable for alcohol-related student deaths. While recognizing that problem behaviors among students, whether manifested as poor academic performance or criminal activities, often result from a variety of causes, the observation of mental health professionals holds true: “*there is no problem so bad that drugs and alcohol will not make it worse.*”<sup>8</sup>

College administrators sometimes hesitate to take decisive action. You, as a trustee, are a fiduciary and have the power and legal authority to make necessary changes ... quickly.

In the next few pages, we outline how the growing use of alcohol and drugs is the alarming byproduct of a campus culture that de-emphasizes its academic mission, and therefore tacitly—or overtly—creates a vacuum that will readily be filled by substance abuse.

Trustees should understand that no comprehensive alcohol and substance abuse prevention program will be effective without the active input of the institution’s highest authorities—and this requires you to have the facts about drug and alcohol use on your campus.

**Once informed, there are steps institutions can take to reduce student binge drinking and substance abuse and we outline some of them.**

With the guidance of expert advisors, you can help determine what steps would be appropriate for your institution.

## **Campus Culture, Drug Use, and Drinking**

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When best-selling author Tom Wolfe was researching his 2005 novel about campus life, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, he uncovered an undergraduate culture where wild parties and instant gratification often prevailed over learning and intellectual commitment. Student surveys showing declining time spent studying or attending classes lend weight to Wolfe's portrayal.

An average undergraduate student will take about four or five courses per semester, each meeting two or three times a week for about 50 to 80 minutes—or about 12 to 15 classroom hours. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, 39 percent of college seniors study ten hours per week or less, 59 percent study 15 hours or less. In other words, most students study no more than two hours per day—and many don't even do that.

Adding class time and study time together, most students are spending substantially fewer hours per week on task than a normal nine-to-five job requires.<sup>9</sup> Because their academic responsibilities are so minimal, these students have a great deal of free time, and it is not unusual for the weekend to start on Thursday night and continue through

Saturday night. Needless to say, time spent partying cuts directly into time that could be spent studying; indeed, many students report spending more time drinking each week than they spend studying.

According to a survey of over 30,000 freshmen on 76 campuses, students who consumed at least one drink in the last two weeks spent an average of 10.2 hours a week drinking, versus an average of 8.4 hours a week studying.<sup>10</sup>

As these figures suggest, academic standards and campus culture are inextricably tied together: the more students party, the less they study. The epidemic of student binge drinking and tolerance for drug use are at least partially attributable to the widespread failure of institutions of higher education to set and maintain high academic standards. Trustees wishing to address the campus party culture would do well to take up that issue in tandem with a close examination of how well their institutions are fulfilling their academic missions.

## An Alcohol and Drug Abuse Agenda for Trustees

The problem of substance abuse and excessive student drinking is not something that is going to be ended overnight. That said, there *are* many things that colleges and universities can do to discourage excessive drinking and drug abuse among students. Trustees need to be an active part of that process.

- **Act now.** You stand in loco parentis for thousands of young people. Most of them are under age. Their well-being depends on you—

and you have a legal and ethical obligation to ensure their safety. Do not wait for yet another tragedy or another year of academic opportunity to be compromised by a culture of drinking and drug abuse. There is no time to waste.

- **Find out the facts about student drinking and substance abuse on your campus.** You simply must get the basic facts on student alcohol and illegal drug usage. How many students (particularly underage students) engage in binge drinking at your school? Is drinking or substance abuse centered on sports events or as part of the social life of fraternities, sororities, or dormitories? How has local law enforcement approached the problem of underage drinking and use of illegal drugs? If necessary, trustees can commission an anonymous survey of student practices and attitudes concerning alcohol and substance abuse, asking students why they engage in such behavior, how much, and how they perceive the habits of their peers. Awareness of how alcohol and substance abuse figure into the social life of your school is a prerequisite for developing appropriate policies.
- **Be aware of your oversight responsibilities.** Trustees, as part of their fiduciary duties, are responsible for the welfare of their institution and their students. This includes overseeing such areas as intercollegiate athletics—including the conduct of the fans and student



participants—as well as the safety and activities of campus-based student organizations, including fraternities and sororities and other similar groups. Trustees need to take proactive measures to be certain that their campuses obey federal and state laws. It is also your responsibility to ensure that students know that underage drinking and drug abuse are violations of the law, and an arrest record can bring an abrupt end to a number of career options. Clear understanding of these campus responsibilities is needed in order to develop appropriate policies.

- **Identify the current alcohol and substance abuse policies at your institution.** Trustees need to know what policies are already in place regarding drinking and substance abuse, including educational efforts, residential hall regulations, and disciplinary procedures. Does the university employ a “no tolerance” policy for underage drinking or drug use? Are certain dormitories designated as “substance free”? Are students fully informed about the dangers of binge drinking and illegal drug use? Is alcohol sold during intercollegiate athletic events? Is there adequate oversight of tailgate parties and other fan practices? If necessary, trustees should review these policies, paying special attention to their effectiveness and their appropriateness to the school’s mission.
- **Always look at the broader context.** Since the campus attitude toward drug and alcohol

use is directly related to its academic climate, ask the following questions: How many hours each week are students in class? How many classes meet on Fridays? How widespread is grade inflation, which, by itself, can reduce the incentive for academic work? Can you correlate students' drinking and drug habits with their majors? With their grade point averages? With their dropout rates or time to degree? Does the data reveal a correlation between academic laxity and an institutionalized party culture?

## Curbing Alcohol and Substance Abuse: What Other Schools Have Done

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Colleges and universities have tried a number of approaches to controlling student binge drinking and drug use. What you decide to do depends on your institution's resources and mission as well as what has been attempted in the past. For a comprehensive list of programs at colleges and universities across the country, see the "Case Studies" at the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention website: <http://www.higheredcenter.org/resources/case-studies/list>.

- **Alcohol education programs.** Programs, such as AlcoholEdu,<sup>11</sup> attempt to educate students (usually during freshman orientation) about the effects of alcohol and the dangers of binge drinking. These programs are used by institutions such as Georgetown, UC Berkeley,

the University of Iowa, and the University of Miami, among many others. It is unclear, however, whether such programs have a long-term impact on student drinking habits.

- **Social norms.** Students often have exaggerated ideas about how much their fellow students drink. These misguided ideas, in turn, can lead them to drink more than they otherwise would. The social norms approach (sometimes called “re-norming”) attempts to change students’ perceptions of what their peers are doing; the aim is to lessen the perception that “everyone is doing it.”
  - Although the effectiveness of this norming has been debated, a number of schools, most notably the University of Virginia, have experimented with it.<sup>12</sup> In 2006, UVA opened the National Social Norms Institute to research, evaluate, and promote the social norms approach to curbing student drinking.
  - A social norms and environmental management campaign at the University of Arizona resulted in a 29 percent decrease in heavy episodic drinking among undergraduates from 1995 to 1998.<sup>13</sup>
  - Haverford College’s “Quaker Bouncers” and the Dartmouth College “Green Team,” groups of students trained to recognize potentially dangerous intoxication, have substantially reduced alcohol poisoning

incidents at student parties. Such programs form part of Dartmouth College president Jim Yong Kim’s “Learning Collaborative” approach to eliminating binge drinking.<sup>14</sup>

- **Environmental management.** This term covers a wide range of actions taken to alter the environmental factors that contribute to student drinking culture, both on the campus and off. For example, colleges and universities can collaborate with the local community, including law enforcement, businesses, and concerned citizen groups, to cut down on excessive drinking off-campus as well as on-campus.
  - *Campus-community partnerships.* St. Cloud State University in Minnesota formed a Community Alliance consisting of neighborhood groups, businesses, and local government and law enforcement to help combat student alcohol abuse.<sup>15</sup>
  - *Alcohol-free entertainment.* Many schools host on-campus weekend activities for undergraduate students as an alternative to drinking. These include free movies, concerts, and other social activities that do not revolve around alcohol. For example, Penn State University’s “Late Night—Penn State” program aims to curb excessive drinking by offering free music and comedy shows, games, and movies in the student

union building. According to a 2002 survey, 66 percent of student participants said that the program resulted in their consuming less alcohol.<sup>16</sup>

- *Substance-free housing.* Many schools designate some of their on-campus housing as “substance free.” Although the arrangement is not always perfect in practice, students who elect substance-free housing note that the atmosphere is more conducive to studying and provides a more serious academic environment.<sup>17</sup> Some schools, notably Rutgers University<sup>18</sup> and Case Western Reserve University,<sup>19</sup> have even instituted “recovery housing” for students with alcohol and addiction problems.
- *Collegiate athletics.* According to the *American Journal of College Health*, college sports fans consume significantly more alcohol on game day than the last time they were at a party or social function. Alcohol is also a significant factor in unruly spectator behavior, which costs precious resources and contributes to poor institutional image. A recent study in turn shows that student grades decline when their college’s sports teams are in the finals of national tournaments, with increased drinking as one of the proximate causes.<sup>20</sup> The good news is that fans strongly support game-day interventions such as

nonalcoholic pregame events, increased crackdown on underage drinking, and designated tailgating areas.<sup>21</sup> When alcohol-related fan behavior at University of Colorado-Boulder football games led officials to restrict alcohol sales at games in 1996, the number of arrests, assaults, and disciplinary actions fell significantly, and fans continued to renew season pass subscriptions despite the new policies.<sup>22</sup>

- **Community service and engagement.** Some universities advocate service and volunteer work as a way to discourage drinking and substance abuse while promoting positive community engagement.
- **Involving parents.** Following two alcohol-related student deaths, the University of Kansas began to inform parents when their underage students were found in violation of drug and alcohol laws. Kansas State University informs parents when students have multiple substance-abuse offences on their records.<sup>23</sup> A recent study of Penn State University showed that parent-based intervention as simple as discussion of the dangers of alcohol abuse before students arrive on campus can be highly effective in curbing heavy drinking patterns.<sup>24</sup>

Since campus alcohol abuse is a multifaceted problem, university officials have responded to it in a variety of ways. What you do depends on your institution's unique characteristics, its mission, and the resources available. But all trustees need to

keep one important thing in mind: **the university is and should be primarily a place of learning and intellectual discovery.** When students drink to excess or engage in substance abuse, this is a sign that they are intellectually disengaged. This, in turn, is an indication that there is a vacuum where the central purpose of your college or university should be. Self-destructive substance abuse fills the void created by the lack of meaningful course requirements and minimal effort needed to earn passing grades. Reconnecting students with the life of the mind can make the weekdays fuller and the weekends far more temperate.

Your involvement in enhancing the academic culture of your institution is entirely within your role and responsibility as a trustee and does not constitute “micromanagement” or interference with faculty prerogatives. Faculty members have academic freedom for their teaching and research; you have the fiduciary responsibility for the academic reputation, safety, and well-being of your institution.

## Renewing the Academic Mission

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A number of options are available to help renew your institution’s academic mission.

- **Schedule more Friday classes.** Students report that the weekend is beginning earlier, with drinking often starting on Thursdays. In many cases, students arrange their schedules so that they have no classes on Fridays, and campuses generally schedule fewer sessions that day.

Scheduling more classes on Friday (especially Friday afternoon) and encouraging faculty to give quizzes and tests on Friday sends the message that the university is primarily a place of learning.


- **Create intellectual alternatives to the party culture.** Lecture series, colloquia, panel discussions, and debates can help draw students away from the drinking scene and enhance the campus intellectual climate. Programs such as the Richard Snyder President's Lecture Series at Tufts University generate packed lecture halls and fervent discussion. When students devote more time to intellectually substantive extracurricular activities, they are less likely to spend their leisure hours taking drugs or drinking to excess.
- **Represent your school as a place of learning.** Do not allow your school's logo to be used to promote the sale of alcoholic drinks. You have the legal capacity to present a more responsible image for your institution.
- **Involve the faculty.** The acute peer pressure experienced by many college students (especially first-year students) contributes significantly to the campus drinking and drug culture. Greater faculty involvement with students outside the classroom can help to draw students outside their normal social circle and give them guidance. This can be particularly effective in the context of residential life, where faculty-in-residence can elevate the campus life



experience beyond what peer advisors alone can do.

- **Address grade inflation.** Research reveals that students today spend little more than half as much time studying as they did 50 years ago, but the average student's GPA has risen from 2.5 to 3.1 over approximately the same period. Even before the dramatic findings of *Academically Adrift*<sup>25</sup> showing that substantial numbers of students have little or no cognitive gain while in college, outside evidence suggested that the reason for higher grades is not that students are smarter and more efficient in their studies. On the contrary, a survey of employers found that less than a quarter call college graduates' workforce preparation "excellent." Grade inflation is part of the problem and, as a board, you should insist on looking at information regarding grade distributions across the campus. For further information, consult ACTA's guide on this topic, *Making the Grade*.
- **Involve the alumni.** Institutions can use alumni, especially during homecoming activities, to promote alcohol-free activities and to encourage greater law enforcement during games. This can teach students that you can enjoy sporting events and show school spirit without excessive alcohol consumption.

Ensuring a safe and wholesome campus environment is one of the most important duties of governing boards. Appropriate and effective



policies on alcohol and substance abuse can literally determine not only the difference between student success and student failure, but even life and death. Your proactive approach to a better campus culture will inevitably strengthen the academic commitment and intellectual environment of your institution. Through that effort, your college will find both a better environment and a deeper and more enduring sense of purpose.

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## End Notes

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