

Campus Alcohol Policies:

An Examination of Student Attitudes
Towards Policies and Their Enforcement

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Introduction

Much of the progress achieved over the past two decades in campus alcohol prevention can be attributed to the adoption of a public health approach, which has resulted in an emphasis on universally-targeted approaches that complement programs for students at higher risk for alcohol problems. An important facet of the public health approach is an emphasis on policies to deter high-risk behavior. There is a wealth of research on the impact of community, state, and even federal policies that target underage and high-risk alcohol use, yet much less is known about the impact of campus-level policies designed to address alcohol problems among college students.

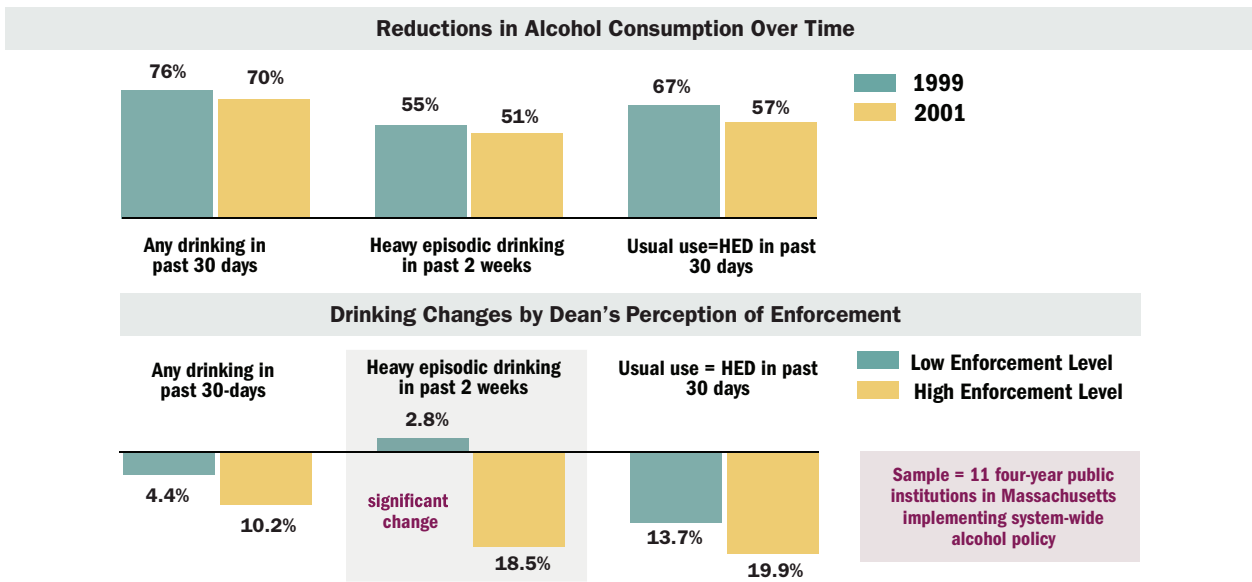
The following report describes findings from the existing literature on campus alcohol policies, plus survey data collected by EverFi, formerly Outside The Classroom, to measure first-year college students' attitudes towards the development and enforcement of campus alcohol policies. While there is a continuing need to examine the impact of campus alcohol policies on student alcohol use and its consequences, these findings provide a solid, evidence-informed foundation for the adoption and implementation of stronger policies on campus.

The Campus Alcohol Policy Literature

In early 2011, EverFi staff undertook a thorough review of research pertaining to college alcohol policies, dating back to 1997. Unfortunately, much of the research under examination is descriptive in nature and does not seek to demonstrate the impact of policies on student behavior. Some of this research describes the implementation of outright prohibitions on alcohol, either campus-wide or in particular settings (e.g., tailgating, residence halls, Greek housing, etc.), while other studies focus on a broader range of alcohol control policies designed to curtail alcohol-related problems and protect student health. Importantly, most of this research, conducted as part of the Harvard College Alcohol Study, is somewhat dated, stemming from surveys conducted in 2000 and 2002.

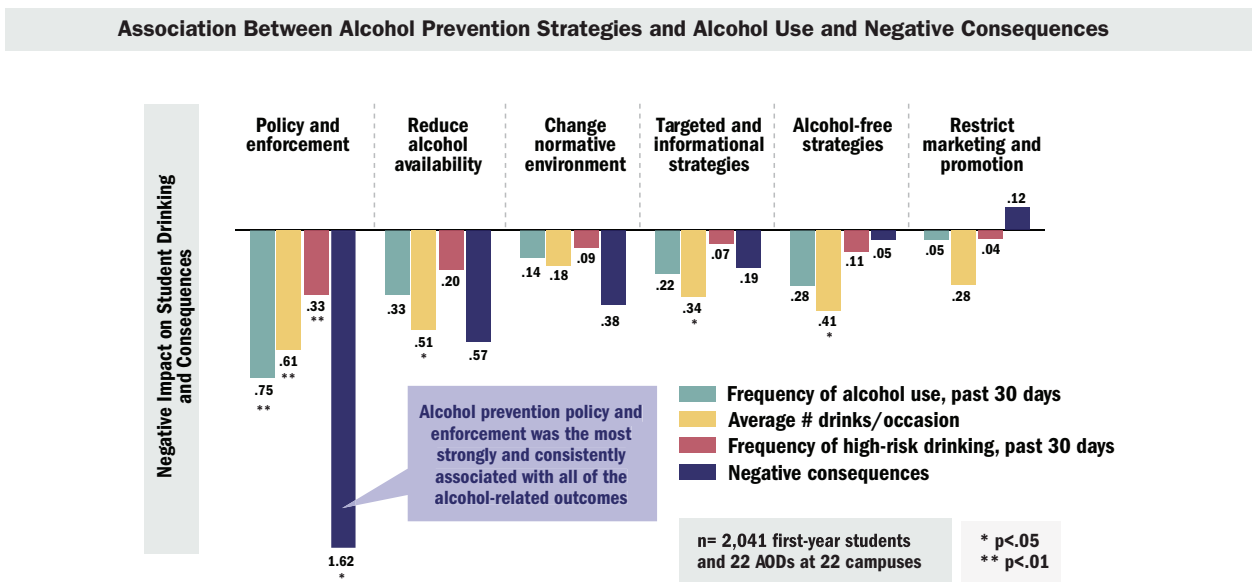
Regarding the enforcement of campus alcohol policies, there is a growing body of research examining policy enforcement by campus officials and its association with violations, alcohol use, and problems experienced by students. One dated but nonetheless relevant study from the University of Rhode Island demonstrates how stronger alcohol policy enforcement by residence life staff can lead to significant declines in violations over time.¹ A more recent longitudinal analysis of 11 public institutions in Massachusetts, all of which implemented a system-wide alcohol policy, also demonstrated significant reductions in alcohol use over time. Notably, these reductions were associated with the dean's perception of enforcement levels on campus: student behavior changed the most where the deans considered enforcement levels to be strongest. Interestingly, changes in student behavior were not associated with the chief security officers' ratings of enforcement.²

Figure 1: Dean's Policy Enforcement Perception Mirrors Student Behavior



Perhaps the best demonstration to date of the impact of campus alcohol policies on student behavior comes from a recent examination of student behavior and campus official reports from 22 institutions across the U.S.³ Here, alcohol prevention efforts on 22 campuses were categorized as policy and enforcement initiatives, efforts to reduce alcohol availability, changes to the normative environment, educational efforts, and so on. These were then measured against student responses to surveys administered on these campuses. Compared with other types of efforts, alcohol policy changes were the most significantly and strongly related to lower levels of student alcohol use and related problems (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Policy and Enforcement Efforts Strongly Related to Alcohol-Related Outcomes



One area needing research attention is the impact of specific alcohol citations and sanctions on student conduct. This research is almost wholly descriptive, providing a snapshot of the extent to which campuses impose certain types of sanctions or consequences for various types of alcohol violations. One study examining the relative impact of “passive sanctions” (e.g., warnings, probations, suspensions) versus “active sanctions” (e.g., mandated education, community service, other assignments) found no differences on rates of recidivism and retention.⁴

POLICY EVALUATION: A CALL TO ACTION

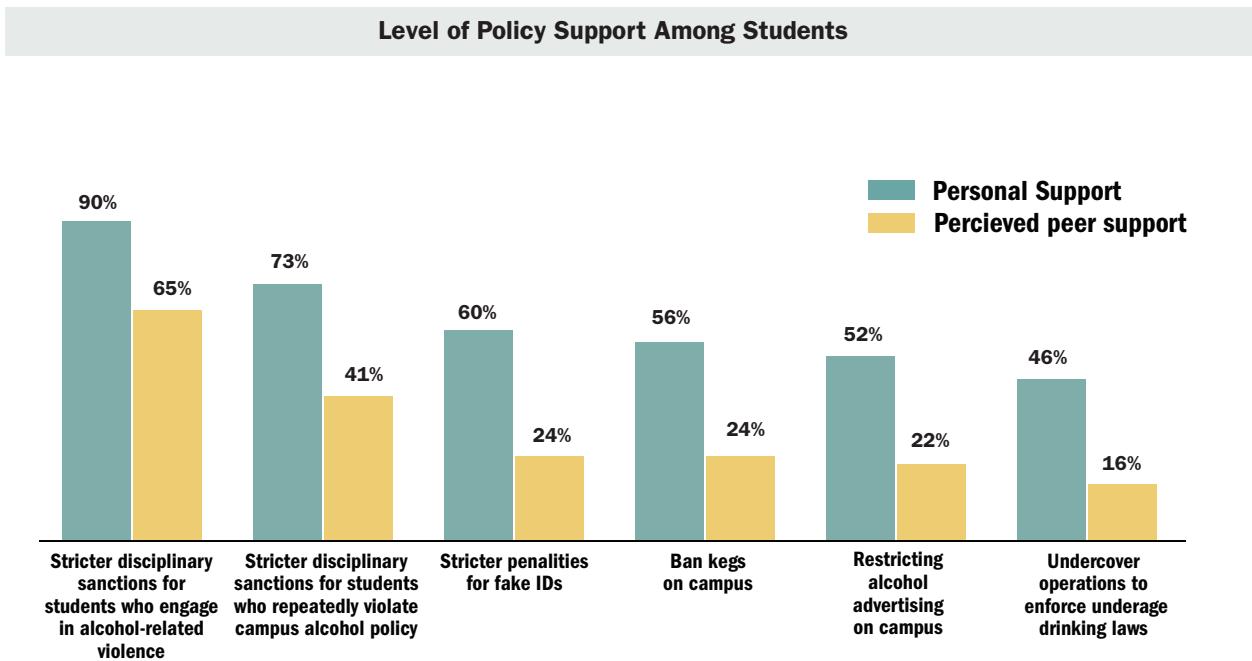
Our research efforts revealed few actionable insights to demonstrate how campus alcohol policies are best formed, implemented, enforced, and adjudicated. Evaluations designed to demonstrate whether policies are having their intended impact are lacking, in part due to a lack of institutional capacity. When seeking to identify best practices in campus alcohol prevention, we encountered very few campus officials who were making an honest attempt to measure the impact of their alcohol policies on student behaviors.

As part of our investigation, we did identify a few discrete practices for assessing policies and their adjudication which may lead the way to improved outcome tracking and evaluation over time. We encourage Coalition campuses to engage us in their efforts to better track the impact of their campus policy efforts. Through our continued efforts to highlight and build upon evaluation practices, we are committed to providing tools and improving skills in program and policy evaluation among Coalition campuses.

Student Support for Campus Alcohol Policies and Enforcement

One aspect of campus alcohol policy receiving considerable attention in the research literature is the degree of student support for campus alcohol policies. Initial studies arose from a social norms perspective. Researchers hypothesized that just as students underestimate the extent of alcohol use among their peers, they would similarly believe less support for campus alcohol prevention existed among their peers than in reality. This hypothesis was confirmed in an initial 2007 study of 5,210 students from 32 institutions across the U.S.⁵ This study demonstrated majority student support for a variety of measures including stricter sanctions for policy violators, banning kegs on campus, and undercover operations to enforce the minimum legal drinking age. Moreover, students underestimated the extent of support for these policies by anywhere from 28 to 65 percent.

Figure 3: Student Support of Alcohol Policies in a National Sample



Subsequent institutional-level research has verified that student support for alcohol policies and prevention efforts is much greater than students suspect. This research is valuable, as it may mirror misperceptions of campus administrators who are reluctant to act more forcefully on the issue of alcohol for fear of student backlash.

In addition to the misperception research, further research has confirmed the large degree of student support for alcohol policies in general. Responses from a sample of 164,653 students from 194 institutions across the U.S. were analyzed in an examination of data from the Core Survey administered between 1996 and 2010.⁶ In this study, students were asked if they 1) knew of and supported campus alcohol rules, 2) knew of and opposed them, 3) knew of and didn't have an opinion, or 4) were unaware of campus policies. The survey then asked them to indicate the attitudes and awareness of their peers. Results indicated that students supported policies far more (48%) than they opposed them (18%). Here too, students believed there was less support than in reality (30% vs. 48% actual) and more opposition than in reality (37% vs. 18% actual).

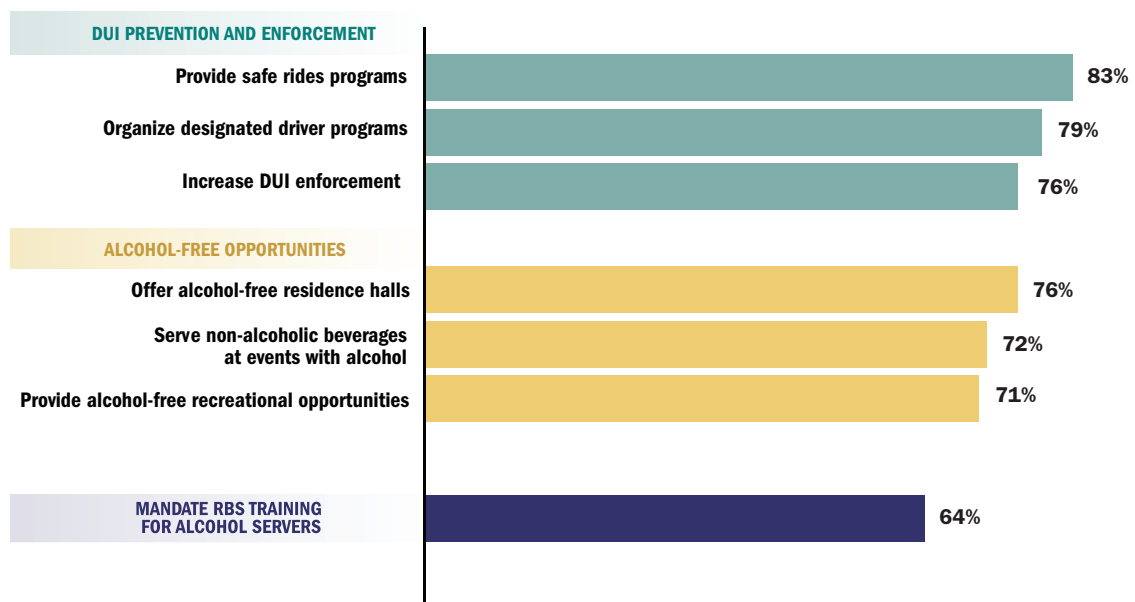
Analysis of AlcoholEdu Data

In order to gain further insight into student opinions on this topic, we collected survey data via the fall 2010 administration of AlcoholEdu for College™ regarding students' attitudes and perceptions of campus alcohol policies. Our analysis of responses from 2,500 first-year undergraduates provided several interesting insights related to the development and enforcement of policies to protect college student health and wellbeing.

As part of this survey, students were asked, "to what extent do you support or oppose the following possible policies or procedures?" followed by a list of 44 measures to control or sanction student alcohol use. For each item, a 7-point Likert scale presented response options ranging from (1) strongly opposed to (7) strongly support. In our analysis of the data, we discovered that approximately a third of students responded "4" on the scale, demonstrating neither opposition nor support for these measures. In order to assess the measure of support or opposition among those who expressed an opinion one way or the other, we removed the "4" responses from our analysis.

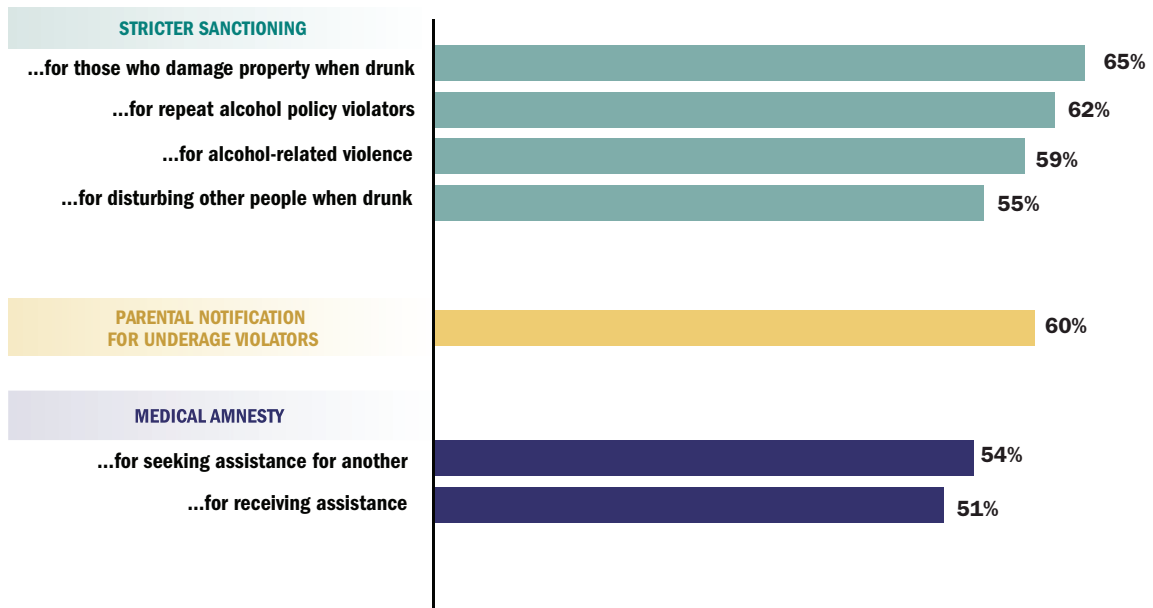
Our findings concluded that student support was greatest for policies to enforce and prevent drunk driving: safe rides programs (83% support), designated driver programs (79%), and increased DUI enforcement (76%). Second to this category, support for alcohol-free opportunities was also strong: substance-free residence halls (76%), alcohol-free beverages provided at events with alcohol (72%), and provision of alcohol-free activities (71%). Policy positions enjoying the least amount of support included requiring more early morning and Friday classes, and notably, having no policies or procedures to curtail alcohol use.

Figure 4: Campus Policies with Greatest Student Support



There was also majority support for a number of institutional responses to policy violators: stricter sanctions for those who damage property when drunk (65%), for repeat alcohol policy violators (62%), for alcohol-related violence (59%), and for disturbing others when drunk (55%). Other campus responses to alcohol policy violators that received majority support included parental notification (60%) and medical amnesty for seeking emergency assistance for others (54%) or for receiving such assistance (51%).

Figure 5: Student Support for Institutional Responses to Policy Violators



Relationship between Perceptions of Enforcement and Alcohol Problems among Students

In the same survey, students were asked about the prevalence of conduct-related problems among students on their campus: alcohol use, other drug use, sexual assault, suicide, physical assaults, vandalism, racial tension, and harassment because of religion, race, and gender. Separately, they were also asked how likely it was for students to get caught for a variety of violations: underage drinking anywhere, in a residence hall, underage students playing drinking games, and underage drinking at a university-sponsored event.

We hypothesized that students who indicated that it was unlikely for violators to get caught would report a higher level of problems among students on their campus. Instead, we found the opposite: students who said that violators were likely to get caught for alcohol violations also indicated a high level of conduct of problems on campus. This finding suggests that information about campus alcohol policy enforcement may signal to students that there are significant problems on campus that need to be addressed through stricter measures.

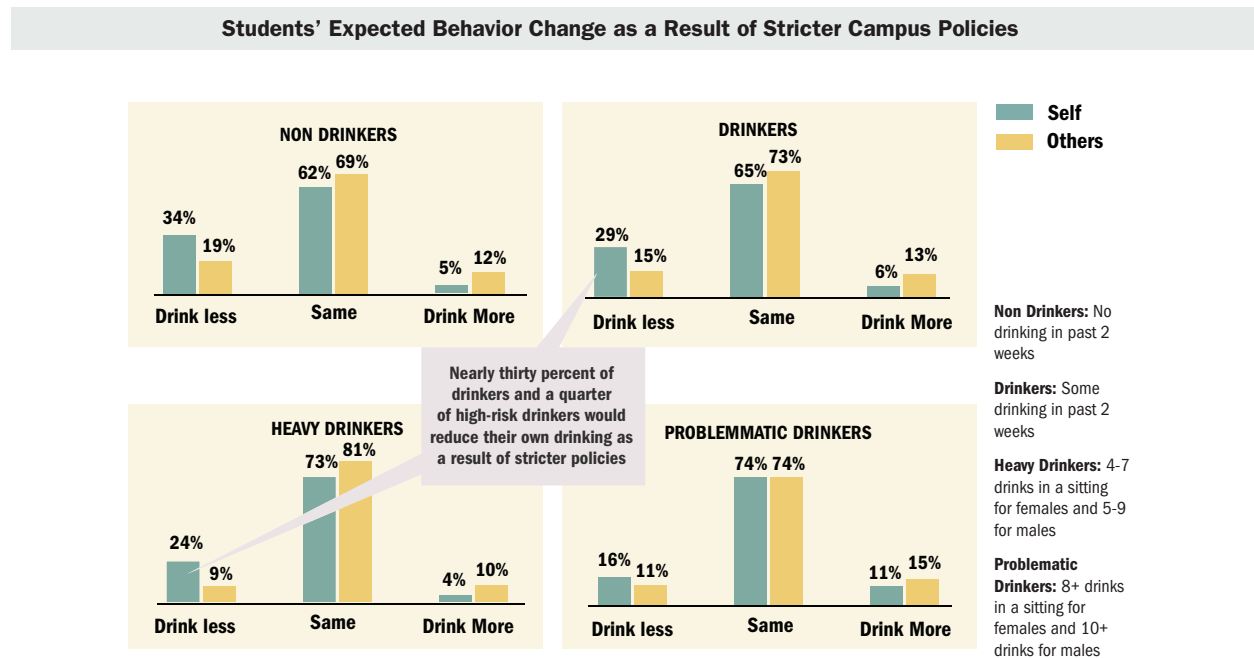
Previously, many researchers have suggested that publicity of enforcement efforts is beneficial in sending a message to students about the extent to which policy violations are taken seriously. We still believe this to be true. Given the findings of this study, however, campus administrators may want to balance any messages that publicize policy enforcement with other messages that announce students' healthy behavioral norms.

Student Responses to Stricter Campus Policies

Among the most interesting findings arose from our investigation into how students might respond if their campus alcohol policies were stricter. Students were asked, “If alcohol policies on your campus were stricter, which of the following do you think most people at your school would do?” Their response options were “drink less than now,” “drink the same as now,” and “drink more than now.” They were also asked, using the same response options, how they would respond to stricter campus policies.

We were particularly interested to see how students’ level of alcohol use might be related to their responses to these questions. We split the sample into four categories of drinkers based upon their reported alcohol consumption in the previous two weeks: non-drinkers, defined as having no alcohol; drinkers, defined as having three or fewer drinks in a sitting for women, and four or fewer drinks for men; heavy drinkers, defined as having between four and seven drinks for women, and between five and nine drinks for men; and problematic drinkers, who had eight or more drinks for women, and ten or more drinks for men. Figure 6 details our analysis of these findings.

Figure 6: The Impact of Stricter Policies on Student Alcohol Use



Among non-drinkers, drinkers, and high-risk drinkers, the percentage of students indicating they would drink less was five to seven times the percentage of those who said they would drink more. Only in the problematic drinking category did the percentage of students who indicated they would drink more come within 20 percentage points of those who would drink less. Notably, nearly 30 percent of students in the drinker category and a quarter of those in the high-risk category stated that they would reduce their own drinking as a result of stricter policies. These findings belie the assumption of administrators—and protests of vocal students—that stricter policies will in some manner exacerbate student alcohol use and problems. Further, they lend support to a growing body of evidence indicating that changes in written alcohol policies and their enforcement can positively impact the alcohol use of lower risk and high-risk drinkers alike.

Student Perceptions vs. Reality

Across all four drinking categories, the percentage of students who thought that other students would drink less as a result of stricter policies was smaller than the percentage who said that they themselves would do this. Likewise, the percentage who thought that other students would drink more was greater than the percentage who said that they themselves would do this. These findings demonstrate that students expect their peers will respond much more negatively to tougher policies than is actually the case. This finding is consistent with previous social norms research showing that college students typically perceive their peers to have unhealthier habits and attitudes concerning a range of topics, from substance use and safer sex to views regarding women and gender.

With the disproportionate attention that is given to student opposition to campus alcohol policies, these research findings are critically important to share with campus administrators who may unduly fear student backlash in response to stricter alcohol policies. Of course, just as important is to collect this type of information on an individual campus level. Local data are extremely influential in the consideration of new policy initiatives. While survey questions used in this analysis were shared with Alcohol Prevention Coalition partners at the 2011 Annual Research Summit, EverFi staff are happy to share the full list of measures should a campus be interested in collecting this important information from their students.

Conclusion

Changes in policy are a critical component of the public health approach to addressing underage and high-risk alcohol use among college students. On many campuses, administrators may raise their hands as if policy enforcement is too difficult, or that it is an ineffective tool in countering the problems that result from collegiate drinking. However, a growing body of research has borne out the idea that campuses can exert control over their students' alcohol use by adopting and enforcing effective campus policies.

A critical question, then, is whether students will rise up in revolt to such changes. In fact, a majority of first-year college students support a wide range of alcohol control policies at both the campus and the community level. Moreover, students indicate that their own behavior would not move in a negative direction as a result of stiffer campus alcohol policies. Administrators can head off student opposition by publicizing this type of survey data.

Efforts by campus administrators to make an honest assessment of their students' attitudes towards policy changes at the campus level are long overdue. The majority of healthy students on our nation's campuses deserve the benefit of the doubt regarding their attitudes towards positive change. Given that the health and safety of our campuses and students lie in the balance, administrators' attention to these matters is of utmost importance.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cohen, F. & Rogers, D. (1997). Effects of Alcohol Policy Change. *Journal of Drug and Alcohol Education*, 42:2.

² Harris, S., Sherritt, S., Van Hook, S., Wechsler, H. & Knight, J. (2010). Alcohol policy enforcement and changes in student drinking rates in a statewide public college system: a follow-up study. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 5:18.

³ Ringwalt, C., Paschall, M., & Gitelman, A. (2011). Alcohol prevention strategies on college campuses and student alcohol abuse and related problems. *Journal of Drug Education*. 41(1), 99-118.

⁴ Kompalla, S. & Mccarthy, M. (2001). The effect of judicial sanctions on recidivism and retention. *College Student Journal*. 35(2): 223.

⁵ DeJong, W., Towvim, L., & Schneider, S. (2007). Support for alcohol-control policies and enforcement strategies among US college students at 4-year institutions. *Journal of American College Health*, 56(3): 231-236.

⁶ Perkins, W. (2011, January). *Nation-Wide Findings from the Campus Survey of Alcohol and Other Drug Norms*. Presented at the NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) National Conference on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention, Miami, FL.