RUNNING HEAD: Heads UP!

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Heads UP! A Nested Intervention with Freshmen Male College Students and the Broader Campus Community to Promote Responsible Drinking

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Abstract

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism developed several guidelines for effective interventions in dealing with problematic college student drinking; including targeted individual interventions paired with broader campus community involvement. The Heads UP! Project combines these suggestions in an effort to intervene with high-risk freshmen male college students during their initial semester at school. In doing so, the project seeks to reduce campus alcohol-related negative events and prevent these high-risk students from developing dangerous drinking patterns throughout college. The project aims to provide an environment that supports the freshmen students in actively following the goals outlined by the intervention, while actively impacting the overall campus to make responsible drinking decisions. Promising results are forthcoming and other universities are encouraged to design and adopt similar nested programs with high-risk populations on campus.
Problematic student drinking impacts almost every major university in the United States. Universities seek to implement programs that reduce the incidence of negative alcohol-related events on campus, both towards the school (i.e. theft, property damage) and towards the individual (i.e. academic failure, sexual assault, violence). Most interventions to date are general, casting a wide net over students, but Wechsler and colleagues suggest that school communities must go beyond “one size fits all” approaches, since problematic drinking may be influenced by various personal and environmental characteristics. One or more general programs may not be as beneficial as targeting different high-risk populations with separate programs in reducing drinking and drinking-related problems.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Task Force on College Student Drinking (NIAAA) suggests that successful interventions need to target both high-risk individuals and the broader campus community. Strong evidence from the NIAAA supports the effectiveness of interventions that simultaneously (1) address alcohol-related attitudes and behaviors, (2) use survey data to counter students’ misconceptions about their fellow students’ attitudes towards excessive drinking and drinking practices, and (3) increase students’ motivation to change their drinking habits. Programs that combine these three empirically validated approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing problem drinking.

Freshmen students may be at particular risk for alcohol related problems. Likewise, heavy drinking patterns established during the early days of freshmen year often continue throughout college. Turrisi, Padilla, and Wiersma found that both traditional and nontraditional freshmen consume larger amounts of alcohol than upperclassmen. Early interventions with freshmen might be successful in warding off subsequent problems.

Programs utilizing the strategies of Motivational Interviewing (MI) have been successful in reducing college student drinking. These adaptations of Motivational Interviewing (AMIs) include providing feedback to change student perception of normative drinking, helping students find inconsistencies between their goals and current behavior, and helping students learn new
strategies to deal with high-risk situations. All this is implemented in the non-punitive, non-confrontational style that is at the heart of MI. Several reviews note the effectiveness of AMIs\textsuperscript{9,10,11} and effective use of AMIs by clinicians not specializing in substance abuse treatment.\textsuperscript{9}

Consistent with the NIAAA guidelines, the current program, \textit{Heads UP!}, involves a nested approach to intervention that targets one particular high-risk group of students while providing support and infrastructure for broader campus culture change with respect to drinking. At the center is a group AMI intervention administered to freshmen male students during their initial six weeks in college. Complementing this group intervention are several campus wide initiatives designed to impact the broader campus culture’s views and reactions to alcohol-related problems and create a campus culture supportive of responsible and mindful behavior.

**Overview of the Heads UP!**

**Group Intervention**

A group intervention with freshmen male students is at the center of the \textit{Heads UP!} Project. Groups of 10-15 students participate in a 60-90 minute intervention conducted in the style of MI that aims to promote responsible drinking, reduce high-risk drinking, and decrease negative alcohol related incidents on campus, including violations of campus alcohol policies. The groups are conducted by masters and doctoral level MI trained facilitators and merge several empirically validated techniques into one brief group intervention. These techniques include a Timeline Followback measure, social norms feedback, group and individual decisional balances, relapse prevention, expectancy challenges, and the setting of individual behavioral goals about future drinking behavior. At the end of the group intervention, individuals continue to monitor alcohol use by filling out monthly drinking diaries.

Upon arrival, participants complete an initial questionnaire that assesses current drinking behavior and attitudes toward drinking. After the questionnaire, the group intervention begins with a \textit{Timeline Followback (TLFB)}\textsuperscript{12} assessment, where the facilitator leads participants back day-by-day through three month calendars in which each participant individually records each of
their drinking days and the quantity they drank. In addition to providing researchers with accurate portrayals of previous drinking, the TLFB is used to raise awareness of past behavior by allowing the students to see their own patterns and to make them mindful of these patterns.

Next, participants together estimate the typical drinking behavior of students on campus, as well as the campus incidence of alcohol-related negative events (sexual assaults, violence, etc.). The facilitator then provides participants with actual normative drinking data for the campus (based on the CORE Alcohol and Drug Survey) to correct overestimations of perceived normal drinking behavior. The facilitator also gives participants feedback about the prevalence of on-campus alcohol-related incidents of violence, forced sex, vandalism, and other negative activities to correct underestimations of alcohol-related negative events.

The group then generates a list of reasons for (Pros) and reasons against (Cons) drinking less than they presently do. The facilitator writes these lists on a blackboard and, using an established decisional balance scale, assists the group by adding any reasons for drinking less that they may have missed. Participants then create personal decisional balance sheets, rating the strength of their personal Pros and Cons. The decisional balance aids individuals in recognizing their ambivalence to change, examining personal discrepancies between their goals and their behavior, and clarifying their own motivating factors for changing. This encourages participants to consider the possibility of changing their drinking behavior. After the personal lists are completed, the facilitator leads the group in brief open-ended discussions on the importance of reasons for drinking less. Some of these may include doing better in school, saving money, being in better shape, avoiding hangovers, and avoiding problems with school and legal authorities.

After the discussion about the reasons for and against drinking, the group generates a list of high-risk situations in which they feel it is difficult for themselves or others to avoid drinking in excess. Discussions follow about how to deal with these risky situations as students explore their own abusive drinking experiences, identify their existing skills to effectively deal with risky situations, and develop new strategies for dealing with future situations. The facilitator reinforces
skills and strategies for dealing effectively in reducing risk. The group also discusses the role alcohol expectancies play in drinking by talking about general perceptions and expectations about alcohol’s social, physical and sexual effects. They are provided with alternative evidence to counter their perceived alcohol-related positive expectancies that alcohol alone leads to the enhancement of social and sexual outcomes.

Finally, each student sets a personal behavioral goal for their own drinking in the next month. They share their goals with the group. Goals relating to responsible behavior or reductions in drinking are reinforced. These goals are also discussed during brief, monthly individual follow-ups to see how successful the individual is in adhering to the goal and whether or not the goal needs to be adapted for the following month.

Following the intervention, students keep a monthly drinking diary; recording how many drinks they consume each day, when and with whom. Students return diaries at the end of each month, consecutively for three months, and at the time of return discuss their drinking behavior and successes or failures at meeting their behavioral goals. For research purposes, other assessments of drinking behavior are included in the diary to determine the extent to which individuals are reducing their problematic drinking behavior (or the extent to which pre-intervention responsible drinking behavior is not becoming problematic). Each student receives nominal prizes (pizza certificates, water bottles, frisbees, etc.) for participating in the project. Results have been promising and will be reported elsewhere.

Campus Community Involvement

In addition to the group intervention with students themselves, several aspects of the Heads UP! project involve engaging the campus community (faculty, staff, parents, student body leaders) to establish an environment that will support the freshmen students in actively following the goals outlined by the intervention, as well as shifting campus attitudes concerning alcohol use towards more risk-reducing attitudes. Involvement of the campus community increases and
encourages campus dialogue about alcohol problems, thus impacting students, staff, and faculty who did not participate in the intervention.

**Administrative initiatives: Heads UP!** benefits from Presidential and Vice Presidential support which creates synergy for the overall project. One month prior to the start of the fall semester, all incoming freshmen students and their parents receive separate letters from the University President describing negative consequences related to drinking often experienced by new students. The letters encourage parents and students to discuss the role drinking will play in their college life before they arrive at school. This Presidential initiative sets the institutional tone against illicit and irresponsible drinking while raising the awareness of freshmen and their parents about how problem drinking can negatively affect college success. Further, the University Vice President for Student Affairs is actively involved in and supportive of the project (a co-Principal Investigator), encouraging staff involvement in programs. NIAAA highlights the importance of administrative leadership in developing successful campus alcohol programs.²

**Campus dialogue: Heads UP!** implements several activities and programs across campus throughout the academic year to raise awareness of alcohol-related issues and to promote responsible drinking. Resident Directors present social norms programs during mandatory dorm meetings during the first month of school. This feedback session corrects the misperceived normative drinking patterns of the university students. In addition, separate student leader and faculty/staff monthly luncheons involve campus members in discussions that present helpful information on drinking issues and increase faculty and student leader involvement in campus alcohol issues. Advice is given on how to include issues related to alcohol in courses and clubs, and faculty, staff, and student leaders learn how to use MI techniques to intervene with persons at-risk. A campus wide poster campaign developed on site by students in a graphic design course provides students with further campus-specific normative drinking information. **Heads UP!** also maintains a presence at many campus events, houses an accessible and approachable campus office, and involves students in online alcohol assessments (e-Check Up to Go)¹⁴. By increasing
campus dialogue about university alcohol problems and by establishing an accessible presence on campus, the Heads UP! project attempts to reinforce the freshmen intervention and provide the campus with an environment supportive of responsible drinking choices.

Conclusions

Results of the current program will be reported elsewhere, but preliminary analyses reveal a reduction in problematic drinking and alcohol violations among freshmen male participants, as well as a preventive effect for these freshmen males developing risky drinking patterns during their freshmen year. This has been established by comparing the freshmen participants to their own previous behavior and to a control group of freshmen who did not participate in the group intervention. Campus judicial records of alcohol violations between groups and from previous years were also examined.

The Heads UP! project has been enthusiastically received by campus administration and student affairs, as well as by student leadership groups and the students themselves. Student publications and local news sources have also highlighted the project and several of its programs. Due to its welcomed reception, the project appears to be making progress in targeting both a group of high-risk individuals and the broader campus community. Other universities are encouraged to design and implement similar nested programs with supportive environments on their own campuses.
References


