

An Evaluation of College Online Alcohol-Policy Information

2007 Compared With 2002

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Objective

To receive federal funds, colleges and universities are required to provide information to students about their alcohol policies as part of their alcohol-abuse prevention efforts. This study investigated whether and how the availability and completeness of alcohol-policy information on college Web sites changed between 2002 and 2007.

Method

The Web sites of the top 52 national universities listed in the 2002 rankings of U.S. News and World Report, which were reviewed for alcohol-policy information in 2002, were reviewed again in 2007 using the same Web search methodology.

Results

Much more information regarding college alcohol policies was available on the Web sites of the 52 universities in 2007 than in 2002. Substantial increases were seen in the areas of (1) rules, restrictions, requirements; and (2) consequences for infractions, especially for student groups. In addition, information on university Web sites regarding their alcohol policies was easier to access in 2007 than in 2002.

Conclusions

These findings indicate that colleges have made online alcohol-policy information more available and accessible to their students and other interested parties, including parents. This may reflect a greater engagement of colleges and universities in the issue of drinking on campus in general.

Excessive and underage drinking among college students remains widespread and problematic. Studies consistently indicate that the majority of college students drink, and about half of college drinkers engage in drinking five or more drinks on an occasion ([Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002](#)), a particularly dangerous pattern of consumption. According to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006](#)), past-month alcohol use was reported by 64.4% of full-time college students. Rates of drinking five or more drinks on an occasion (heavy episodic consumption) in the past 30 days and heavy use (heavy episodic consumption on 5 or more days in the past 30 days) for college students were 44.8% and 19.5%, respectively. For persons of the same age not enrolled in college full time (i.e., part-time college students and persons not enrolled in college), rates of alcohol use, drinking five or more drinks on an occasion, and heavy use were 53.2%, 38.3%, and 13.0%, respectively. These differences between full-time college students and others ages 18-22 have remained consistent since 2002 ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006](#)).

The consequences of drinking by college students are many and far ranging. They include alcohol-related injuries, assaults, date rape, unsafe sex, academic problems, health problems including alcohol dependence and suicide attempts, drunk driving, vandalism, property damage or involvement with the law, deaths from alcohol-related motor-vehicle crashes, and other alcohol-related unintentional injuries including alcohol poisoning ([Hingson et al., 2005](#); [Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002](#)).

Addressing the high rate of alcohol use on college campuses and the negative outcomes that can follow has long been a key priority of college administrators. To receive federal funds, colleges are mandated by the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act Amendments of 1989 (PL 101-226) to implement a “program to prevent the use of illicit drugs and the abuse of alcohol by students” (PL 101-226). In 1994, as part of the Improving America's School Act (PL 103-382), and again in 2001, under the No Child Left Behind Act (PL 107-110), the law was reauthorized as the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act and expanded to promote school safety and violence prevention. Colleges and universities still adhere to the guidelines laid out in the 1989 amendment, which require at a minimum the distribution of information to students regarding the following: (1) applicable laws regulating alcohol and drug use; (2) the health risks associated with illicit drugs and alcohol; (3) any counseling, treatment, and education programs available to students; and (4) a clear statement that the institution will impose penalties for violations of its standards of conduct and a description of those penalties. This act also requires a biennial evaluation of the program.

In 2002, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism released its landmark report, “A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges,” that highlighted the problem of alcohol consumption on America's campuses and described potential interventions and their evidence base ([Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002](#)). At about the same time, recognizing that the Web was increasingly becoming a source of information for students, [Faden and Baskin \(2002\)](#) evaluated college online alcohol-policy information. Reasoning that national universities might have the most sophisticated Web sites, they investigated the sites of the top 50 (actually 52 because of ties) national universities from U.S. News & World Report's 2002 annual college rankings. This analysis revealed that, whereas most of the schools evaluated had some alcohol-policy information on their Web sites, it likely did not reflect their complete policy. Furthermore, the policy information was often difficult to access, because different components of the policy were spread across a number of locations on the site. Likewise, a 2005 study by Hirschfeld et al. that rated the Web accessibility of alcohol policies for 24 colleges found considerable variability among schools, concluding that obtaining this information typically required “effort.”

Of note, the prevalence of drinking on campus has declined somewhat since 2002. The American College Health Association National College Health Assessment Survey conducted in the fall of 2002 indicated that 82.9% of college students had used alcohol in their lives ([American College Health Association, 2003](#)), and 70.5% of them had used alcohol in the last 30 days. In the fall of 2007, those rates were 77.2% and 61.8%, respectively ([American College Health Association, 2008](#)), indicating some improvement across the 5-year period. This improvement may be, in part, because since 2002, many colleges have engaged the problem of drinking on campus even more vigorously than before ([Larimer and Cronce, 2002, 2007](#); [Toomey and Wagenaar, 2002](#); [Toomey et al., 2007](#)).

In addition, of the 52 schools studied by [Faden and Baskin \(2002\)](#), many now require some form of alcohol education for incoming freshman. Currently, 35 of the 52 colleges use online alcohol education courses to inform students about the risks of alcohol. The majority of the institutions are thus using the Internet as a means to educate and inform students, as the Web has become an ever more prominent part of college life, and life in general, than it was just several years ago. In fact, the student handbook at many schools is now available only on the Web. The purpose of the present study was to evaluate changes in the availability and accessibility of online college alcohol policies between 2002 and 2007.

Method

To ensure comparability, the methods used in the previous study ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)) were closely followed. The same 52 universities surveyed previously were studied again. These schools, ranked as the top 50 national universities that award doctoral degrees (52 including two ties) by U.S. News & World Report in 2002, differed from the 2007 top 50 ranking only by the addition of 1 school and the deletion of 2 in 2007. The full list of universities studied is available from the authors.

As in the previous study, the Web sites of the 52 universities were carefully scrutinized ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)). Also as in the prior study, the components of the alcohol policies that are listed in [Table 1](#) were organized into four categories: (1) information/explanations (4 items); (2) rules, restrictions, and requirements (16 items); (3) possible consequences delivered to groups (4 items); and (4) possible consequences delivered to individuals (9 items). In the 2002 study, the relevant alcohol-policy components were determined by reviewing the relevant literature on college and university alcohol policies ([Toomey and Wagenaar, 2002](#); [Wechsler et al., 2000](#)), visiting the Web sites of a number of well-known schools, and reviewing the student handbooks of others. The same categories were retained, but after reviewing the Web sites for the present study, one component was added to the rules, restrictions, and requirements category because many schools now include a specific policy on bring-your-own-beverage events.

Table 1
Summary of alcohol-related policies and content based on Web site information for the 52 universities—2007 compared with 2002^a

Alcohol-related policies and content	2002		2007		McNemar's test ^b <i>P</i>
	Policy page	Elsewhere	Policy page	Elsewhere	
Information/explanation					
Explanation/citation of applicable laws	49	0	46	6	.08
Description of health risks	25	22	35	17	.03
Information about counseling offered by school	33	14	37	15	.03
Phone numbers/contact for counseling provided	19	27	33	19	.01
	Permitted	Not permitted	Permitted	Not permitted	
Rules, restrictions, and requirements					
Consumption in dorms	32	4	50	2	<.0001
Consumption in public places	0	38	0	38	1.00
Sponsorship by alcohol manufacturer	5	4	6	11	.002
Tailgating	7	1	11	4	.0001
Consumption in stadium	1	13	0	21	.04
Alcohol references in advertising	10	21	9	32	.05
Use of student funds to buy alcohol	3	10	2	28	.01
Alcohol at membership recruitments	0	9	0	32	.07
	Restricted	Not restricted	Restricted	Not Restricted	

Table 1

Summary of alcohol-related policies and content based on Web site information for the 52 universities—2007 compared with 2002^a

As before, each Web search began by using the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Web site on college drinking (www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov), which provides links to alcohol policies for colleges and universities. If the university's link was not provided on the Web site or if the link provided was not accurate, the search began on the institution's homepage. Each site was browsed extensively and each was searched for the terms "alcohol policy," "student handbook," "alcohol regulations," "student alcohol policy," and "undergraduate alcohol policy." Searches targeted toward

specific components of the policy, such as the university's residential life page to locate components relating to consumption of alcohol in residential areas, also were conducted.

Whenever it was available online, the student handbook was carefully examined, as was the Judicial and Student Affairs portions of the Web site. As in the previous study, the sites varied in their organization and sophistication, which influenced the search process. Each individual search of a Web site was guided by how the sites were organized, much as a casual searcher would be guided. The 52 Web sites were thoroughly and repeatedly searched to determine whether each policy component was mentioned anywhere on the sites.

In analyzing the Web-based alcohol-policy information for a school, the first step was to locate the "main alcohol policy page," which is defined for purposes of this study as a page clearly labeled as the university's alcohol policy. This page would often be the only location to include certain features, such as an explanation of alcohol-related laws. The main alcohol policy page would often have the most information related to the alcohol policy in one place, thus providing the most comprehensive account of the school's alcohol policy. The school's policy was labeled incomplete until this page was located. The page could often be found in multiple places, such as in the online student handbook or on a university policy page. Any additional Web pages that referred to the alcohol policy, such as pages dedicated to residential life or fraternity/sorority life, also were examined, and information from them was included in the compilation of the results on the university's Web-based alcohol policy.

To assess the accuracy and completeness of the information compiled, a phone follow-up with administrative personnel at nine schools was conducted. (Nine were chosen because nine is the maximum number of contacts that can be made by a federal agency without Office of Management and Budget clearance.) Administrative personnel from the same nine schools randomly selected in the previous study ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)) were interviewed for the present study. The nine schools were telephoned to ask school officials, such as the dean of students, about each aspect of the alcohol policy that had been identified during the Web-site search process. Inquiries were made regarding whether there were any additional components of the policy that had not been identified and how often the policy was reviewed or updated. Questions were asked to determine how the information in the alcohol policy was made available to students and parents and if freshman students were required to undergo any alcohol education, such as AlcoholEdu (<http://college.alco-holedu.com>; Outside the Classroom, Inc., Needham, MA) or Mystudentbody.com (Inflexxion Inc., Newton MA), which are two of the most popular commercially developed products marketed to colleges and universities for the purpose of providing online alcohol education to students. Finally, a copy of the student handbook was requested.

Results

The main policy page was located for 48 of the 52 schools. For the four schools for which no main policy page was located online, information was found pertaining to at least some of the components.

As seen in the previous study ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)), the sites varied in their organization and ease of use. Some schools presented all aspects of the policy in one location, either on the same page or by providing links to other pages. Other schools provided the information in multiple sections of the school's Web site without linking it to the main page. For example, some schools detailed the possible consequences for group violations of the alcohol policy on the main policy page, whereas others gave only a general statement on consequences on the main page and listed the specific consequences under the Judicial Affairs section of the Web site.

Because of the nature of the search methodology, it is impossible to determine with complete certainty whether the absence of information meant that a school did not have that particular component in their alcohol policy or that the component was not described on the Web site. Any component not located was labeled as “no mention,” and the policy was labeled as “incomplete” for that component. It is possible that the information was on the Web site and that the search methodology used did not locate it.

Overall, a significantly greater amount of information was located than in the previous study ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)), and it was better organized. Twenty schools had their policy in one location in 2007 compared with 18 schools in 2002, and 10 more schools mentioned sanctions on the policy page than had been the case in the prior study (48 schools in 2007 vs 38 schools in 2002). More schools also listed contact information for counseling and a description of health risks on the main policy page.

[Table 1](#) provides a summary of the specific policy data found for the 52 schools in 2007 compared with that for the 2002 study. In the present study, information for more schools was located for all but one of the components, and, for that component (consumption in public places), the number of schools with information was the same as in 2002. Information for all 52 schools was located for five of the components, including all of the components in the information/explanation category and the policy on consumption in dormitories. The availability of information about each component in 2002 and 2007 was compared using the McNemar's test. Most differences were statistically significant, indicating greater availability of information in 2007 than in 2002.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the change in the four categories of policy information between 2002 and 2007. In all four policy areas, significantly more ($p < .0001$) components were mentioned in the Web sites in 2007 than in 2002. Particularly striking is the increase in information about possible consequences, especially for groups of students but also for individuals. This information about consequences is presented visually in [Figure 1](#).

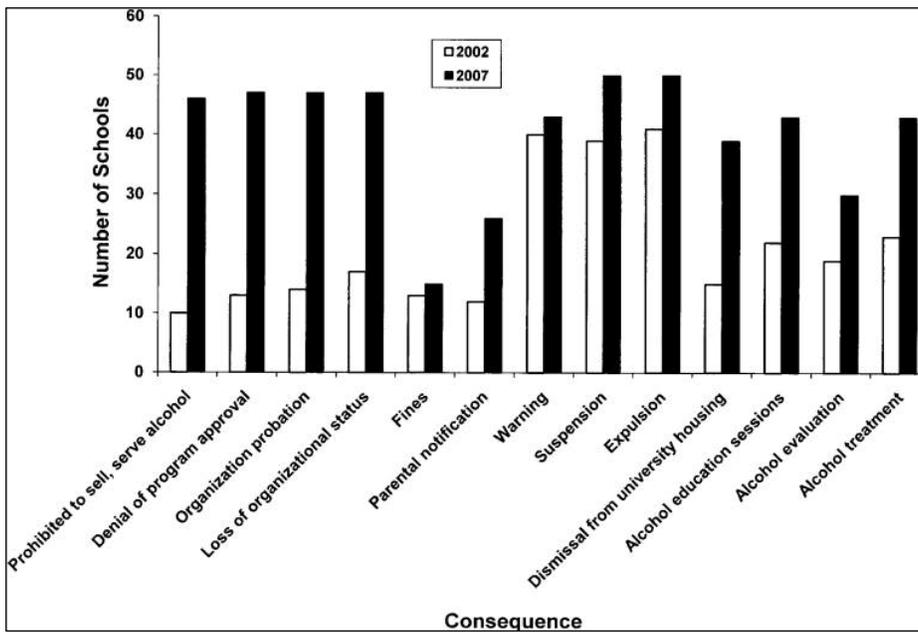


Figure 1
Information about consequences of alcohol violations

Table 2
Mean number of alcohol policy components mentioned in 52 university Web sites, by category

Category	Components		Paired t test <i>P</i>
	<i>n</i>	No. mentioned	
	2002	2007	
Information/explanations	4	2.6 4.0	<.0001
Rules	15	6.2 9.2	<.0001
Consequences			
Group	4	1.2 3.6	<.0001
Individual	9	4.5 6.5	<.0001

Table 2
Mean number of alcohol policy components mentioned in 52 university Web sites, by category

As before (Faden and Baskin, 2002), a telephone follow-up was conducted with some administrators at the colleges and universities to compare what could be learned directly from school personnel about a school's alcohol policy with what had been found on the Web site. Follow-up was done with the same nine schools as in the previous study. At some of the schools, one administrator was able to provide all the information requested. However, at others, the response(s) of the administrator(s) mirrored the decentralized nature of the policy online. In other words, particular school officials knew about only the section(s) of the policy for which they were responsible, and it was necessary to speak with several persons to ascertain the full policy. Some of the administrators seemed well versed in the policy, whereas others said that they were reading from the policy as they were answering our questions.

At one school, we were redirected to several different administrative offices, none of which were either able or available to answer questions. This school was sent an email inquiry to which the administrator responded by directing us to the Web site. At an additional school, we were unable, despite repeated attempts, to speak with an administrator. The telephone follow-up was therefore completed with seven of the nine schools from the original list.

The kappa statistic was computed to summarize the agreement of the Web site information with that reported by school administrators. For the information/explanations category, the information was the same for both. For the rules category, κ 's ranged from 0 to .26. For the group consequences and individual consequences, κ 's ranged from 0 to 1.

Discussion

In the previous study ([Faden and Baskin, 2002](#)), it was difficult to locate all the components of the alcohol policies for the universities investigated. In 2002, most of the schools presented their online alcohol-policy information in a decentralized fashion, breaking it up among different departments such as Student Affairs and Residential Life. Also, the search methodology did not locate information about many of the components when in actuality there was a policy in place, as indicated by the follow-up telephone conversations with the school officials. A recommendation that emerged from the prior study was that schools post their complete alcohol policies in one location on their Web sites to better enable easy online access by students and parents to this important information. Although the present study showed some improvements, this recommendation still applies.

Evaluating each school's Web site 5 years later indicated that substantially more information was being presented online in 2007 than in 2002. Although only two more schools provided all their information in one location, many of the schools had more information listed somewhere on their Web site than was located in the earlier study, particularly in the area of consequences for alcohol violations. The level of detail about the policies found online was another improvement compared with the prior results, although certain schools still lacked information and no schools had all of the components of their alcohol policy online.

As in the prior study, the ease of navigation varied from site to site. The easiest sites to search for alcohol-policy information were those whose search engines led directly to the main alcohol policy page when one searched using terms such as "student alcohol policy" and "student handbook." Even if the policy was not all in one place, some schools clearly labeled the parts of the alcohol policy that were on the Residential Life or Student Affairs homepages. For other schools, however, it was more difficult to find the information, and the searcher had to go through multiple links to get it. The Web-site search process used involved spending several hours examining each Web site, but a casual searcher is unlikely to be as persistent.

This study has several limitations. Similar to the previous study, when no information about a particular policy component was found for a particular school, it was impossible to be certain that the school had no policy addressing that component, because the information might actually have been on the Web site but not found by the search methods used. However, as before, the search was extensive. Therefore, it is likely that the information was not there; even if it were, however, it is unlikely that a casual searcher would find it.

Next, because the telephone follow-up involved the same nine schools as before, for purposes of comparability, the sample of follow-up schools again comprised mostly large state schools in the lower half of the top 50. In addition, for the present study, we were unable to get information from two of the schools despite repeated attempts to do so.

This study was not designed to directly address the relationship between the accessibility and availability of alcohol-policy information online and student drinking. However, prior studies have shown that students who attended college in states with more alcohol-control policies such as keg registration and restrictions on happy hours were less likely to drink five or more drinks on an occasion ([Nelson et al., 2005](#)). Presumably, awareness and enforcement of these policies factor into these effects. Similarly, one could imagine that ease of Web access to a school's alcohol policies would factor into student awareness of the policies and the consequences for violating them.

At the end of the previous study, it was recommended that schools post their complete policies in one location on their Web sites and make it easier to locate the policy by posting direct links to the alcohol policy. Repeating the described systematic search of the 52 Web sites 5 years later showed that there was more information being posted online. However, information was still often spread out across different parts of the Web sites. Although there is no way to know for sure, this is likely because of lack of recognition of the value of centralizing this information and not related to any disincentive to doing so. By centralizing the alcohol-policy information in one location, in addition to emphasizing information relevant to different departments, schools could make it easier for students and other interested persons to become informed about and understand all aspects of a school's alcohol policy. Schools could also begin to investigate directly the relationship between readily available Web site information on alcohol policies and actual rates of drinking on their campuses.

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